



## Poorest village and GNH

BY RABI C. DAHAL IN UNGAR, LHUENTSE

A two-day walk from the roadhead at Gorgan, Ungar in Mentso Gewog is the remotest and poorest village in Lhuentse.

According to the Lhuentse Dzongda, Mentso and Jari Gewogs are the only two gewogs in the *dzongkhag* without a farm road. The 482 people in Ungar are spread over 52 houses that have no electricity. There is no BHU, no RNR extension centre, no drinking water supply, no market.

But all that may change. A team lead by the GNH Commission Secretary visited Ungar on December 31, 2008, to study ground realities and devise ways to improve the economic well-being of the villagers.

"A comprehensive situation analysis of the villages has to be conducted before coming up with possible interventions to reduce poverty in the area," said Secretary Karma Tshiteem.

Speaking at a focal group discussion after a three-day detailed household survey, the Secretary said that Ungar was not as poor as nine other villages the GNH Commission had surveyed earlier.

"The climate in Ungar suits any type of crop (*druna gu*) and the land is fertile," he said.

He explained that the Rural Economy Advancement Programme (REAP) helped people generate income in such remote societies that had not been reached by mainstream development. He said this would allow for sustainable and long-term in-



Aum Ngolimo in her kitchen in Ungar village

terventions with the villagers gradually claiming ownership of projects.

The study team saw that most of the people had two-storied houses with CGI sheets roofs, ate three meals (*kharang*, red rice or both mixed) a day and raised domestic animals. Most of the houses were poor in hygiene and did not have toilets or ventilated cooking stoves.

Every Ungar household used a considerable portion of the main crops grown, maize and rice, to brew about 300 litres of ara every year. No one worked in the fields after the harvest. No one wove cloth.

Almost all the 52 households were in debt to either banks or local money lenders, having borrowed money when they had to share the cost of roofing with the Thrumsenga National Park.

The GNH Commission team found that, on average, the villagers faced food shortage for four months every year. Crop attacks by wild animals were common as the village fell in the boundaries of the national park. No compensation had been made as yet by the government for the crops destroyed.

Ugyen Tshering, a farmer, said on each year about 60

acres of crops were lost to wild animals.

To make matters worse, land holdings in Ungar were too small so crop yield was also meagre, according to Metso Gup Tshering Dorji. Some people owned less than 13 decimals of land while many of the paddy fields were owned by people in Bumthang.

"This is one of the reasons why people in Ungar are poor," he said. "There are many people living in chronic poverty in other parts of the gewog also."

Metso Gewog is, however, rich in non-wood forest products. Amla, fern, walnut, *ola choto*, *dambroo*, *fetche*, wild berries and many species of mushroom grow in the wild. The study team felt that the people could harness these products to improve their economic well-being.

Villagers at the public discussion pointed out that there was no market for such non-wood forest products because there was no road. Dendup from Tsongthormi said mushroom grew abundantly in the wild but needed some technology for drying before be-

ing transported to the market.

Mushroom farming was seen as a potential intervention. More than 10 villagers will give it a try if it is found to be a viable way of generating rural income.

Sonam Dorji, a farmer and a focal person in the discussion, said mushroom cultivation was an option to consider till the road came to the village. He said carrying a basket full of mushroom to Lhuentse or the roadpoint yielded more profit than a horse load of potatoes.

However, warns Dzongkhag Agriculture Officer Sangay Dorji, it is important to explore the market before introducing any project in the villages. In the possible eventuality that a market could not be found, the community would be disillusioned by the government.

The Dzongda said that the dzongkhag will help subsidise transportation if people are willing to take up government initiated projects in their villages. Mushrooms had a good market in the country and abroad, he said.

### Ungar: Origin of the name

When Lama Ngagi Wangchuk travelled from Tibet to Bhutan, he saw a dragon flying over his head towards the south (Lho Mon). Following the dragon, the lama crossed Rodungla Pass and reached a big village. No sooner did he arrive in the village than an old man asked of him a good name for the village. Looking around, the lama saw many men and women fetching water from huge wells above their houses. He also saw Terton Pema Lingpa, who had come to Kurtoe to discover treasures, making iron chains and swords. The lama, therefore, named the place *Ungarwa*. In Kurtoe dialect, *un* means a pond and *garwa* means a blacksmith. Ungar is the corrupted form of Umgarwa.