

POLICY BRIEF

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Title of research: Rising from the Rubble: Post-Disaster Recovery and (Re)Development in Nepal
Location of Research: Nepal

01. Research Context and Background

Nepal, a 'small' landlocked country located in South Asia between India and China, lies in a seismically active region, making it the 11th most earthquake-vulnerable country globally (GoN/ MoHA, 2017; Prakash et al., 2016). The country has experienced various small- and large-scale earthquakes over the decades; and the most recent major one took place in 2015 with 7.8 magnitudes. The earthquake of 2015, on which my doctoral research is based, had a significant impact on people's lives, livelihoods, private property, and community infrastructure.

The Nepal Earthquake 2015 claimed nearly 9,000 lives and injured more than 20,000 people. The tremor impacted approximately eight million people and destroyed over half a million houses (which accounts for almost one-third of the country's total population). Moreover, the earthquake significantly ruined agriculture and animal husbandry and damaged public infrastructures (such as schools, health-posts, roads and bridges, water-supply systems, and hydro-power plants), requiring billions of dollars to repair reconstruct (GoN/NPC, 2015).

An unprecedented number of national and international Non-Government Organisations (NGOs/ INGOs) and government institutions have carried out post-disaster recovery and reconstruction programmes in the affected communities following the Nepal earthquake

2015. At this juncture, it is crucial to analyse the relevance and effectiveness of the humanitarian actions for the most marginalised communities because an ineffective disaster recovery process can perpetuate social inequality and even put people in more vulnerable conditions (Anderson & Woodrow, 1991; D'Souza, 1986; Sovacool, 2017). Moreover, if the recovery process is ineffective and unsustainable, the conditions for the next disaster are reproduced, leaving people as vulnerable as they were in the past (Anderson & Woodrow, 1989; Wisner, 1993).

Recovery remains the least researched aspect of the hazard cycle (Tierney, 2019, p. 203). A better understanding of the recovery process in this disaster will be crucial for both the present and future societies of Nepal and other parts of the world vulnerable to similar kinds of disasters. Therefore, it is believed that findings from this research would help with the recovery of disadvantaged and marginalised social groups in Nepal and beyond.

The research was carried out in the four districts of Nepal, viz. Dhading, Gorkha, Rasuwa, and Sindhupalchok, which were highly affected by the Nepal Earthquake 2015. The research followed a qualitative inquiry process (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2011). The original research methodology had to be reviewed and changed due to travel restrictions and disruption in the respective communities

brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research utilised multiple approaches to collect the data. Online and remote interviews were collected through digital technology such as Zoom and telephone. Interviews in remote locations were undertaken by field assistants.

Institutional ethics approval was obtained from the researchers' university. Forty-six interviews were conducted with local people, humanitarian and development workers in the

international and national non-government organisations (I/NGOs) and government representatives. Thirty-five of them were community people or disaster survivors, eight were humanitarian and development I/NGO workers based in the research districts and in Kathmandu (the capital city), and three were government representatives responsible for them post-disaster recovery and reconstruction.

02. Key Findings

2.1 Humanitarian Relief and Recovery Assistance

The disaster survivors acknowledged and appreciated, in general, the humanitarian goods and recovery assistance provided. When asked which relief items they want to highlight as more helpful, they have said the food items, blankets, tarpaulin, galvanised/corrugated iron sheets, blankets, and vegetable seeds were most helpful.

However, there were many issues with the humanitarian interventions. There was a duplication of humanitarian assistance in some places. People received the same items from different humanitarian agencies. The people said that it would be good if various agencies gave them different things than the same goods. It clearly shows that the coordination among humanitarian agencies was weak.

One of the most vital themes that emerged from this research was that the relief was meagre or very little. The participants shared that they only got some minimal food items, which lasted

2.2 Post-Earthquake Housing Reconstruction

The people's perception toward the housing reconstruction assistance and disaster bureaucracy was positive. Although the assistance for housing reconstruction provided by the government was minimal (NPR 300,000 or about NZD 3,500), almost all the disaster survivors acknowledged the support provided.

for a few days. Similarly, they received few non-food items. Several participants said they had no idea who was distributing *what*, *when* and *where* in the earthquake-affected areas.

Similarly, some of the relief materials contradicted local traditions and cultural norms. For example, *sari* (a long piece of garment wrapped around the body) were distributed in the Gorkha district, but the ethnic communities wear *lungi* (a garment wrapped around the waist and extending to the ankles). Similarly, miniskirts were found to have been distributed in Rasuwa, a mountain district, whereas this type of clothing is neither culturally appropriate nor climatically suitable in that region. Moreover, some interventions such as cardamom, coffee, and orange cultivation were not helpful either because these were time-consuming initiatives taking several years to be ready for producing and selling in the market.

The majority of the disaster survivors said that they did not have to face the bureaucratic difficulty of accessing the financial provision allocated by the government for permanent housing reconstruction. However, a few of them did suffer from accessing the official grant as the survivors were unable to produce proof of citizenship or land ownership certificates (which people either did not inherit

or had lost or was buried in the rubble). These issues were only resolved months later.

With levels of official financial support for rebuilding houses being so minimal, communities took the initiative to rebuild by seeking out loans from local moneylenders and financial institutions. These sources were certainly seen as helpful in the short term, for purposes of immediate survival and for completing housing reconstruction work (since, as noted, government funding support was insufficient for this task). However, it was found that the dependence on these actors, especially with local moneylenders and micro-finance institutions, was unhelpful in the long run because of the high-interest rates charged (as high as 36 per cent). As a consequence, the poor people have become poorer due to the high interest of the loan. Further, their repayment plan through the remittance has also shattered due to COVID-19.

The disaster survivors have perceived the post-earthquake housing as safe. They have more confidence that they will remain safe in the next earthquake; however, they feel that the structure may not survive if the quakes are massive. On the other hand, the people also experienced the disadvantages of these new houses (compared to their lost vernacular homes). They shared that the roof of corrugated iron sheets generate dew, causing cold and making small children sick. Some complained that the new house is also not suitable for storing grain after harvesting due to the moisture or dampness generated by the cement. Most importantly, many people also felt that the new house was less spacious than their previous dwelling.

2.3 Social Capital

In the research districts, it has been found that the disaster-affected people stated that they

helped each other to cope with the disaster. It has been revealed that they shared their food and time to help one another. Further, they helped one another rebuild their respective houses exchanging skills, labour, and even financial resources. My research has revealed that the survivors were not particularly dependent upon top-down aid from official quarters (the government and NGOs), instead they were dependent on their neighbours, relatives, and other people in the village to fulfil their needs after the disaster.

The survivors' social capital was vital for their everyday survival and rebuilding of their houses after the earthquake. These social connections proved to be invaluable when disaster struck. People duly received financial assistance from their neighbours and relatives and undertook *parma* (exchange of labour; cultural capital) in their neighbourhood to rebuild one another's houses. They also shared food setting up a communal or shared kitchen in the field immediately after the quakes. One of the reasons for completing post-earthquake housing reconstruction in some neighbourhoods of Rasuwa district was that the Tamang community had had cultural ties and kinship affinities that made the required physical labour and other necessary mutual support readily available.

Furthermore, cultural capital (such as learning, knowledge, and new skills) that was accrued from humanitarian projects such as skilled-masonry training meant that people could convert them into economic capital, as they used newly acquired skills to supplement or raise incomes. By utilising survivors' existing material capital (such as landownership) and social status or trustworthiness (cultural capital), they could accumulate additional economic capital through their relatives, moneylenders or financial institutions.

03. Implications

Duplication of resources can be reduced with increased coordination, cooperation, and transparency among humanitarian agencies.

If the communication of relief distribution is poor, the oppressed and marginalised people suffer the most due to their geographical isolation and social exclusion. Therefore, humanitarian communication should be as wide as possible and targeted to reach the most vulnerable and affected populations.

Lack of the disaster survivors' participation in the post-disaster recovery process will make the interventions ineffective and inappropriate. These programmes are also likely to be

unsustainable. Therefore, disaster survivors' participation should be enhanced, their voices heard, and their agency recognised for adequate recovery and reconstruction results to be achieved.

The people are disproportionately impacted by the disaster, where the poor and marginalised people are affected the most. Therefore, housing reconstruction assistance should be devised accordingly so that the poorest people get equitable forms of assistance. Capitalisation on catastrophe or profiting from pain should be curbed to prevent poor people from falling further into the vicious cycle of poverty and deb

04. Limitations and Further Research

This is qualitative research, to capture the lived-experience of people affected by the disaster and their journey of recovery and reconstruction. Thus, quantification is beyond its scope. Further, the findings may not be generalised; however, the principles might be applicable in a number of settings in developing countries.

The research was carried out during one of the most challenging times in our recent memory.

Fieldwork travel was not possible due to the border closure and travel restrictions due to the pandemic. Therefore, interviews were conducted remotely, and assistance from local interviewers were also sought.

This study had a focus to understand the recovery and reconstruction in rural areas. Thus, the recovery and reconstruction

experience in an urban context is outside of the scope of this research.

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