
CHAPTER 1

Nepal's Post-Disaster
Reconstruction Experience
Current Status and
Lessons Learnt

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The government began its relief effort immediately after the disaster in April 2015 by enforcing Essential Services Operation Act 1957 and launched a search and rescue operation for survivors under the debris. The Central Disaster Relief Committee got into action as per the National Disaster Response Framework. Government officials and members of security forces were mobilized for the relief. The Central Command Post led by the home secretary, coordinated the operations and temporary settlements were erected in the open spaces of Kathmandu.

Help was sought from foreign countries and development partners for the rescue and relief operations. While the news of the disaster spread across the globe, support began pouring in. The aid came in the form of relief materials and personnel to support the operations and medical emergencies.

The government prioritized relief works to streamline and coordinate them. The priority was the safety of the people. This included providing tents and tarpaulins for shelter and providing food and ensuring safe sanitation for the affected people. Moreover, rescuing the possible survivors buried under the debris, and providing medical attention, was paramount during the first phase of the rescue and relief process.

The army and police were mobilized for the Search and Rescue (SAR) operation. Nepal Army, the SAR teams (represented by India, China and USA) and the private sector all contributed in the rescue operation. Altogether, 66,069 personnel of the Nepal army, 41,776 of Nepal Police, 24,775 of Armed Police Force and 22,500 civil servants were mobilized for the purpose. Helicopters of Nepal Army and foreign and private operators made 4,299 flights leading to the rescue of 7,606 people.¹ Over time, altogether 134 international SAR teams from 34 countries responded to Nepal's request for help. Four thousand government and private health workers were mobilized to aid rescue and relief efforts.² Opening up of roads, establishing communications networks, clearing debris, looking for missing people and ensuring supplies, were carried out with unprecedented support from both within and outside the country.

State Leadership: prioritizing and mobilizing support

The government declared a state of emergency in order to ensure the supply of essential materials to the affected areas and requested international assistance. There were initial hiccups in managing the large consignments of relief material being sent from all over the world. The government, with help from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and volunteers, constructed emergency centres to supply the relief materials and attend to the injured. Remarkably, the stalled commercial airline flights were back in operation by the end of 26 April.

An important, but challenging, task was checking the buildings and other structures for their safety with the aftershocks still rattling the country. Since the buildings had sustained different degrees of damage, they required expert engineering opinion to assess whether the structure was habitable or, if not, the amount of repairs required. Categorizing the buildings according to the damages incurred by them was a massive work requiring a large number of trained engineers. This work was done with the help of Nepal Engineers Association, which provided orientation to its members and mobilized them in the thousands to do the first round of assessment. The buildings were labelled Red, Yellow or Green to indicate their habitability. The green signified that the buildings were safe, yellow implied habitable after minor repairs and red meant unsafe. In addition, engineers and skilled workers had to be trained to demolish the unsafe buildings and clear the debris.

The relief operation saw support, in form of cash and kind, from foreign countries and humanitarian agencies. The United Nations agencies—United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Development Program, United Nations Children's Fund and World Food Program, among others, were at the forefront in arranging and mobilizing humanitarian support. A number of INGOs, NGOs and other voluntary

Box 1.1

Immediate relief measures announced

- NPR 40,000 per dead person for cremation
- NPR 100,000 for households with dead family members
- NPR 25,000 per house for maintenance of damaged houses; and NPR 15,000 per household for corrugated-roofing sheets (these amounts were to be deducted from housing relief amount distributed later)
- Free of cost treatment facility for injured persons

Source: Editors' compilation based on MoFA press releases

organizations were mobilized for relief and rescue operations. They mobilized relief resources and human support.

Given the scale of the disaster, people in general came together to provide the necessary support to survivors by mobilizing relief activities. The private sector—corporate enterprises—also got engaged in relief and rehabilitation works. It coordinated relief efforts ranging from providing essential goods to survivors to arranging temporary shelters.³ The private sector was also one of the largest contributors to the Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund (PM-DRF). Its response extended beyond fund-raising and contributing to relief efforts. In addition, it was involved in the rehabilitation of disaster affected communities.⁴

Youth wings of political parties and different social clubs also made their presence felt. They were engaged in managing relief supplies—constructing temporary buildings and distributing food, water, tarpaulin and sanitation kits, among others. The Nepali diaspora too played an important role in collecting and dispatching of essential materials from all over the world to the affected people. These groups raised funds, mobilized volunteers and offered technical support during search, rescue and relief works.

Funds were being raised by individuals, communities, NGOs and other non-government contributors at the national and local

levels. The government needed to coordinate relief and recovery works to suit the activities at the affected sites. To streamline the funds, the government issued a directive to channel all the funds to the PMDRF. Overall, the earthquake related donations had reached NPR 6.88 billion within six months of the disaster, and to use up the funds in rehabilitation and reconstruction, the government set up a National Reconstruction Fund (NRF).

Coordinating and allocating sectors and areas for the support required management skills. This was especially relevant in the face of criticism directed at the government for not being able to manage the relief efforts properly. Red tape hindering smooth distribution of relief, which in the first couple of months, attracted a lot of criticism. By mid-June 2015, the government announced that the relief operation was almost over and that it would begin focusing on reconstruction and recovery work.

Was relief operations success?

The massive scale of the relief works was unprecedented for Nepal. Located on one of the most seismologically active zones, a great magnitude earthquake had been expected in the region for some time. The experience of the 1934 earthquake had not been completely forgotten when the 2015 one struck. Different disaster risk reduction plans, workshops and drills had been going on to prepare the population. However, when it actually happened, the government machinery and society found itself at a loss. This confusion lasted for a couple of days until the state pulled itself together and the response became firmer and more systematic. The government claimed success in relief and rescue works and asserted that, given the magnitude of destruction and the technical challenges, it had done a decent job. Once rescued, "no one died for lack of treatment", it said.

According to Nepal Disaster Report 2015, prepared by Disaster Preparedness Network-Nepal and Ministry of Home Affairs, initial search and rescue operation, though commendable, failed to reach the affected in due time and there was a serious lapse in

damage and needs assessment. It also pointed out that more than 4,500 team members from 34 countries were only able to save 16 lives, despite the cost incurred in supporting the foreign teams.⁵ The same report pointed out the lack of open spaces for temporary shelters, emergency warehouses and proper inventory for relief materials, which affected the relief.

Post-disaster reconstruction planning

Post-disaster reconstruction planning began with preparing the Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) document and support from international community.

Post Disaster Needs Assessment

The report was prepared by the National Planning Commission supported by its development partners, such as Asian Development Bank, European Union, Japan International Cooperation Agency and The World Bank. Line ministries, international humanitarian organizations and various stakeholders helped with the estimation of the amounts and values of the damages to key sectors and assessment of the required humanitarian assistance. The main purpose of the assessment was to quantify the impact of the disaster and to outline a recovery framework for the country. The assessment covered the 31 affected districts, 14 of which are considered severely affected. It included 23 thematic areas classified into four major sectors—social, productive, infrastructure and cross-cutting sectors. For each sector, damages, losses, recovery needs, strategies and implementation arrangements were identified. The total value of disaster damages and losses caused by the earthquake and its aftershocks was estimated to be NPR 706 billion (US\$7 billion), or equivalent to one-third of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the fiscal year (FY) 2013/14.⁶

The social sector, which includes housing, was identified as the most affected. Housing and settlements sustained about 50 per

cent of the destruction and production decline caused by the disaster, followed by tourism at 11 per cent, according to the PDNA.⁷ The earthquake led to GDP growth rate being downgraded to three per cent from the estimated 4.6 per cent in FY 2014/15. The lost momentum through forgone production in the three months between the earthquake and the end of that FY was valued at NPR 52 billion. The initial assessment of funds required for reconstruction was NPR 669 billion according to PDNA estimates.

International funds

Given the fiscal constraints of the government and the large amounts needed for reconstruction, Nepal required financing from foreign partners. To communicate this need to the international community, the PDNA was presented to them at a one-day conference called "International Conference on Nepal's Reconstruction", held two months after the disaster. During the conference, the donor community pledged to provide NPR 410 billion to aid reconstruction.

In his inaugural address to the gathering, the prime minister (PM) announced the creation of the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), to lead rehabilitation and reconstruction. The Authority, headed by the PM, would seek guidance from disaster management experts and engineers.

International support, whether government or private, was made available to Nepal since the time of the disaster. They aided in relief works and were even present during demolition and debris management. Neighbours like India, China, Pakistan, Bhutan and Bangladesh came with immediate relief, requiring personnel and equipment. Almost all the countries in the world came to aid Nepal, financially and otherwise at this time of need.

Reconstruction planning framework

Reconstruction activities planning included preparing comprehensive Post Disaster Recovery Framework (PDRF) and setting up NRA.

Post Disaster Recovery Framework

In May 2016, the government released a five year Recovery Framework to provide vision and the strategic objectives to fulfil it. It is a policy and institutional frameworks for recovery and reconstruction and outlines the implementation arrangements, projected financial requirements and immediate next steps. This document envisions the "establishment of well-planned and resilient settlements".

This document revised the amount required for reconstruction to NPR 8.38 billion over a five-year period —from 2016 to 2020.⁸ The PDRF classification of sectors before making the estimation is different than PDNA's. The new classification is more elaborate, that is: culture, education, rural housing, urban housing, nutrition, health, government buildings, agriculture, tourism, energy, transport, water supply and sanitation, disaster risk reduction, employment and livelihood, gender and social inclusion, and governance.

Strategic objectives

The document laid out five strategic objectives for recovery—restore and improve disaster resilient physical construction, build resilient and cohesive community, improve access to services, restore economic activities and livelihood and build state's capacity to meet such disasters in the future.

The focus of the reconstruction plan is to rebuild private houses and cultural heritage; improve land use; engage the community, the private sector and the diaspora in reconstruction; reduce disaster risks by building back better; provide financial assistance to the affected people under government supervision. The document envisioned "owner-driven construction", relocation where needed, restoration of cultural heritage and architecture and enforcement of the safe building code. Cash transfers from government to beneficiaries are the core of reconstruction and recovery plan. Special focus has been given to social and environmental safeguards.

Institutional arrangement

NRA was established on 25 December 2015 as the legally mandated agency to lead and manage earthquake recovery and reconstruction. Its functions include assessing the damages caused by the earthquake and its aftershocks, fixing the priorities of reconstruction, preparing policies, plans and programs and facilitating implementation. It can carry out reconstruction, or ensure that it is done through different agencies, obtain land for reconstruction and prepare plans for developing integrated settlements to ensure that reconstruction is carried out in the prescribed manner, in accordance with established safety standards. The NRA is also responsible for coordinating the work of, and collaborating with, NGOs, the private sector and communities. It is also empowered to collect financial resources for reconstruction and to make arrangements for their effective use.

At the national level, there is an Advisory Committee (AC) chaired by the PM and the opposition leader in the parliament as the vice chairperson. Its members include representatives from the military and civil society. There is a Steering Committee (SC), which is also chaired by the PM, with key government ministers, experts and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the NRA as members. The committee approves policies and plan prepared by the Executive Committee (EC) and provides direction for effective reconstruction. The EC is chaired by the CEO of NRA and politically appointed expert members. It functions under the SC.

Four ministries are tasked with the implementation of reconstruction projects—Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation. These ministries have a technical unit called Central Level Project Implementation Unit (CLPIU) to look after the reconstruction tasks.

At the regional level, there is a Sub-Regional Office, which coordinates national and district level reconstruction works. It supports preparation of local reconstruction plans and facilitates their implementation. There are District Level Project Imple-

mentation Units (DLPIU) and District Coordination Committees (DCC) chaired by Members of Parliament with Local Development Officers, Chief District Officers and Municipality Chief Executives as members. At the village level, there is a Resource Centre, one for every three to six Village Development Committees (VDCs)—now restructured as rural municipalities—headed by the VDC Secretary and supported by an engineer and a social mobilizer.

Each VDC and Municipality is supported by a reconstruction Project Implementation Unit (PIU) staffed with one engineer, one sub-engineer and one social mobilizer to assist in design and construction tasks. The Executive Officer of the Municipal Council signs reconstruction agreements with community organizations and supports collaboration between communities and municipalities. NRA appoints Grievance Redress Officers to assist the Resource Centres. In most districts, the District Disaster Relief Committee is the institution that has been maintaining coordination between the government and development partners.

To finance the reconstruction activities, the government has set up a National Reconstruction Fund. The fund contains all the resources—government and non-government, domestic and international—meant for reconstruction. It is a non-freezing account where unspent amount gets carried over to the next year's budget. There is a provision for Multi Donor Trust Fund for rural housing construction established with the support of development partners.

Implementation of plan

Private houses destroyed in the earthquake take the lion's share of NRA's reconstruction initiative. Housing grant distribution is coordinated by the NRA (See Figure 1.1). Its first task was to assess the damage of private houses, which included surveys, screening and identification of beneficiaries and addressing the grievances of those left out from the beneficiary list. The plan is to carry out the

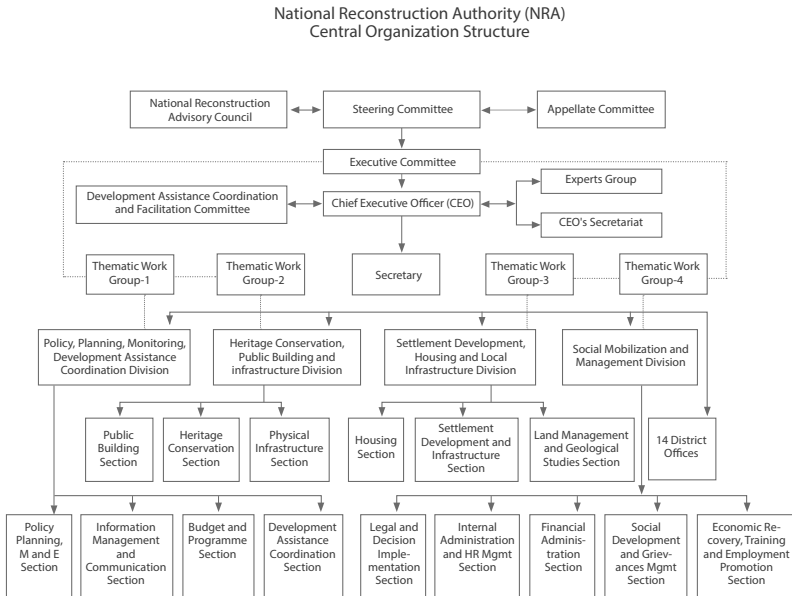
reconstruction in a phased manner—dealing with the severely affected in the 14 districts in the first phase before venturing into the less affected 17 districts.

Grants process

The operational modality for grants distribution: NRA signs a Memorandum of Understanding with the beneficiary who, in turn, receives a commitment to be granted NPR 300,000 in three tranches. In addition, Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB)—the

Figure 1.1

NRA's institutional structure



Source: Author's compilation

central bank of Nepal—has made provisions for earthquake survivors to get soft loans, at two per cent interest, up to NPR 1.5 million for rural, and up to NPR 2.5 million for urban house reconstruction. NRA initially provided 17 model house designs for the purpose. Later, it added more designs to accommodate the diversity of contexts. NRA provides engineering consultancy services and supervision for the construction of the houses. The funds—distributed in three tranches are released based on the recommendations of DLPIU after being approved by technical officers.

In addition to housing reconstruction grants, NGOs and government line agencies are also implementing livelihood recovery programs. Reconstruction of damaged schools, hospitals, monuments and other public buildings is carried out by the respective government agencies.

Three years on...

NRA's initial survey had shown that among the 996,582 houses assessed 767,705 were identified as eligible for the reconstruction grant. By the end of March 2018, 404,672 houses were under construction, of which 691,485 had received their first tranche. Out of the 350,933 applications for the second tranche, 340,498 were approved of which only 298,024 received the second tranche. Only 104,504 applied for the third tranche 97,978 of which received approval. Out of them 73,913 received the third tranche. Altogether, 237,085 grievances were registered, 205,584 of which have already been addressed.

Likewise, during the period, 220 government buildings have been completed and 174 are under construction. Similarly, reconstruction of 3,613 educational buildings has seen completion and 1,719 are being constructed. In addition, 100 cultural heritage sites have been completed, while 329 are undergoing construction. Health Centers under construction number 180 with 586 already completed. There are 795 drinking water projects that are undergoing reconstruction, 581 have been completed.

Meanwhile, 993 vulnerable settlements are being studied to see if they need relocation. The total number of settlements to be relocated is likely to reach 143.⁹

Measure of success

Nepal achieved mixed success at addressing the challenge of relief and reconstruction. After initial disarray, and ineffective management of rescue and relief works, the government regrouped and completed the work quite successfully. It mobilized international resources for search and rescue operations and providing shelter and care to the affected people. Some cases of mismanagement and delays, in relief material collection, transporting and distribution, especially in remote and outlying areas, were reported. Then again, overall, this phase was a success. The immediate relief initiatives may be considered to have been successful in limiting the number of deaths in the post-disaster relief period.

The government was successful in communicating to the world community for immediate relief and mobilizing them for post-disaster reconstruction. The PDNA was prepared on time. An international conference was successfully concluded with a large number of high level representatives. The gathering was held at a time when the aftershocks were continuing to endanger the safety of buildings—even star hotels, where the conference was to be held. It was successful in providing a first-hand experience of the situation to the representatives, not to mention the government's commitment and confidence to carry out reconstruction.

However, the government wasted valuable time and energy in political horse-trading while appointing the CEO of the reconstruction authority. The ordinance to create a legal institution failed in the initial phase. Furthermore, the CEO appointment was nullified. When NRA was finally set up, the remaining months of the first year were spent on institutionalizing it, not to mention plights like seeking cooperation from the bureaucracy. Despite these, the PDRF document was prepared and over three dozen policy, guide-

lines, legal documents and manuals were prepared to systematize the reconstruction work.

NRA has been criticized for not delivering its services, especially the construction of private houses and providing the affected people safe shelter. It was spending too much time preparing itself for implementation. The musical chair for the CEO continues. Since its establishment in 2015, NRA has already seen three CEOs. Each leadership has struggled to overcome some of the hurdles to get the reconstruction work moving, especially distributing grants to the eligible people and training them on techniques of rebuilding their houses. Progress has accelerated in last six months, but the targets of constructing all private houses in three years and all reconstruction works within five years (except monuments and cultural heritage) seem far off. Despite the slow start, applications for subsequent tranches for housing reconstruction grants picked up pace in the last year. Since, the major task of the NRA is to move people to safer houses and settlements, the achievements still leave much to be desired.

Reasons for slow progress

There are multiple reasons for the lacklustre progress of reconstruction. They range from the institutional to the technical. The general trend of political parties elbowing each other to grab powerful government posts created delays in the appointment of NRA head. Valuable time was spent on legislating the NRA's establishment, appointment of its CEOs and other experts and seeking support from the concerned ministries. The NRA needed to mobilize the requisite human resources from other ministries to fill its posts. However, there was not much willingness on the part of officials to be deputed to this new entity.

As an organization for reconstruction, the NRA is top heavy, with numerous committees of redundant expert positions. This has centralized the authority even while its work requires a decentralized approach—especially in the face of its stated policy and the PDRF's directive. Some of PDRF's critical provisions have not

been implemented, thus visibly reducing NRA's effectiveness. The Reconstruction Fund it touts and the Resource Center at the local level are absent.

NRA has had difficulty in coordinating and getting things done through other government agencies. Since, the CLPIU and DLPIU are scattered among four different ministries, their responsibility and accountability remain dispersed as well. As a result, NRA cannot mobilize them as it wants, not to mention the difficulties it faces seeking cooperation from other government agencies.¹⁰

There may also have been an unrealistic assumption about Nepal's capacity and skill to get things done at times of crisis. Technical knowhow and managerial skills were lacking, especially among engineers, for the specialized work. Much time was spent in training and mobilizing the manpower to the field.

Likewise, the works had already started, but that did not stop NRA from spending valuable time in addressing disputes over enumeration of the housing grants beneficiaries. Disputes regarding the initial listing of the eligible households forced it to conduct a second survey. This was a process of including those eligible but left out excluding those wrongfully included. It was not an easy task. NRA had to make its decisions on a case by case basis, on the recommendation of the local administration. In spite of all the troubles, the process was too centralized, ineffective and time consuming.

NRA's grants distribution difficulties consist of different dimensions. Primarily, there was an initial confusion on the actual amount of grant announced by the government—whether the initial relief amount of NPR 15,000 was included in the total grant or not, and how the money was to be transferred to the beneficiaries. The compulsion of having a bank account to receive the payments delayed the process.

The initial grant announcement of NPR 200,000 was later increased to NPR 300,000. This created hopes that there could be more such increments. Further, the amount of the grant was the same for all victims, irrespective of their financial condition.

There were conditions attached to the release of the grant in three tranches. These had different effects on different groups of people. Those who were weak and who needed the support most could not fulfil the conditions, while those who were better off and who needed the money less were indifferent to fulfilling the conditions and, yet, were still seeking the grant. Clearly, NRA's equal treatment failed to address the issue of social inequality and justice.

The initial enthusiasm and energy for reconstruction as a "national movement", is losing steam with time, both at the local level as well as at the national level. Policymakers appear to be giving the issues less priorities, and there is less of talk at the national level, including in the parliamentary committees, about the reconstruction today. Other pressing issues like constitution amendment, local elections, the general election and new disasters like floods and landslides have taken the limelight in the eyes of the media and the public at large.

Nevertheless, the NGOs seem to be doing better and completing works in their own way. Good examples include the Dhurmus Suntali Foundation, Non-Resident Nepalese Association and others who have completed works faster than state agencies. State agencies are slow because they have limited resources and are more general in their approach than operate with a narrow focus on specific area or project.

The concept of individual house construction, especially in rural areas, is something that needs to be better understood by the experts. People were not taking the second instalment to build their houses because it is loaded with technical and administrative conditions. The NRA approved designs, the technology and the material used are new to most people, making it difficult to rebuild.

The stringent conditions of meeting building codes and design specifications to be eligible for the aid are difficult for many people to meet. It appears that they would rather avoid taking government support than meet the conditions. This was evident

in Namobuddha Municipality,¹¹ where an INGO is constructing "*bore ghar*" (earthbag houses) for the victims. The affected people had received the first tranche of NPR 50,000, but they were eager to return this money instead of seeking the second tranche. They rather wanted their houses to be built by the INGO. The reason they give for their lack of interest is "too much bureaucratic hassle".

Although, conditions for building safer houses built on sound engineering technology is necessary, it is difficult for the survivors in remote villages to adhere to all these codes. It is necessary to recognize that houses, especially for rural people, are a social product, not a physical structure. Several factors determine the desire to build a house which is not just a physical output. Even as a physical product, a family is ready to build a house only when it knows the kind of house it wants to construct. Often, people take loans to construct better houses than they are living in. These days, many people in villages are taking the reconstruction as an opportunity to transit into concrete houses from their rural stone and mud structures. As the grant money is not sufficient for such construction they are willing to wait out till they have enough money for construction of what they believe to be a strong and urban structure—a *pakka ghar*.

Land ownership is a major issue that has affected the quick disbursement of grants for private houses. Many people do not have land titles and live on public land. Since such houses were destroyed by the earthquake, the victims' entitlement to reconstruction grants becomes a contentious topic. NRA has tried to cope with the problem by revising its policy, but it will take time and effort to benefit from the policy change.

Lessons learnt

While there are many lessons we can draw from Nepal's experience with post-2015 earthquake relief and reconstruction, here are some areas requiring further analysis and research.

Intensity and urgency to act declines with time

Perceived urgency and eagerness for post-disaster activities erode with time. They become normal business; once normalized it becomes difficult to raise the issue or maintain the earlier momentum. Additionally, the value of time is different for different stakeholders—the affected people, the government, NGOs and the donors. Any great public activity, or "*mahayagya*", like reconstruction, requires maintenance of the momentum through continued engagement by government agencies, civil society, media and political parties.

Post-disaster reconstruction is politically sensitive

Control over the process becomes a politically sensitive issue. Controlling a nine-plus billion dollars project balloons the problem and rings political chords. The whole reconstruction issue, the creation of the NRA and the appointment of its CEO, became highly political in Nepal. Political parties blew them out of proportion at the cost of overshadowing the reconstruction.

Avoid temptation of creating top heavy institution

Aggregation of any individual problem often gives a different picture than its original state. Disaggregation provides the real picture. This is usually unavoidable while designing a national level project. The size of the project appears to dictate the size of the institution, or provides the temptation to come up with a top-heavy ineffective institution. After all, in reconstruction, the unit of focus is a house with a couple of rooms, often in a rural context. This means the need is for a deeply decentralized approach. Moreover, there is also a question of how powerful should the Authority be?

Decentralization works better for local issues

The balance between central control/coordination versus local level targeting is always a challenge. Individual targets become

blurred as we move higher. As we raise the level of our vantage point—from family to community, to village, to district, to region, to nation and to world levels—we see the problem at the lowest level less and less clearly. The aggregated number of private houses gives a different picture of the reconstruction problem than that warranted by the actual reconstruction task.

Elucidate unclear policy concepts

An unclear policy leads to misunderstanding and misplaced demands and expectations on the part of the people. The issue of "compensation" versus "relief" or "right" versus "privilege" should be understood clearly while making interventions. Politically, it is always easier to make it a "right" of the citizen to be "compensated" for their hardship than it is to fulfil it.

Timely and clear communication is key to maintaining trust

This is an age of instant messaging and rapid communication. How the issues are messaged and communicated is critical for generating positive or negative perception and correct or false expectation. One can easily overshadow the truth through untruthful messaging. However, people pay attention. It is still a challenge to provide timely and correct information although everyone has access to the international communication network.

Balance long term goal with immediate need

The long-term goal of creating a vibrant society and a safe nation building (Build Back Better, safe housing etc.) is required, but the immediate need of an individual is to have a shelter. Statements like "I am still living in shed after two years..." on the part of the victims or "... they should follow the safety parameters or we cannot support them..." on the part of officials are pointers to a lack of balance.

Learn and adapt with experience to improve implementation

- Implement decentralized reconstruction—"devolve" the task, the resource and the responsibility to the newly formed local government bodies.
- Bring the implementation units (CLPIU, DLPIU etc.) under NRA.
- Relax the designs and implementation guidelines/engineering codes and other requirements to suit the local need.
- Provide a larger number and variety of house designs.
- Increase the amount of collateral-free group loans.
- Ease the supply of construction material.
- Incentivize "safe house construction" by providing further grants.
- Donors need information and data to calculate the amount of help they can provide. Address the need responsibly.

Not final question

In spite of numerous discourses earlier on the inevitability of a Big One along the Himalayan belt and the need for crisis management when it actually occurred, the Government of Nepal seemed little prepared to manage the immediate effect when it hit the country in 2015. There were communication gaps and serious lag in mobilizing rescue missions. This initial weakness was gradually overcome and the government performed quite successfully in leading the rescue and relief effort. It was even successful in mobilizing national and international support for the works by performing an immediate damage and need assessment and conducting an International Conference seeking support from the international community.

NRA, the authority designated to handle the reconstruction effort, however, appears mired in various difficulties in carrying out its task. It has not been able to disburse grants to households that needed rebuilding. Its performance remains especially slack in

releasing the instalments to meet the needs of the quake victims. Too many conditions and procedural requirements, small size of the grant amount, lack of awareness among affected people, centralized approach to implementation, technical design of houses and technology that rural people find alien are some of the reasons for this lacklustre performance.

The NRA has learnt from its three-year experience. It revised some of its requirements, expanded incentives (NPR 100,000 retrofitting grant), increased the grant amount and simplified and multiplied the number of house designs to suit the needs of more communities. It is also decentralizing the implementation approach and plans to delegate reconstruction authority to the newly elected local government bodies. The rules to establish Reconstruction Fund are being changed and the implementation units are being brought under its aegis to accelerate the process. It has also come up with a deadline for beneficiaries to take the grant. With these and other implementation arrangements, the NRA is expecting to complete housing reconstruction within the next two years.

Of course, some basic questions are being raised by the public as to how differently the Government would be likely to respond to the next disaster? How can Nepal avoid damage? Is it better prepared now? Does it have a workable mechanism in place? Are people more alert than before to avoid damage? Do we have a permanent institution to address the issue of disaster?

Besides technical issues, there are also non-technical (political, economic, social) issues which are equally important to be brought into debate. How do we frame the reconstruction question? Should we be thinking differently when it comes to dealing with disasters? Who frames the issue and who sets the agenda when it comes to disaster management? Whose interests should prevail while setting up the agenda? How is the voice of the "voiceless" heard? What are the assumptions regarding— capacity, nature of the state and roles of different actors? These and other similar questions should be debated for better policy and ability to address the issue of disaster management. ■

Notes

- ¹ DPNet-Nepal. 2015. *Nepal Disaster Report 2015*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) and Disaster Preparedness Network-Nepal (DPNet-Nepal).
- ² NPC. 2015. *Nepal Earthquake 2015: Post Disaster Needs Assessment*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission.
- ³ Malakar, S.B. 2015. "Nepali private sector: After the disaster". *The Himalayan Times* July 3. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/opinion/nepali-private-sector-after-the-disaster/>
- ⁴ Prime Minister's Disaster Relief Fund Updates. <http://pmrelief.opmcm.gov.np/contributors.aspx>
- ⁵ *ibid.* Note 1.
- ⁶ *ibid.* Note 2.
- ⁷ *ibid.* Note 2.
- ⁸ NPC. 2016. *Nepal Earthquake 2015: Post Disaster Reconstruction Framework*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission.
- ⁹ NRA. 2018. *Rebuilding Nepal*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, National Reconstruction Authority.
- ¹⁰ In 10 April, National Reconstruction Authority brought all the CLPIU and DLPIU under its aegis from the respective line ministries.
- ¹¹ Author conducted a field visit to Namobuddha Municipality, Kavre and held meeting with the Mayor and Executive Chief and NRA engineers.