

Community participation should be at the heart of Nepal's post-earthquake reconstruction

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Little progress has been made in reconstruction efforts following the twin earthquakes in Nepal last year.

Bishal Chalise writes that a key problem has been the exclusion of the affected communities from the reconstruction process, and argues that giving these groups a voice would help to ensure a more tailored, effective and accountable process.



This article forms part of our Nepal Earthquake Anniversary series. Read previous posts [here](#).

It has been one year since twin earthquakes measuring 7.8 and 7.3 in Richter scale hit Nepal and took nearly 9000 lives. In the aftermath, 21,000 people were injured and more than 200,000 houses were destroyed. Millions of others were forced to live under open sky amidst regular aftershocks for weeks. It was a worst natural disaster in Nepal in eighty years.

Despite the paucity of disaster preparedness, Nepal's immediate rescue and relief effort was laudable. The government was quick to mobilise all public service personnel and security forces. Logistical support provided by neighbouring countries and international agencies expedited the process.

Another highlight of the rescue and relief operations was the [voluntary participation of the community](#) to help other affected members. With their help, thousands of temporary shelters sprang up, and medical assistance was able to reach large numbers of the injured. Dead bodies were recovered efficiently, allowing for families to cremate those they had lost in line with their religious beliefs. The efficiency of the initial clean up prevented the spread of disease despite the fact that large numbers of people in affected districts were homeless and had no access to proper sanitation.



Credit: [US Embassy Kathmandu](#) CC BY-ND 2.0

However, when it came to post-earthquake reconstruction, the early success story crumbled. To date, there has been little effort towards rebuilding damaged properties, beyond clearing rubble and providing [petty contracts to renovate a handful of heritage sites in Kathmandu](#). The government promised affected families cash to rebuild their

houses but it took them nine months to actually hand over the \$150 USD. Overall, the government has disbursed [less than 126 million](#) which constitute mere two percent of [estimated reconstruction budget of 6.7 billion](#).

Aside from political disruption that the country experienced after the earthquake as a result of the promulgation of the new constitution, a major reason for lacklustre performance has been the exclusion of the affected communities from the reconstruction and rebuilding process. The vision of the reconstruction (if any) has been a government-led top-down approach with no space for community participation at any stage in the process.

The [Post-Disaster Need Assessment \(PDNA\)](#) that the government carried out immediately after the earthquakes acknowledged the potential role of the community on the post-disaster reconstruction and recovery, the hastily prepared document did not elaborate the framework within which those affected could voice their concerns. It is surprising to see the absence of community involvement in a country where social engagement is so deeply rooted and have produced some [exemplary results](#) in e.g. environmental management.

But why is the participatory approach in post-disaster reconstruction so important, especially in developing countries?

First and foremost, the affected communities have a better understanding of their own needs and can [provide valuable insight](#) into the local conditions. Such knowledge is crucial in collecting data and setting priorities in rebuilding process. This is particularly important in dealing with the vulnerable groups like women, children, disabled etc. The inclusion of these groups in design and implementation process is necessary to ensure the plan meets the targeted needs as effectively as possible.

Second, communities are more likely to [develop a sense of ownership](#) over the outcome of the process if they are involved. They can bring indigenous ideas and solutions which are sensitive towards local traditions and customs as well as are more likely to suit the local context. Their participation, therefore, not only raises the probability of immediate success but also ensures sustainability.

Last but not the least, community participation opens another avenue for government-community partnership which strengthens the credibility towards the government's current and future actions. Moreover, the community can keep an eye on the working of government authorities to make sure their actions match their promise. This significantly enhances accountability and reduces potential fraud and corruption.

Having said that, community participation in post-disaster reconstruction is not always straightforward despite its merits. The conflict among different community interest groups can potentially hamper a cohesive designing and planning process. Similarly, confusion about the roles and responsibilities among government bodies and community groups may complicate communication and coordination when it comes to implementing the plan. Such cases could lead to uncertainty and delay in decision-making and, at worse, derail the whole reconstruction process.

These problems are likely to be more severe in case of Nepal which [doesn't currently have elected representatives](#) at local level. In the absence of accountable local government, any effort to decentralise the reconstruction would be vulnerable to hijacking by local elites who affiliate themselves with political parties or local businessmen. In such scenario, attempts at community inclusion can be counterproductive and actually make things worse by excluding the real victims from the process.

Fortunately, there are a number case studies from around the world – both good and bad – which offer a range participatory approaches to reconstruction that Nepal can take inspiration from. In [Indonesia](#), after the December 2004 tsunami, “community-led approaches created better housing construction compare to contractor based approach in terms of quality, accountability and beneficiaries satisfaction”. In contrast, the lack of community consultation in [Pakistan](#) following the 2005 earthquake resulted in conflicts based on local land-traditions which has gridlocked the reconstruction of city of Balakot.

Hence, it should be clear to Nepal's PDR planners that meaningful community participation (beyond using locals as

mere construction labour) is essential for smooth and swift reconstruction of public and private properties regardless of the location. It would be incredibly disingenuous for [Nepal Reconstruction Authority \(NRA\)](#), a newly created government body to lead the reconstruction, not to acknowledge the vitality of inclusion of affected community into process.

The NRA can start with setting-up a two-way communication platform where affected people across different communities can share their needs and provide feedback on the plans and policies. It should also identify community leaders or groups which have wider support and can represent voice of all vulnerable groups in the absence of locally elected government. These leaders or groups can work as primary touchpoints for government for further consultation and communication. For earthquake-prone Nepal, such participatory model can work as a useful template to use in future disasters as well.

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