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Dealing with Disasters

Capacity Building Toolkit for National Civil Society Organisation Platforms

CASE
STUDY

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Nepal: Facing the earthquake - civil society facing intensive disaster



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In Nepal, intensive disasters, most recently the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, trigger recognition that increased coordination and preparation are required. CSO platforms have played an important part in this. Partnership with government, nationally and locally, has been strengthened by new legislation in the wake of the disaster. Previous history of disasters shows that CSOs face the challenge of maintaining commitment to reducing risk, as political and public memory fades.

Context

Nepal runs along the edge of the Himalayan collision zone, exposing it to powerful geological hazards, including the major Gorkha earthquake of 2015. The previous large-scale earthquake in 1934 is only just within living memory. How do societies, and civil society, cope with such unpredictable but devastating events?

Case study contributors

The National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) leads the GNDR platform in Nepal. It is also a member of the Disaster Prevention network (DPNet) and of the national NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN). All were deeply involved in response to the 2015 Gorkha earthquake.

Website: <https://www.nset.org.np/nset2012/>

The NFN is a national civil society platform, working at national and federal level in seven provinces and their districts. It has a secretariat in each province and at district level. It has good relationships with the government system. NFN is a member of Forus.

Website: <http://www.ngofederation.org/>

Focus on: Nepal

On April 25 2015, the Gorkha earthquake struck 31 out of the country's 75 districts. 17 days later, on May 12 2015, another earthquake caused further damage and loss of life. The two events claimed 8,896 lives and displaced about 2 million people. 604,930 homes were completely destroyed and 288,856 houses badly damaged.³⁶

NSET commented that after the earthquake everybody did their best in their own way, but they realised that this was not good enough: for a very large event, a coordinated approach and government leadership were needed, one local organisation could not do enough.

As with many disasters, the 'first responders' are local communities and local CSOs coping with their effects. There can sometimes be a gulf between that immediate response and action at other scales. According to CSO DEPROSC, 'We see local organisations and indigenous mechanisms of response, but this is not linked well to donor level. There are many intermediary organisations, resulting in distortion of communication. This causes frustration'. CSO 'Women for Human Rights' adds that 'local NGOs and national level NGOs are not taken as a partner but always as a receiver.'³⁷

Strengthening coordination

A research project led by Christian Aid in Nepal found that 'NGOs should coordinate together

closely within relevant international and national networks and forums to advocate for a fair deal for civil society organisations, and a protected space to reach those who are being left behind. Ultimately, capacity strengthening, planned phase out, and hand over strategies are also vital in partnerships between INGOs and L/NGOs.’³⁸

NFN played a major part in coordination after the earthquake: ‘Of course, there was frustration in the beginning. After a few months the government welcomed all INGOs and NGOs to join hands together for immediate response to people in need . . . , every NGO and INGO should follow the guidelines and system through the DRR committee which was chaired by the Chief District Office (CDO) in each district.’

New partnerships with government

Advocacy by NFN and its member organisations has also played a role in strengthening coordination through the establishment of new legislation ‘reducing disaster risk with preparedness planning, programmes and projects building resilience with the goal of sustainable development.’ The acts established in 2017-2018, and the National Strategic Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction 2018–2030, together emphasise risk reduction coordination at all levels.³⁹

Learning from the Gorkha earthquake has led to a new commitment by both civil society and government to effective coordination, not only in response to disasters, but also in disaster risk reduction and preparation. It aims to reduce impact on affected populations and enable a more coherent response.

NSET comments: ‘That’s why we are trying to work as much with the government, and as much with local organisations as far as possible, for these activities to be replicated on a wider scale.’

NFN agree: ‘I am very optimistic and hopeful that we have to be cool and think seriously how we can be instrumental in supporting the people in need, participating in government initiatives and supporting policy formulation, system upgrade

and functional DRR systems placed in the country.’

Summary

Five years on from the earthquake much has been achieved in government and CSO coordination. The challenge is maintaining this commitment in the decades likely to pass before the next major earthquake. A small stone memorial to the 1934 earthquake stands in a grassed area by a busy street in Kathmandu. Nearby, houses built afterwards stand three stories high, limited by an act passed to reduce the impact of a subsequent earthquake. At least they are clearly originally three stories high. Further stories have been built on top, destabilising the buildings, as memory recedes and learning fades.⁴⁰ A challenge faced by civil society may be maintaining long term commitment to effective disaster risk reduction when political and public commitment fades.

FOOTNOTES

³⁶ Pandey, Chandra Lal (2018) “Making communities disaster resilient: Challenges and prospects for community engagement in Nepal”, *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-05-2018-0156>

³⁷ Pathways to Power podcasts. GFCF. 2019. https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Podcast1_Transcript.pdf

³⁸ Accelerating Localisation Summary Report: Nepal. Christian Aid. 2019. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-02/Accelerating-localisation-research-summary-nepal.pdf>

³⁹ Pandey (2018): Ibid.

⁴⁰ Gibson, Terry (2019) *Making Aid Agencies Work*. Emerald. (p133)