

Understanding Post-Disaster Conflict

Disasters not only bring about destruction of life and property, the aftermath of a disaster and the period of prolonged reconstruction can engender conflicts within and among the communities affected by it.

Conflicts are part and parcel of disasters that disrupt the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. Conflicts are manifestation of the stress, fear, deprivation, scarcity and loss in a post-disaster situation, yet they seem to be given lesser importance than the more tangible and visible destruction of life and property as well as relief efforts. Relief and reconstruction efforts can also induce conflicts within and among communities as well as between the communities and the state itself. As Nepal undertakes massive reconstruction activities in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, proactive efforts and measures to manage and resolve conflict should be a part of the reconstruction strategy.

In an economically poor country like Nepal, disaster can further limit access to natural and financial resources available in the affected communities. This could lead to conflicts between the households living within the communities and it is an imperative to put in place mechanisms that prevent conflicts from escalating.

Massive disasters can result in the displacement of communities forcing them to find safe refuge in other regions of the country. This can cause friction between the displaced communities and the host communities, especially because of resource limitations of the host communities as well. Issues of land encroachment and water resources could be more prominent.

In an ethnically diverse country like Nepal, the religious, ethnic dimensions of conflict cannot be overlooked. Conflicts related to race, religion and ethnicity which the country had already been facing pre-disaster, can become even more evident post disaster, especially in the sharing of the available natural resources. Communities may be reluctant to share the available resources with other communities and might feel that the resources are being encroached upon by another ethnic or caste group.

The systemic biases that have resulted from the skewed structure of social institutions and the resulting distribution of power and resource have been yet another cause of conflicts within and among communities. The Nepali society has been stratified based on caste with a few castes perceived to be better than others. The generations of discrimination against the 'Dalits' and other ethnic communities have left these groups more vulnerable in terms of their access to natural and financial resources. A disaster does not discriminate but the already existing vulnerabilities make these groups more prone to destruction induced by disaster as well as leave them less likely to bounce back from the destruction of assets brought about by the disaster. Having said this, it would be remiss not to mention that there are vulnerable people along all the groups in these social strata whose grievances also need to be addressed. These social institutions have also created biases during the distribution of relief with people looking out only for their own communities resulting in grievances among the communities who feel left behind. The structure of the social institutions and the vast array of conflicts it can induce have deep roots, and these roots need to be understood for the sustainable resolution of conflicts.



BY PRAGATI KOIRALA

A gendered perspective is also necessary for the understanding of disaster-induced conflicts. Women, like the marginalized caste and ethnic groups, have faced generations of systemic discrimination. Women's roles have been defined by the society as a homemaker, wife, and mother and not as an economic agent. Death or out-migration of male family members have left women with the responsibility of providing for their families as well as the reconstruction of their damaged houses. To add insult to injury, the ambiguous system of property ownership has made it difficult for them to claim the reconstruction cash grant. This creates grievance in yet another marginalized group. A recent study conducted by The Asia Foundation, Nepal

has shown a rise in domestic violence post disaster.

Conflict also manifests itself in the form of distrust of the state among the affected communities, especially during the period of relief, reconstruction and recovery. A large proportion of the population has been affected by the earthquake. They have been living in makeshift shelters for more than two and a half years after the earthquake. Reconstruction and recovery have seen a large number of grievances, especially in the distribution process of the housing grant, starting from the survey of the affected households to the distribution of victim identity cards to, ultimately, the distribution of grants. The state has shown weakness in the management of the reconstruction processes and the reasons have been numerous which will not be dealt with here. These inefficiencies from the state institutions have exacerbated the general population's distrust of the reconstruction and recovery processes as well as of the state. Moreover, this protracted period of struggles triggered by the earthquake and compounded by the institutional weakness can manifest in stress, conflict between communities and violence within families.

Conflict resolution needs to be embedded in the recovery and reconstruction process. A mechanism to resolve disaster-induced conflicts in a disaster-prone country like Nepal is absolutely essential. Having a policy on post-disaster conflict resolution is important and so is the implementation of that policy. Therefore, maintaining institutional memory is an imperative for responding to future disasters. A well-established conflict resolution mechanism and management information system can rid our institutions of the institutional amnesia they have suffered so far. The linkages between policy and its implementation can be provided by the recently elected representatives who can act as mediators for the settlement of disputes.

A holistic approach for conflict resolution should be adopted as factors that appear on the surface may not be the only reason for conflict. The societal and institutional dimensions should be understood and the underlying causes of the conflicts should be addressed. Prevention of conflict stemming from issues of caste, race, religion and ethnicity can be done systematically through education from an early age. Conflict resolution needs to fulfill the dual criteria of providing immediate resolution and being sustainable which might require transformative social and structural changes. Identifying the deep-seated causes of the conflict is definitely the first step towards its resolution.

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EARTHQUAKE RECONSTRUCTION

Too Little, Too Official

Despite the progress made in earthquake reconstruction, Dolakha district's experiences have shown that the indigenous and marginalized communities are still living in tents and temporary shelters. The earthquake reconstruction efforts have been unable to meet the wishes of the suffering people. Even after two and a half years, the victims find themselves living in risks. When will they get the real respite?

The face of Pashupati Thami, a member of the indigenous and marginalized Thami community, who has been living in a temporary shelter built with tarp sheets for the last 32 months, sees little hope of shifting to a new house anytime soon. As temperature in the village is dipping, she is frustrated and angry with the situation. When I met her in her home, she shared her pain in a matter of minute, without a breathing space.

"If nothing changes, what is the point of explaining my situation to everyone?" asked Thami. "Although I told my story to a number of people, nothing good has happened out of this yet."

Thami wore a pale face, showing uncertainty about her future.

This is not a lone case. More than 70 households of previously Simpama, Ward No 1 of Bhimeswor Municipality of Dolakha district, have been facing



BY NIRASHI THAMI,
in Dolkha

the same problems, living in temporary shelters, covered by tarpaulin, after the earthquakes of 2015 April and May.

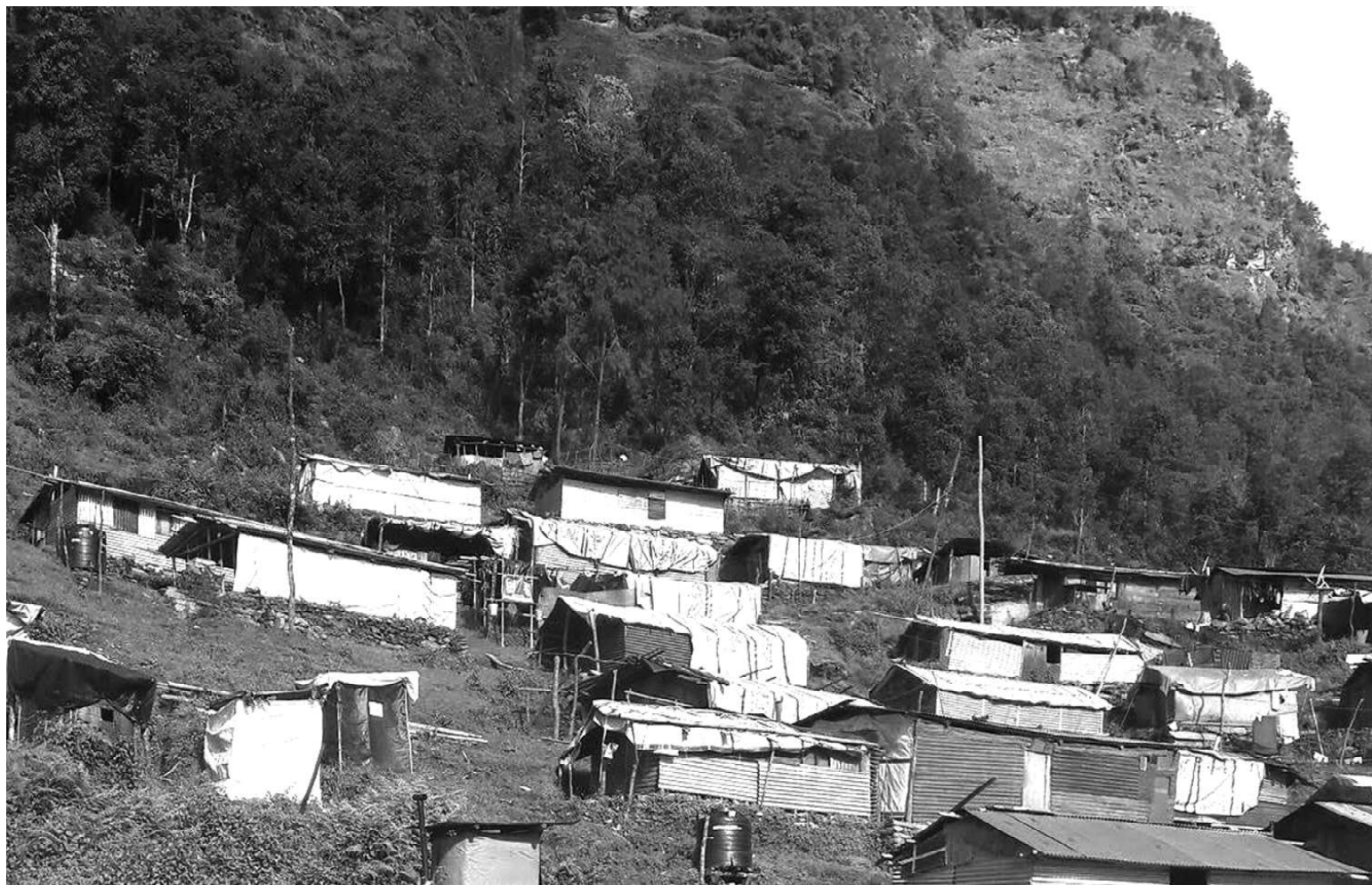
Although their village turned from a Village Development Committee to Municipality, with

elected representatives installed almost seven months ago, the common people are yet to find any respite.

As their land was washed away in a landslide, following earthquakes, and the remaining land cracked, they were relocated in open spaces of a community forest near their village. As landslides made their old settlement impossible to live, they were transferred here in search of a safe place to build their permanent shelter.

"There were a series of landslides beneath the mountains and upper hills," said Thami. "The government then relocated us here to give us a permanent shelter."

A few months after the earthquake, many donors visited the place to provide assistance, which included rice, salt, tarpaulin and clothes. Displaced populations of Besimpaka made the main news for the international media. This coverage generated hopes in the minds of people.



Temporary shelter of earthquake victims of Bosampa village, Dolakha

"With the wide international and national media coverage, our hopes to live in permanent shelters had gone high," said sixty-nine-year-old Bahadur Thami. "Now, with fading coverage locally and internationally, nobody seems to be concerned about our trauma and difficulties. If we had shelters, we could manage food and clothes."

Although these people in pain have been given small pieces of land to build their temporary shelters, they have to walk one and a half hours to their old shelters for grazing their cattle. They leave the temporary shelter early in the morning, with their cattle passing the fractured land, and return to their temporary shelters in the evening. This is their daily routine.

Although National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) has already taken a decision to shift the shelter of Simpama to a new place on the basis of the recommendations from a geological study, the process to transfer the shelter is yet to take off.

"We have been travelling to the district headquarters several times

in the last two years to secure the land ownership certificate of the new land. However, NRA is yet to acquire the land," said Kumar Thami, Chairman of Panipokhari Resettlement Committee. "We have been visiting government offices in the district. The government is yet to acquire the land for us. They are only raising hopes but no one is taking our case seriously. We are surviving merely on a dimming hope."

"A number of national and international organizations have visited us and expressed support to build the shelters. However, everyone demands the land ownership certificate first. But we are homeless in effect, therefore, helpless as well."

Why The Delay?

Although the Bosampa village is just 20 kilometers from Charikot, the district headquarters of Dolakha, and two hours' walk, people are yet to get their permanent shelters.

As per the geological study conducted under the National Reconstruction Authority, the

shelter of Bosampa village, earlier Ward No 1 of Chyamawati Village Development Committee, now Bhimeshwor Municipality Ward No 1, was declared geologically uninhabitable and unsafe for settlement. The study recommended relocation of the old settlement in a safe area.

However, Sagar Acharya, head of District Coordination Office of National Reconstruction Authority, said that the land registration process is at the last stage. "It will complete soon."

However, victims hold different views. "We submitted the necessary documents to various district offices a long time back. But they have been saying the same words. Nothing has changed," said Kumar Thami.

Acharya agrees that the pace of land registration process has been slow because of the delay in related work at the center. "The victims don't need to worry. It is in the last stage," said Acharya.

However, before transferring the settlement, Urban Development

Division Office has to build infrastructure, including road, drinking water and electricity. Although the road construction started last year, it is still incomplete. "We demanded 70 million rupees to construct infrastructure. However, the government has allocated 30 million rupees. It was insufficient to develop the area for resettlement," said Yek Raj Adhikari, head of Dolakha Division Office of Urban Development and Building Construction. "It will be easier for us if we work in coordination with other district level offices. However, it is still uncertain how to go about it?"

Victims have been living in temporary shelters for the third winter. The construction of the houses was delayed earlier because of problems at the district level and now it is getting delayed because of the problems at the center. "Hopefully, we may start the work at the end of December," said Adhikari.

Less Discussion

Since the last one year, elections have been held for three tiers of government, including local level, provincial level and Center. Victims were tired of telling their problems to the candidates of all three levels. Victims have also been sharing their woes with donors and journalists.

Despite the many assurances of the candidates in their populist slogans, the plight of the displaced victims of Ward No 1 of Bhimeshwor Municipality remains the same. During the election campaigns, dozens of candidates passed through Simpa Primary School, which is at the verge of collapse, singing sugar-coated slogans. After the elections, no sign of any change is there for the building.

Even the elected representatives of the local bodies are yet to visit the temporary shelters where the Thami people are living.

Deputy Mayor Kamala Basnet of Bhimeshwor Municipality has agreed that the municipality is yet to discuss the issue at a large scale. "We have been listening to

the issue of relocation of Thami's settlement. However, the issue is yet to get priority in discussions at the district level," said deputy mayor Basnyat.

"There is the need of a coordinated work. The government should also clear the files urgently, along with the development partners, who have been showing interest to support the construction of building in the new location. There should be intense discussions among all the stakeholders. If things do not move in a coordinated manner, the victims will continue to suffer."

How donors see it?

Although many development partners have shown their interest to support the reconstruction of houses, it is virtually impossible for them to actually help the victims, who have no landownership certificate. One can understand the delay in the process of distribution of landownership certificate. Of greater concern is the issue of the delay in the construction of roads, drinking water, electricity and other infrastructure.



Earthquake victim Kumar Thami

Even if the government distributes the landownership certificate to the victims, there is a problem to transport the construction materials and this will likely hamper the private house construction.

Non Resident Nepali Association has also taken the decision to assist the earthquake-displaced population of Simpa of Dolakha District. Kulendra Mani Neupane, Representative of NRNA and Coordinator of Settlement Reconstruction, said that NRNA has planned to construct new two-rooms and three-rooms earthquake resilient houses for the victims. "We have already collected the responses of a survey of a number of households and done other necessary works. Initially, the work stopped because of problems with victims and now it got stalled due to the internal problems of NRNA," said Neupane.



Deputy Mayor Kamala Basnet

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Earthquake victim Ganesh Shrestha

Human Rights Awareness and Development Center Nepal (URADEC-Nepal-an NGO, which also took the initiative earlier to build houses for the victims, has pulled out from the project. "We went to NRA with a plan to construct the houses for earthquake displaced population. URADEC-Nepal pulled out after the government rejected their proposal," said Home Pathak, chairman of HURADEC Dolakha district.

Displaced Population in a Trap

As the freezing frost covers the

roof of the temporary shelters, the earthquake-displaced population of Dolakha are struggling for survival. With a recent decision of NRA to complete the reconstruction of houses within a year, some of the victims, who received Rs. 50000 (Fifty-thousand) in the first installment under private housing grant, don't know what to do.

Some of them said that they have already spent the money for household use and some of them said that they still have the money. With no secured land on their own, they are facing problems, one after

another.

Displaced populations are worried about when to build their house, even after two years since the first major earthquake of 2015. The government's inability has forced the displaced population to live in a trap. "We are very much worried about when to collect the construction materials and when to build the houses," said a victim. "After all they also have to collect the money."

As many donors, who came there to assist the victims, have already returned, victims are losing hope of finding a ready help. From drinking water to shelter, the displaced populations are facing all kinds of problems. "As the nearby streams dried, there is no water to drink. We don't know how we will collect water. The toilets built two years ago have already worn out. The earthquake just took our home. We are suffering more now," said Kul Bahadur Thami, with a long sleigh. "There used to be a primary school in Besampa Tole. However, the landslide caused by the earthquake washed it away and there is no trace of primary school now," said Thami.

Search for a Secure Settlement

Since they were relocated in Panipokhari, small children did not get the opportunity to study. After earthquakes, people built a temporary school using tarpaulin. This is no more there now. "As there is no land for school, the budget allocated for the reconstruction of school is going to waste. The future of forty-students is uncertain," said Jiten Thami, chairperson of the School Management Committee.

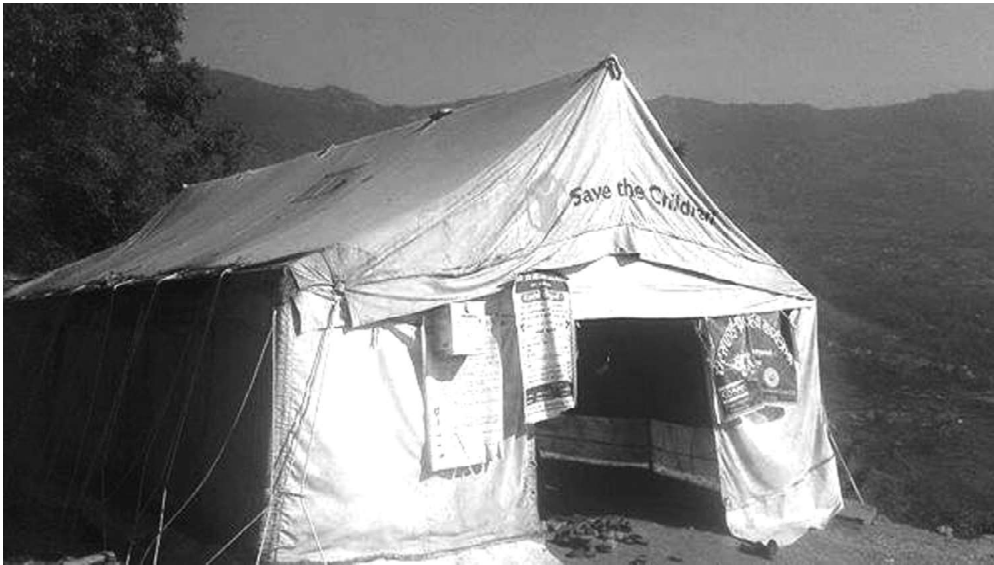
Building Separate House

At a time when a group of victims are complaining about the new houses, another group of people, who have already got the new houses, too have stories to tell.

The residence of formerly Lakuri Danda Village Development Committee Ward No 1, now Bhimeshwor Municipality Ward 1, were quite happy to live in a new house constructed under donor's support. Over one hundred houses were constructed in the village with



Reconstruction in progress



Temporary Primary School

views. "It is wrong to blame us. We never forced people to build two room houses," said Acharya. Victims are free to build the houses as per their wishes. Only one requirement is that the building should be at par with NRA's building guidelines."

He agreed that NGOs and INGOs have limitations as they cannot spend Rs.350,000.00 as per the regulations. However, they can build even four-room houses asking for contribution from the

the support. As the two room houses are insufficient, they are compelled to build the new houses taking the loan again.

Maila Tamang, a resident of the village, said donors delivered us a new house constructed under a turnkey basis. Donors purchased construction materials and provided wages of labors and built the houses. Had we built the houses taking Rs.300,000.00 of private housing grants, we would need an additional Rs.800,000.00. But, we won't have to face the problems of space.

"Although my house was built under a complete grant scheme by

NGOs, the problem with me now is the inadequate space. As my house has two rooms, I find it difficult to store foodstuff and provide additional space for my children and guests. This is the reason I have to construct another house by taking a loan," said Tamang.

Built under the grant assistance of SOS Children's home, 108 houses have three rooms as per the approved design of National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). As people accepted the model of NRA without much knowledge, they are facing the problems now.

All the victims have similar complaints. "Initially, they told us that they would construct four room houses. When NRA did not permit four-room buildings, donors were to build two room houses," said a victim.

However, NRA's District Unit Head Sagar Acharya holds different

local communities."

"The government has been repeatedly saying that Rs.300,000.00 is given just to build earthquake resilient houses. If house owners want to build four room houses, they can build these with additional money as necessary. The only question is that the house should be built as per the guidelines of NRA," said Acharya.

Looking at the latest condition of Dolakha District, most of the earthquake victims are building two-room houses because they don't have the additional money. There is a misperception about the grant. Many victims think that the grant money is to build the two room houses.

After receiving the grant money, Ganesh Bahadur Shrestha of Lakuri Danda is also building a two-room house. Shrestha's understanding is that under a private housing grant, he can build only a two-room house.

According to National Reconstruction Authority District Unit, the progress of private construction is satisfactory. Many buildings are under construction and the number of beneficiaries taking the grants has drastically increased.

However, the rural populations have their own difficulties. There is confusion in the rural areas whether they are building



NRA's District Unit Head Acharya

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Divisional Engineer Division Office Urban Development and Building Construction Yekraj Adhikari,

earthquake resilient houses or two-room houses. Under the supervisions of engineers and approved design of Department of Urban Development Building Construction, people are building the houses. According to the catalogue, the earthquake victims can build one room or two room houses. The second part of the catalogue also approves alternative technology to build the houses. However, victims will receive the grant only when the buildings follow the National Building Codes.

Although there are dozens of organizations working in reconstruction in Dolakha, there were only a few reconstructed houses with Nepalese structures. Majority of the houses under construction are two-room houses. The two-room houses are inadequate in the rural structures with cattle shed, bee hive or chicken cage, forget about the balcony.

Victims complain that the designs are not in tune with their livelihood. Old people have their own worries. Sixty one years old Chasman Tamang complains that the government is blurring the lines of old Nepalese style in the name of new earthquake resilient houses.

"The NRA approved building design undermines the old culture and agriculture based lifestyle. I think the new buildings will be resilient to earthquakes. However, they bury and dismantle our own cultures and values."

In the name of building earthquake resilient houses, people are building houses, which are insufficient and unable to meet their own needs.

"We are giving up our rich construction costumes, culture and style, forgetting our own materials and creativity in the name of earthquake resilient houses like doll. NRA's present guidelines compel people to build the house as per their own design," said Tamang.

Although the government has constituted NRA to speed up reconstruction systematically with necessary rules and regulations, collect the donor's contributions, design various building structures and assign engineers in the villages, the speed of initial period

7 to 45 days of training and donors from all over the world are supporting the reconstruction process. However, Nepal's own culture and technology is going beneath these resilient structures.

According to the data of Urban Development Building Construction, District Office Dolakha, 15000 houses have already been constructed in Dolakha and 21000 are in the process of reconstruction, 16300 beneficiaries have already received second installment and 4517 have received the third installment.

Out of them 1500 beneficiaries have received the second installment and 1000 received the third installment from donors.

According to the Urban Development and Building Construction, District Office, five international non-government organizations have been building 2289 houses in the district. Those include The Save the Children 549, CARITAS 1335, SOS Children 108 and HURADEC 297.

Government officials claim that those houses built under the grant are all earthquake resilient but they have only two rooms. Adhikari, head of Urban Development and Building Construction Division, is also not happy with the design.

"During the initial days, our concern was how to build the houses for the victims and to distribute the grant easily. Of course, the beneficiaries are raising the voices on the reconstruction but no one is listening. Instead of building one house to show to the government and another for living, I would like to request all beneficiaries to build their houses as per their need following the guidelines for earthquake resilience." Adhikari also holds the view that the organizations working in the districts do not have the coordination with the



Earthquake victim Maila Tamang

was slow. Now many masons are receiving

local level. Most of the organizations are coming to the

district for signing agreements with the center. He said that the NGOs and INGOs chose the areas connected to the roads and nobody went to remote parts of the country.

Central advisor of SOS Children and Reconstruction in charge Shanker Pradhanang said, "We have to construct the buildings strictly following the guidelines and agreement. NRA allows us just 350,000.00 per family. "You cannot make houses spending such a small amount of money. We have already handed over 108 homes in Lakuri danda," said Pradhanang.

Other non-government organizations also complain about the process to get the permission and ceiling set for the reconstruction. "It took us 17 months to secure the permission and two months for training. We chose the houses under the design provided by NRA. Initially, our plan was to construct four room homes. However, the money available with us was inadequate to do so. Our aim is to hand over earthquake resilient houses to beneficiaries even if it is just two rooms. In some places, the beneficiaries do not have adequate land to build a two-room house," said Pradhanang.

Although the earthquake gave a good opportunity to build organized urban areas and earthquake resilient houses, the ongoing reconstruction process shows something else happening. As Nepal's reconstruction process has passed through a period of intense political instability, it has left many lacunas behind.

Despite making progress and working to heal the wounds of earthquake victims, there are still a lot of things to do in the district. Looking through the eyes of the victims, Nepal's ongoing reconstruction process is too little and too official oriented.

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LOCAL LEVEL IN RECONSTRUCTION

Unaccountable Delay

Even eight months after holding the local level elections, many Rural Municipalities and Municipalities are yet to carry out reconstruction programs effectively in the earthquake-affected areas. Against the general hope of delivering effective and efficient services locally, the local level bodies seem to have failed to carry out the reconstruction work

BYA CORRESPONDENT

Seventy-seven years old Ait Singh Tamang, a resident of Bagmati Rural Municipality, Ward No 2, Bhorletar, is yet to receive the earthquake grant.

Although the politicians contested the local elections with a slogan to provide the affected people with grants to reconstruct their house, the agenda is given a nominal priority now. Tamang's chairman and ward president told him to wait till the completion of the two layers of elections.

"I don't know whether my ward chairman has pushed my application



A house under construction

forward and paved the way to receive the grant," said Tamang. The earthquake has badly affected Bagmati Rural Municipality, including Bhorletar. Bordering three other districts, Lalitpur and Kavrepalanchok in north and Sindhuli in east, Bhorletar is one of the remote villages of Makwanpur district, six hours' drive from Hetauda.

Formerly under the Faparbari Village Development Committee, Ward No 2, the Bhorletar village has seen the earthquake victims struggling now to receive the final settlement. Leaning to the wall of her under-construction house, fifty-year old Phool Maya Tamang asked whether she is eligible for the third installment. "During the election campaigns, political party leaders even assured them to increase the current grant to over Rs.500.000. Will I get the money?" asked Tamang.



Earthquake victim Phool Maya Tamang

These people are in confusion about getting the grant money as the locally-elected leaders are in the district headquarters to celebrate the victory of their colleagues. With the elections results of the upper tiers coming out, the representatives of rural municipalities are actively taking part in the victory marches and nobody is there to address the concerns of the earthquake victims.

Ward Chairman of Ward No 2 of Bagmati Rural Municipality, however, said that the situation of the earthquake victims has improved a lot following the elections. The Rural Municipality has already sent additional names of the victims, which were left out in the previous survey and the number of engineers and sub-overseers has increased. "Those, whose names appeared as eligible in the first list, have already received the second installment. Following the elections, the earthquake reconstruction work has accelerated," said ward chairman.

However, the affected people disagree. "One can see the state of earthquake reconstruction," said victim Tamang. "We are losing hope that the elected representatives can deliver better."

Lack of elected local government levels was one of the most frequently cited reasons for the delay in the process of reconstruction. People like Ait Singh Tamang, however, have found nothing changing even eight months after the elections.

The story of the residents of Chisapani, Ward No 2 of Hariharpur Gadhi Rural Municipality of Sindhuli District is not much different. Situated in the remote western parts of Sindhuli district, bordering Kavrepalanchwok and Makwanpur, an overwhelming number of people are yet to get the second and third installments.

According to local residents, May 12, 2015 aftershock damaged almost all the houses in the village. They said that even the houses made of wood

cracked.

Sixty eight years old Uttardhoj Ghalan does not know when he will receive the second installment. "I have already completed the reconstruction of my house. Since our elected Ward Chairman has been in the election campaign for the last three months, I have been waiting to receive the second and third installments," said Ghalan. "As I received a loan from a money lender, I have been paying a hefty interest rate per month for my loan of Rs.200.000.00. If they release the money earlier, I won't have to pay the interest," said Ghalan.

Published in 2017 April, the opinions expressed in the Aid and Recovery In Post Earthquake Nepal, as per a study conducted by Inter Disciplinary Analysts

with support from the Asia Foundation, still ring true at least in Bagmati Rural Municipality of Makwanpur District, 70 kilometers east of Hetauda, and in Chisapani Village, Ward No 2 of Hariharpur Gadhi Rural Municipality of Sindhuli district.

Although earthquake victims of the villages of the two different districts are facing similar problems, elected representatives of local level have reasons to defend their negligence, too.

"Now the elections have concluded, we will spare all our time and efforts to solve the problems of the earthquake victims," said Kasang Ghalan, Chairman of Ward No 2. "Once the rural municipality sends the technical staff, including the engineers, the pace of distribution of money will accelerate."

For the villagers of Chisapani, one of the remote villages of Sindhuli District, it takes almost one and a half days to reach the district headquarters, Sindhuligadhi, and almost a five to six hours walk to reach the Rural Municipality's Office.

"After the merger of four Village Development Committees, it takes a day for us to visit the rural



Earthquake victim Uttardhoj Ghalan

NEW SPOTLIGHT INVESTIGATION

municipality's office," said Ghalan. "This is also responsible for the delay in the process."

In the independent impacts and recovery monitoring, phase 4, quantitative survey, April 2017; four in ten respondents had said that reconstruction would operate the same way as before and after the elections.

Fifty-five years old Janak Bahadur Tamang Lopchan, another earthquake victim, talks about how merger of villages and successive elections delayed the grants process. Although Lopchan has already received the second installment before the elections, he is waiting to get the third installment.

With the merger of four Village Development Committees, area of Bagmati Rural Municipality has expanded largely, making it impossible for the chairman of Rural Municipality to listen to the voices of the local people.

Promulgated in October 15, 2017, Local Government Operation Act 2017 gives sweeping powers to the local level regarding many issues related to the development activities in the rural and urban areas.

According to the provisions of the act, Ward Office is responsible

to issue all kinds of certification for the purpose of grants, including for the earthquake victims. Ward Office is the final authority to declare all kinds of individual status and issue certification for damage and loss. The spirit of the act is the complete devolution of power.

Even the revised provision of the Guidelines of Private Housing Grants notes the legal provision. However, the ward chairs are yet to understand what the law says about their authority.

Although there is a provision in the act that in case of his or her absence for a week, the ward chair has to hand over the authority to one of the assembly members of the ward as acting chair.

The ward chair does not see it necessary to make another acting ward chair during such absences. "Since I was travelling near my village during the elections campaign, I don't think it is necessary to hand over the authority to somebody else," said Ghalan.

With no sense of public accountability, no one seems compelled to appoint the person in charge in their absence. However, the prolonged period of absence of ward chairs has definitely delayed the process of reconstruction, increasing the human suffering.

The Act further specifically allows the ward chairperson to take any decision and recommendation, which cannot be challenged by any other authority. Even some of the directives of NRA are made irrelevant following the promulgation of the act.

With such sweeping powers in hand, the local level leaders can make a major change if they are determined to do so. At a time when Chief Executive Officer of National Reconstruction Authority Yubaraj Bhusal has



Construction in progress in Bhorletar

declared that the reconstruction of the private housing will complete by 2018, it needs the support of local level representatives to materialize this.

Given the present state of earthquake reconstruction of two villages, with no sense of public accountability among the elected representatives, it seems that the chances of alleviating the woes of the earthquake victims soon are few.

Although many houses were cracked in several places, the teams did not include the names of victims in the list as eligible for private housing grant.

After several complaints, some names were included in the name list. However, transformation of local bodies and three different elections in a matter of just eight months disrupted the process. New act in hand and three tiers of elected bodies in place, earthquake victims of these two remote villages are waiting for the days to see an accelerated pace of reconstruction in their villages.

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