THE PULSE

Survival in the Disaster Zone: Nepal's Arduous Recovery

Findings from a new survey show that a year on from Nepal's earthquake, communities are struggling to get by as reconstruction aid fails to arrive.

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Anniversaries are a time for reflection and introspection. With a year having passed since a devastating earthquake turned large swathes of Nepal to rubble, Nepalese and aid agencies alike are taking stock of what has been done, what hasn't, and what needs remain. New results from the Independent Impacts and Recovery Monitoring (IRM) project, which includes a large-scale household survey and in-depth field monitoring, provide the most systematic evidence to date on how recovery is proceeding and current conditions in the earthquake zone.

The picture one year on is of communities coping in an environment of immense challenges and slow responses. While victims have survived, there are signs that things might get worse if housing aid and cash does not reach affected areas soon.

Lack of reconstruction aid

The emergency response in the months following the earthquake was chaotic, but aid eventually reached most communities. The first round of IRM in June 2015 found that after the government established District Disaster Relief Committees, aid coordination improved and tarps and food had gone out to most of those in vital need.

However, funds to support the reconstruction of the 900,000 houses that were damaged or destroyed did not follow. The government provided two small cash transfers, totaling $250, to help those who lost their houses construct temporary shelters and cope with the winter. The survey finds that as of March, 90 percent of people in the most affected districts had received cash from the government, but the average sum received was just $210.

Further support stalled. Despite more than $4 billion being pledged by donors in June 2015, very little has reached communities in need. The government's National Reconstruction Authority has only just started to operate. The NRA plans to disburse larger grants of $2,000 to those people whose houses were destroyed, but these disbursements had not arrived in any of the research areas.

Current conditions

Without adequate support, conditions are difficult in many areas. Villagers are getting by but face immense challenges. In the five surveyed districts that were most heavily impacted, more than three-quarters are living in temporary self-constructed shelters.

Although these are more sturdy than those erected immediately after the earthquake, many were not fit for the monsoon. Water leakage was frequent, resulting in children and the elderly suffering from diseases as well as from leeches and insect bites. This forced some to return to their damaged homes despite the safety risks. Winter was also hard for the displaced. One-quarter of people in severely hit districts said they were unable to ensure their house or shelter was sufficient to withstand the cold. This has led to some returning to live in dangerous, damaged homes, especially in more mountainous wards. With the monsoon season approaching, many fear their shelters will not protect them and are trying to repair their homes, without the means to do so.

The fuel crisis and recovery

In September, political elites decided to controversially fast-track the promulgation of a new constitution, the culmination of a drawn-out political transition following the 2006 accord which ended Nepal's civil war. This led to protests across the southern Terai plains by Madhesi and Tharu groups, who believed the constitution discriminated against them. A four-month blockade of the Indian border led to massive fuel shortages across Nepal, including in earthquake-affected areas.

This set back recovery. Only 8 percent of respondents had been able to get the fuel they needed for cooking and transportation and half said that fuel shortages had negatively affected their livelihoods. (Two percent lost their livelihoods entirely because of the crisis.) Indirect impacts include rampant inflation, with around 95 percent reporting the price of basic food staples was much higher than before. Sixty-five percent of informants in severely hit districts noted that it had led to delays in aid in their wards with 24 percent saying aid completely stopped while the crisis was ongoing.

Coping amidst adversity

With major reconstruction assistance still to arrive, villagers are responding creatively to the adversity they face to survive and restart their lives. They face many challenges in doing so. Short-term coping strategies may lead to longer-run problems.

Traditionally, households send family members abroad to generate remittances and to cities to earn money and this has continued. Money has continued to flow in, at similar levels to before the earthquake. But it is not enough to help victims recover.

While the earthquake negatively impacted people's livelihoods, there has been some degree of return to normality. Most farmers, for example, have gone back to their fields. However, in many places, water sources have dried out since the earthquake and have seriously affected yields. Most of those in business have recommenced work. But the tourism industry has been particularly affected and has not fully recovered. In Solukhumbu, the home to Everest, hotel owners have rebuilt their hotels but few tourists have returned. Guides and porters suffered as very few trekkers visited in the last season.

The dominant coping strategy has been borrowing. There have been large increases in loan taking. In June 2015, 17 percent of survey respondents said they had borrowed with most waiting to see what the government would provide for them. However, nine months on, with government support still not having arrived, more have taken loans. In March, 36 percent of survey respondents said they had borrowed money since the 2015 monsoon. Borrowing will further increase: 57 percent of those in severely hit districts say they plan to take out loans in the next three months. Many are borrowing believing that government housing grants will come soon and can be used to repay loans. If expected support does not arrive, or if it cannot be used to repay loans previously taken out for housing reconstruction, this will cause major problems for those who have taken on debt.

This is a particular risk because people are turning to expensive informal sources of credit. Twelve percent have taken loans from moneylenders – on average $3,300. Borrowing can help people get by in the short term, but there are signs that it may lead to troubles down the road. The average interest charged by moneylenders is 2.4 percent per month. As interest compounds over time, this can lead to astronomical debts if the principal is not repaid.

Problems ahead

People in the earthquake zone are getting by, but the means by which they are doing so create down-the-road risks. And if and when aid volumes rise, new problems may occur.

The debt trap. People borrow to recover, find they cannot repay, and end up losing their assets. This cycle has occurred in previous post-disaster landscapes such as the Myanmar Delta after Cyclone Nargis. High interest rates, along with ongoing uncertainty over what the government will provide, mean that this is a real risk in Nepal. This could lead to widespread land transfers and increases in inequality. As people put larger shares of their incomes into paying off debt, the opportunities for them to economically recover diminish.

Rising disillusionment. More aid is needed, but increased assistance may also do harm if it is badly planned and targeted. IRM finds that resentment against the Nepali government has increased as promised support has not arrived. Once the resource tap opens, with the government due to start its reconstruction phase this month, tensions may increase further. Faulty and inconsistent damage assessments, leading to inaccuracies in beneficiary lists, could lead to increased anger from those who miss out.

Vulnerability. The aid response is operating in an environment of unequal power relations: across gender, caste, and other divides. There are risks that some groups (widows, the mentally ill, the disabled, the impoverished, Dalits) get left behind, further reinforcing inequalities. It will be of vital importance to track whether traditionally marginalized groups are accessing aid, whether their distinct needs are being met, and whether new forms are exclusion are eventuating.

The IRM project is collaboration between The Asia Foundation, Democracy Resource Center Nepal and Interdisciplinary Analysts. It involves a 4,000 plus representative household survey in 11 districts, along with in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in six of these. Surveys are conducted at six-month intervals to track changes over time.

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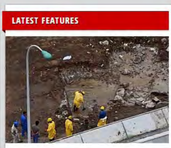

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