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Disaster Governance and Challenges in a Rural Nepali Community: Notes from Future Village NGO

Lai Ming Lam
Varun Khanna
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More than two years after the 2015 earthquakes devastated Nepal, Katunge village in Dhading district, Nepal, remained as destroyed as it was right after the earthquake. While the villagers were rather hopeful about rebuilding their houses and lives during the immediate relief effort in which we engaged, one month after the earthquake, now only a few are confident that they will ever rebuild their homes.

In this article, we describe the reconstruction progress, followed by a critique of why the reconstruction progress has been so slow. We conclude with reflections on reconstruction challenges interwoven into the context of our NGO experience. During our trips to the region, we have observed and experienced the difficulties people and organizations are facing in the reconstruction process. We interviewed government officials and NGOs that have been involved in reconstruction, which helped us to

gain insight into broader perspectives on the community or family-level realities that hinder rebuilding and community revitalization. We conclude that by mobilizing earthquake victims, it is possible to rebuild houses and revitalize communities. Conversely, little progress can be expected in Nepal's rebuilding as long as poor governance and poor coordination between major reconstruction actors prevails.

Keywords: Nepal earthquake, post-disaster relief and recovery, governance, NGOs, reconstruction.

Introduction

As we walked through Katunge village in Nepal's Dhading district, nearly 18 months after the Spring 2015 earthquakes that devastated Nepal, we saw that the village was still as broken and shattered as when we saw it for the first time after the earthquake. Everywhere we went, we saw piles of bricks, debris and houses that were either collapsed or showed cracks and gaping holes. Nearly all of the families were still living in semi-temporary shelters, mostly made of wood with tin roofs, and often built next to their collapsed houses. We visited several families living in shelters, and they described the hardships they have been enduring since the earthquake. Many talked about how difficult life is in the shelters, with leaking and draughty roofs, lack of space, and improper sanitation. It was not difficult for us to imagine how hard life is for the villagers; during several of our field trips we made to the village we experienced ourselves how hot it can be in the shelters during the summer, and how cold and wet during the monsoon season. In our discussions with the villagers, the way people talked about their future significantly changed since our last visit, just a few months ago. While the villagers were rather hopeful about rebuilding their houses and lives when we met them one month after the earthquake, now only a few are confident that they will ever rebuild their homes. This is a description of our latest trip to Katunge village and several other places in Nepal in September 2016.

Having been involved for years with a grassroots Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called Future Village, we decided to provide emergency relief and establish a reconstruction project in our project area, Katunge village, in Dhading district.¹ While prior to the earthquake our NGO mainly focused on providing free education and health care to the most disadvantaged families in the village, our efforts after the earthquake focused on supporting and assisting all affected families. Since the earthquake we have made several visits to Nepal to contribute to the project and to study the post-earthquake situation. During our trips, we have observed and experienced the difficulties people and organizations are facing as they try to rebuild, and have spoken to several government officials and NGOs that have been involved in the reconstruction.

In this article, we discuss our perspectives on the reasons why the reconstruction progress in Nepal has been slow; we focus on how Nepalese government and non-governmental organization actions have slowed the revitalization process. We argue that the government's inefficiency to deliver funding and services to affected people, and its

lack of coordination with NGOs in the aftermath of the earthquake, are among the main reasons why the reconstruction progress has been impeded. This paper has been written based on the observations we made during our several trips, the discussions we had (as representatives of reconstruction projects) with government officials and representatives of other NGOs, and our first-hand experiences as members of an NGO involved in reconstruction projects.

This article consists of three parts. First, we describe the reconstruction progress. Second, we critically analyze why the progress has been so slow. Third, we provide reflections on reconstruction challenges using our experience working with NGOs.

Aspirations and Realities of Reconstruction

The descriptions of Katunge village provided earlier in this paper do not differ much from post-earthquake situations in the rest of affected areas in Nepal. In most places the reconstruction progress has been slow. By the time the earthquake marked its first anniversary, and media attention surrounding the rebuilding progress peaked, none of the more than 800,000 houses damaged or destroyed during the earthquake had been rebuilt by the government (Rigby 2016). This left approximately three million people without permanent shelter (Save the Children 2016). At that time, most of these affected families were still living in temporary shelter unsuitable for Nepal's intense monsoons and cold winters. In some extreme cases, people were even living in tents or had moved back into their damaged houses (Basu 2016).

The slow reconstruction pace has been met with substantial criticism both inside and outside Nepal, and many organizations, including donors, have urged the Nepali government to expedite the reconstruction and the distribution of grants (Nikhil 2016). Despite this pressure, the reconstruction progress only started to accelerate in August 2016, when a campaign was undertaken to finally distribute the reconstruction grant installment of NRs. 50,000 to the affected families that had signed grant agreements. This long-awaited installment was part of a series of installments that the Nepalese government had promised to grant and distribute to all earthquake-affected families that had applied for the grant and had signed the necessary grant agreement. This grant agreement requires affected families to rebuild an earthquake-resistant home in accordance with government formulated standards to receive further aid. More assessments were also conducted in August to identify families who had been affected by the

earthquakes but had not been registered. Because of this campaign, the number of households receiving the first installment increased from 1,000 in June 2016 to 407,007 by the end of September 2016 (National Reconstruction Authority 2016).

In terms of public facilities, the reconstruction progress has been better, but can still be considered moderate. During the earthquake, 21,169 classrooms were destroyed and 27,452 classrooms were partially damaged. By the end of September 2016, 8,856 of these classrooms were rebuilt or were being rebuilt by the Nepali government or NGOs; however, no clear plan had been implemented for rebuilding the remaining classrooms. Reconstruction of the health facilities has also been slow, with construction only starting for 444 of the 1,080 destroyed health facilities by the end of September 2016, and currently only 200 facilities have been reopened. At the same time, construction has only just begun for 49 of the 750 damaged cultural heritage sites, making problems worse for an already suffering tourism industry (National Reconstruction Authority 2016).²

The lack of progress strongly contrasts with the promises made during the conference of donors held in June 2015. During this conference, donor countries pledged nearly 4.1 billion USD for the long-term recovery of Nepal, a level of commitment that surprised many, and covers just under half of the 9.18 billion USD the Nepali government now expects will be needed to rebuild the country. In return, the Nepali government promised to establish a national reconstruction authority that would centrally organize all the reconstruction efforts and ensure they are carried out expeditiously and fairly. Indeed, the government was able to rapidly map the needs and damage in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and communicate those needs to international donors, which was promising. This makes it even more disappointing that the reconstruction progress has been slow, despite the availability of extensive resources (Nikhil 2016).

What's Wrong with Rebuilding Nepal?

The slow progress of post-earthquake reconstruction is in part the result of deeper socio-political conflicts in the Nepali society. First, political dysfunction has worsened in the post-earthquake time, and second, the lack of trust between the State and NGOs has led to many potential reconstruction projects being turned down or being ineffective in responding to local needs. In other words, post-disaster governance has played a crucial role in the reconstruction performance.

Political Dysfunction in the Post-Earthquake Context

Since 2006, the year when King Gyanendra's monarchical rule collapsed, the new Republic of Nepal has experienced endless confrontations based on sharply diverging political and ethnic lines. In July 2008, the Maoist leader, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), was selected as the first president of the Republic and formed a coalition led by the Maoist party. However, later the Maoists left the coalition, politically destabilizing Nepal and leading to frequent changes in the government due to dismissals and resignations. Although several deadline extensions for drafting the new constitution had been made, the political parties could not reach a consensus (Jaiswal 2016). In particular, Madheshi-based parties from the lowland Tarai region had asked for more representation in the parliament and refused to support the proposed constitution.

This conflict about a new constitution continued after the earthquake. In September 2015, Kathmandu-based political parties reached an accord and finally drafted the new constitution, however, they failed to gain support from the Madheshi groups from the Tarai region who have long been fighting for greater autonomy. This impasse led to unexpected four-month-long fuel blockades, and protests in Tarai escalated and became increasingly violent. The fuel blockade eviscerated Nepal's energy supply, further impacting earthquake victims who could not get essential necessities, such as medical supplies and fuel. Nepal's economy was also badly hit by the earthquake and later by the fuel crisis; tourism took a massive hit because of this double crisis. High transportation costs also limited reconstruction progress as much reconstruction work had to be suspended. Facing the increasing social turmoil and political uncertainty, many NGOs decided to finish their disaster relief work in Nepal earlier by December 2015 and gave up the long-term recovery and reconstruction projects.

Little Gets Done Without a Reconstruction Policy

Effective reconstruction policy must go hand in hand with good governance, which has been clearly discussed in the literature on disaster governance. Empirical examples indicate that effective coordination between the State and NGOs helps to overcome the relief and recovery challenges to those resource-poor countries (e.g. the earthquake in Turkey on August 17, 1999). Civil society's involvement strengthens the community's resilience to future disasters (e.g. the earthquakes in Sichuan on May 12, 2008 and on April 20, 2013). Disasters can also transform the society on multiple levels. For instance, the 1995 Kobe earthquake directly caused the development of civil society organizations in Japan because the public believed that these

organizations could react to the disasters more effectively than the State. All these empirical cases show that the involvement of civil society in post-disaster management is positive, however, civic cooperation does not appear in a vacuum; it relies on state policy (Jalai 2002). There is no doubt that the government plays a key role in post-disaster recovery, but the level of state intervention is debatable.

Two major reconstruction experiences—Hurricane Katrina (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2009) and the Indian Ocean Tsunami (Aldrich 2010; 2011)³—show that government intervention may not necessarily be good and that some policies may adversely affect the recovery process. The complicated state-led reconstruction policies often cause significant delay and encourage disaster-affected communities to take a wait-and-see attitude. Consequently, the community's revitalization is undermined in this post-disaster time (Chamlee-Wright and Rothschild 2007; Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2009). Chamlee-Wright and Storr (2009) also find that the state's promises are often unrealistic, which can exacerbate pessimistic expectations among the affected communities if the rebuilding work is slow. They conclude that, in contrast with a state where power is centralized, the coordinated relationship between key stakeholders, including the state, local NGOs, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and local communities, is the key to better recovery. They argue the role of the state is to create mechanisms for disaster-affected communities to self-recover by reinforcing their local knowledge and community resources.

Nepal has faced many governance challenges in the post-disaster period. Political dysfunction resulted in a serious delay in the establishment of a reconstruction authority. During the Donor Conference in June 2015, the Nepali government promised to establish the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). This authority was supposed to oversee all reconstruction work including eligibility assessment, project approval and policy implementation. It was also responsible for coordinating, guiding and supporting the activities of ministries, local authorities and partner organizations (HRRP 2017). Despite the crucial need for the establishment of the NRA, the authority was only established in January 2016 after several delays. During these eight months from June to January, Nepal was left without an official national reconstruction policy. The delay in establishing the NRA clearly reflected the struggle between divergent political parties. Pokharel and Wagle (2016) point out that the politicization of the bureaucracy in Nepal was a serious issue and that most of the civil servants were affiliated with the ruling party. The NRA became another way for the major political

parties to fight for control, specifically over the reconstruction fund. As a result, a consensus among different parties of who should lead the NRA was hard to reach.

Even after the NRA was finally created in January 2016, its function was criticized by the public (Nikhil 2016). It was severely understaffed and most positions were 'under recruitment.' Consequently, the release of new building codes and reconstruction policies was severely delayed. The decision-making process was criticized for its lack of accountability and transparency (Parajuli 2016). For example, after the NRA took over all reconstruction responsibilities, the Nepali government and its foreign partners rejected the previous census conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics in the eleven most affected districts due to the worry of 'misappropriation of funds' by 'fake' earthquake victims. Huge money was spent for 'advance technologies' and 'technical manpower' (mostly engineers) on a reassessment effort. Parajuli criticizes that the public was never informed about the trade-off involved. Furthermore, according to the *Aid and Recovery in Post-Earthquake Nepal* report (The Asia Foundation 2016a), coordination between the NRA, officials in the district and village officials is rare. The local NRA offices and district offices were often confused about their actual roles and duties due to frequent changes in national (central) level guidelines. It appeared that central-level guidelines weren't flexible enough to respond to district-level realities, and it was difficult to adjust these guidelines and to develop local reconstruction policies (The Asia Foundation 2016b). This top-down approach, along with the government's inability to function properly, resulted in only a few houses being rebuilt the year after the earthquake.

Apart from the delayed reconstruction policy, this reconstruction strategy fails to respond to local complexities. Equality is the most important reconstruction principle for the Nepali government's post-earthquake response. An unjust reconstruction policy could further escalate the tense ethnic divisions and anxieties following the earthquake, therefore the Nepali government has enforced a limit on housing grants, and to avoid duplication of relief and reconstruction efforts it has retained all decision-making power for reconstruction projects. Influenced by the approaches used by the State Government of Gujarat to rebuild following the 2001 earthquake in India, and the advice from the World Bank, the government of Nepal decided an owner-driven approach would be the most effective and culturally sensitive way to rebuild private houses (National Planning Commission 2015). However, what government officials promote as equality, in reality, does not mean equality for everyone, especially the

poor who have difficulty accessing adequate information from local officials. According to the recent report *Building Inequality* by Amnesty International (2017), the 'owner-driven' housing reconstruction program, which requires proof of land ownership as a condition for house owners to qualify to receive housing grants, did not address Nepal's history of feudal land tenure systems and local informal tenure relationships. As a result, the most disadvantaged groups, including the landless, were excluded from this housing scheme.

In addition, the Nepali government enforced a housing grant policy that capped grants at a certain amount and did not allow additional top-up grants for marginalized communities. All eligible households in rural areas could receive NRs. 300,000 (\$3,000 USD) in three installments if their rebuilt houses complied with the building requirements. A staff member from one Taiwan-based NGO explained to us why their organization finally gave up on their housing reconstruction project, "It is hard for us to work because villagers have to choose to get help from the government or us, not both. Two Lakh Rupees [approx. US\$2,000] is a big amount for the rural poor. Villagers don't want to lose the grant opportunity." Without more intervention from NGOs and the State, the owner-driven approach simply means that those with the resources can build safe houses, but the poor never can. Consequently, most of the rural poor continue to live in uninhabitable temporary shelters, and their hopes of rebuilding their houses seems to be fading.

Wait-and-See Attitudes among Earthquake-Affected Communities

Another critical challenge in the post-earthquake scenario is the lack of trust between NGOs and the government of Nepal. In our discussions with national and international non-governmental aid (NGOs/INGOs) workers, respondents stated that they were confused about the frequent changes in the reconstruction policy and admitted that the one-door system where all reconstruction projects had get approval from NRA weakened their autonomy.

On September 9, 2016, when we were on our way to meet officers from an INGO, we suddenly heard the news that the newly-appointed Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, had proposed to increase the housing grant from NRs. 200,000 to NRs. 300,000. Together with a proposed low interest rate loan, the new housing package for each eligible household would be up to NRs. 800,000. The INGO officers were shocked and suspected this may be just another ploy to obtain popularity, as it did not seem

realistic in a poor country like Nepal. One officer asserted that "this amount is huge even for people living in an urban area like Kathmandu." He was worried that the increase in the housing grant would not help to speed up the house rebuilding process: "Some people actually can manage to rebuild houses by themselves. However, the hope for getting more and more housing grants makes everyone take a wait-and-see attitude and solely depend on government. This is one of reasons for the severe delay in housing reconstruction." At the end of September 2016, the NRA announced that over 80% enrolled beneficiaries (361,575 out of 455,710) received the first housing grant installment. According to our observations in the Dhading district (one of the 11 most earthquake-devastated districts), even though most villagers had received the housing grant, active rebuilding had not yet commenced. Some villagers told us they used the money for food purchases and festival celebration. Many villagers also mentioned that they did not have sufficient knowledge to build earthquake-resilient houses.

Government: "NGO Fund is Also a Government Fund"

The direct involvement of NGOs and INGOs in housing reconstruction is very rare. Most NGOs and INGOs in Nepal have allocated their funds to public infrastructure, masonry and carpentry training programs, and livelihood improvement activities. This dilemma was prevalent among NGOs, and in fact, in February 2016 the NRA requested that NGOs and INGOs not provide financial assistance or building materials directly to villagers because such organizations could not comply with building codes. Later, the NRA clarified that NGOs/INGOs were welcome to become involved in the house rebuilding sector with the understanding that the one-door system meant they must obtain approval from the NRA and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government of Nepal prior to becoming involved. In addition, NGOs were told that their housing projects should cover one defined and bounded area (such as a whole village or district). The NRA also notified the NGOs that no reconstruction projects should target a particular community based on caste, ethnicity or religion as this may harm national, caste, religious and ethnic sensitivities, and undermine the government's sovereignty. According to the *Mobilization of NGOs for Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Procedure Guideline* issued in April 2016, there must be no duplication of aid efforts, which means earthquake victims cannot receive financial assistance from both the government and NGOs. One politician explained to us that when the NGO signs a MoU, the project becomes a government project, "NGO fund is also the government's fund," said the official.

The NRA has encouraged NGOs and INGOs to deposit funds for private house reconstruction in the NRA's Reconstruction Fund. During interviews, high-ranking government officials pointed out that the one-door system is necessary to avoid poor NGO governance in the post-earthquake context. While the number of NGOs and INGOs in Nepal has increased dramatically in the past three decades, their governance has long been questioned due to their lack of transparency in the monitoring and evaluation of project expenses and of their general activities (Dhakal 2007). This explains why the guideline requires at least 80% of an organization's total project budget to be allocated to project activities, not staff salaries and traveling expenses, which is fair. However, this attempt to avoid corruption and mismanagement in NGOs has resulted in many NGOs simply giving up on their house rebuilding plans, or allocating funds to other recovery activities. It is estimated that less than 2% of the rebuilding of private houses will be supported by non-governmental organizations.

The NGOs are very suspicious of the one-door reconstruction approach in Nepal. Some NGOs are concerned that they will not be able to be accountable to their donors for donations that are managed by the Nepali government. In March 2016, we visited one influential NGO that had planned to help poor villagers rebuild their houses, but had changed their plans when negotiations with the government broke down. One of the reasons these negotiations halted was that this NGO was asked to rebuild the entire district, but the NGO simply did not have the ability to do so. The NGO was concerned about handing over donations to the government. The NGO officer pointed out that safe shelter for affected villagers should be the top priority, but it was difficult to deal with the bureaucracy. Finally, the decision was made to allocate funding to less controversial reconstruction sectors, such as education, health and water facilities. Five months later, the officer told us that the MoU with the Nepali government was finally signed. According to the MoU, the NGO would provide financial support to 8,000 households in four districts to rebuild their houses and the government had the right to decide the beneficiaries and oversee grant disbursement.

Under the equality principle, these 8,000 households would receive the same housing grant amount as other earthquake-affected households. The NGO was also responsible for providing the masonry and carpentry training for villagers. The officer admitted the agreement was not perfect. First, the NGO lost the authority to decide who would be the beneficiaries of their funds and how much

they would be granted. Second, the NGOs presence was limited because the beneficiaries did not know the support they received originated from the NGO, not the State. The senior officer further explained that to increase the level of accountability, the NGO would carry out some social communication campaigns to inform villagers of their right to appeal if they encountered any unfairness in receiving the housing grant. The NGO had hoped that through its training programs, more villagers could develop enough knowledge to rebuild their houses. The senior officer admitted that although the first housing grant installment was released, at least 30% of beneficiaries, such as female heads of households, the elderly and extremely poor families would not be able to rebuild their homes. He commented that in the past NGOs had the independence to implement more holistic social development projects, but after the earthquake, they lost this power. For example, they felt the housing grant was inadequate for villagers to rebuild their houses, and thus proposed giving an extra grant to cover the costs of transportation; however, the government rejected this proposal based on the principle of equality for all.

Lack of Long-term NGO Commitment and Coordination

Based on our year-long observation, we noticed that the poor performance of some NGOs (both local and international) also led to the slow reconstruction progress. Most NGOs are involved in masonry training programs, however the quality and effectiveness of these programs is a serious concern. Some NGOs offered only three-day masonry training programs, and the instructors did not even have any knowledge on how to build better and safe houses. We discussed this issue with a Japan-funded NGO that carried out several housing reconstruction training programs in rural areas. The staff members explained that due to the lack of funding, they did not have a follow-up action plan after the completion of model houses. They were optimistic that the government-housing grant was enough for villagers to rebuild houses despite the increasing cost of transportation, building materials, and labor in rural areas.

Rebuilding schools was another top priority in earthquake-affected districts where NGOs were actively engaged. We witnessed that some NGOs perceived the project sites as their 'territories' and refused to coordinate with other NGOs. For example, after a long discussion with locals, and having received approval from the local officials, our NGO decided to rebuild a small community school in Katunge since education was severely affected for months after the disaster. However, after we delivered

some basic building materials to the school, we received a call from another foreign-funded NGO claiming they were the only authorized organization to rebuild all schools in the region. The NGO even contacted the schoolteachers to request they terminate the rebuild project with us by offering them 'better deals' (meaning that no financial or in-kind contribution from locals would be necessary). Consequently, we stopped the project and removed all building materials. As a local and volunteer-based NGO, we did not have enough human resources to look for a new beneficial school. This story illustrates that if better coordination existed among NGOs, we could distribute resources wisely and widely so that more schools could be benefited faster.

The sustainability of the top-down reconstruction approach has been a serious concern. In our two-year observation, the coordination between the State, the NGOs and INGOs, as well as local communities, has been very limited. Instead of simply offering financial resources in an efficient way, we believe that good governance and effective coordination will determine whether Nepal can be rebuilt. Our NGO experience in post-disaster reconstruction clearly demonstrates that there is reason hope for revitalization as well as immense hopelessness.

Hope and Hopelessness: Future Village Housing Reconstruction Experiences

The earthquake caused extensive damage in the rural villages outside of Kathmandu, and the Future Village project area was no exception. All the houses had collapsed, and

some people were killed. Most local school buildings were destroyed, villagers had no shelter and were forced to sleep in the fields while it rained. There was a severe food and water shortage, and immediate assistance from the large humanitarian organizations was not forthcoming. The events of the initial days following the earthquake were discouraging for everyone in the village.

Despite these drawbacks, the community responded rather quickly. In the first two months, by working together the villagers managed to build a community center, a temporary school and over 100 temporary shelters. The initial response of our organization after the earthquake was to provide emergency relief, which included emergency cash, funding for the new community building, rice and grain distribution, emergency supplies and materials, such as fertilizers, to ensure a normal planting season. These combined efforts ensured that community members were safe in such a way that they could have positive attitudes about rebuilding their lives.

Moving Ahead in Uncertain Times

What became clear in the first few weeks after the earthquake was that it would be unlikely for large INGOs to offer support to Katunge Village. At the same time, we noticed that the way in which people were working together voluntarily both yielded positive outcomes and was the kind of mobilization that was needed to encourage people to start working together towards community revitalization. Therefore, soon after the earthquake we decided to launch a reconstruction project called The Chance Initiative



Figure 1. Villagers erect steel house frames under professional supervision.

(Atelier-3 x Design For People, 2016)



Figure 2. Rebuilt earthquake-resistant two-story local house.

(Lam, 2016)

that would not only provide the resources necessary for rebuilding the village, but would also encourage people to mobilize in ways that would simultaneously lead to stronger community cohesion.

In the months that followed, we established partnerships with several organizations and produced a strategy to rebuild earthquake-resistant houses in Katunge. In short, we designed an earthquake resistant steel frame,⁴ which could be distributed among the affected families. Architects and engineers from our partner organizations would provide free training to the community on how to erect the steel frames, the necessary foundation for the frames, and how to build the rest of the house according to government regulations. Apart from the steel frame, the materials to build the walls, roofs and floors could be sourced from the surrounding environment and the house could be built in accordance with cultural and traditional knowledge and customs.

Meanwhile, our organization took on the responsibility of mobilizing local people, leading the project and partly financing it through our global donor network. Several fundraising campaigns had already helped us to raise sufficient donation funds to finance the building of the first batch of houses by the end of 2015. We planned to use this budget to support affected families as follows: our organization would finance the steel frames (the most expensive part of the house that makes it seismic-resistant) and the foundation, while the families would be responsible for the

cost of the remaining materials and were obliged to voluntarily help other families (exchange labor) in setting up the frame and building the walls and roofs on their own homes. In this way, we could ensure that more families could be supported, labor costs would stay at a minimum for the families, and that each family could decide freely which materials it wanted to use in addition to the steel frame.

In August 2015, we first presented our plan to the local community. At that time, our plan was met with great enthusiasm and support from the villagers. A local reconstruction committee was also formed to coordinate this rebuilding work.

Implementing Reconstruction

As the community agreed with the implementation of our reconstruction project, we decided to ship the first batch of steel frames from China (the only country close to Nepal where such frames are currently made) to Katunge in December 2015. During this period, we first encountered the political dysfunction in the post-earthquake period: as there was no policy established for reconstruction projects, the authorities were not willing to allow our frames to enter Nepal at the border. In the days that followed, it was difficult to talk to the authorities, and the responses they gave us were contradictory. In the end, we finally gained approval to transport the frames into Nepal, however, we were fined a heavy tax as the customs office was only willing to approve

it as ‘commercial goods.’ The frames eventually arrived in the village in early January 2016.

It was also during this period that we visited the village again and started to notice that the opinion of some villagers about our reconstruction project had changed. Rumors had started to spread that the Nepali government was planning to distribute funds to earthquake-affected families soon. As the villagers had heard about the difficulties we were experiencing with transporting the steel frame, some villagers expressed that they preferred to wait for the government grant instead of starting to rebuild their houses. Some others—especially those who were more skeptical of the government’s promise—preferred to work with us to reconstruct their homes.

In the months that followed, we trained villagers how to rebuild their houses using the steel frame, and the first few houses were being built. Some of the families did exchange labor, while others with more means decided to hire skilled workers. At this stage, some villagers were unwilling to participate in the exchange of capital or help voluntarily because they became unsure whether they themselves wanted a steel frame, and thus were skeptical whether they would get free labor in return if they waited.

Later, we had consultations with the local community to discuss the need for another batch of steel frames to the village. It was around this time that the government had also announced the amount of money the earthquake-affected families would be entitled to and the criteria for receiving such support. Villagers split into two groups: some preferred to rebuild their houses faster and requested we order more steel frames, but most chose to wait for the government’s support. We also noticed that most of the villagers did not understand the conditions for receiving such government support. They were under the impression that the government would give them a sum of money upfront as the first installment and were unfamiliar with the condition that they had to rebuild their house in accordance with the building codes to receive the next installment of support. Nevertheless, 20 families eventually decided to accept the support from our organization; the community selected those families to receive steel frames in April 2016. Our organization also approached different government officials, and despite their promise to support us, nothing was achieved.

Finally, in April 2016, the Nepali government established a policy that made it clear that families who had received or would receive support from NGOs to rebuild their houses would be ineligible to receive the government’s support. The new policy resulted in more and more people taking a

wait-and-see attitude: they would not rebuild anything until the government distributed money. As a result of this policy most families spent another monsoon season in temporary shelters.

Around April 2016, it also became clear that NGOs were no longer allowed to operate without obtaining an approval for their reconstruction projects from the NRA. Therefore, we decided to obtain the government’s approval before we shipped a third batch of steel frames. In the months that followed, we used our resources to approach district officials to tell them about our initiative to help villagers rebuild their homes, and to request government approval. However, district officials did not show any interest in supporting our house rebuilding project. In one meeting, a high-ranking official pointed out that the Nepali government was not interested in ‘candy-type’ small-scale rebuilding projects as he described. He also mentioned that the district government did not have any power to make decisions. He directed us to contact the NRA, stating: “If you get the NRA approval, then we can look at your project.” He also emphasized that without such approval, helping villagers to rebuild houses would be “illegal.” When asked how to make the project legal, he failed to provide useful guidance. During the meeting, he did not even look at our proposal. Later, we were told that any reconstruction project must first get the district government’s support before contacting the NRA. Despite continued efforts to obtain government support, we have neither heard anything back from local government officials nor from the NRA. This has made it difficult for our organization to make long-term plans. Indeed, their bureaucratic-bureaucracy, which included inconsistent information, as well as unclear systems, procedures, delays, and negative responses from reconstruction authorities, discouraged many NGOs like ours from continuing to contribute to the post-earthquake revitalization effort.

Two years have now passed since the earthquake hit Nepal and since we first started to contribute to its revitalization, we have helped to build 27 earthquake resistant houses, one temporary school, one community center, one multi-purpose education center and seven earthquake resistant classrooms. We still have funding left to build a few more houses, but it is difficult to plan what further steps we can take due to the lack of government support, complicated bureaucratic processes and changing attitudes among the villagers who are largely affected by the shifting sands of the State’s policy. As a result, we also cannot do additional fundraising because of our precarious position.

Most families who received the steel frames have now completed their houses. In the meantime, many other families have received the first installment of the govern-

ment's support. But, after the first screening round, most families failed to comply with building codes, and hence are unsure whether they will ever receive the second installment or be able to complete the reconstruction. During our last visit to Katunge in April 2017, we noticed that opinions about how to continue rebuilding the village have become more diverse. Some families are still confident that they will receive further governmental support, while others have become increasingly skeptical of this approach. Some families have decided to start building new houses that are not earthquake resistant, and because they decided it better than the shelter that they had been living in for over two years. Others continue to take a wait-and-see attitude and cannot foresee building a new house anytime soon. For those families, another monsoon season in a temporary shelter lies ahead.

Conclusion

In this case study, we have documented the post-earthquake reality of a rural project area involving a grassroots NGO. We have highlighted some of the challenges of this project, and have interwoven several recommendations into our discussion for future policy-makers. Our reconstruction experience clearly demonstrates that the dominance of government control, bureaucracy, lack of long-term commitment among NGOs as well as the villagers' wait-and-see attitudes all undermine the capacity of the community's ability to rebound. In a resource-poor village like Katunge, civic participation from villagers, NGOs and private sectors are the key for post-disaster recovery. We suggest that the Nepali government should have a more encouraging framework to govern NGOs and an attitude to let the NGOs do what they need to do, so that they can mobilize others to help the local residents rebuild their communities.

The more time passes without things being done, the fewer opportunities Nepali people will have to rebuild their homes safely. It has been argued that the people are always happy and satisfied with whatever they have or can get, and it does not matter whether they are living in temporary shelters. However, natural disasters always go beyond what we can predict, especially if no action is taken. Then the poor are subjected to suffer more. While earthquakes are natural phenomena, their effects are not. Houses collapse because they are not seismic-resistant. We need to build them so that they will survive well into the future. We talk about equality in rebuilding, but not about justice for the most vulnerable. These man-made aspects of the disaster that hinder revitalization of communities after natural calamities can only be resolved when all

social institutions work together cohesively to create a better human society. By mobilizing earthquake victims, it is possible to rebuild houses and revitalize communities; conversely, little progress to rebuild Nepal can be made so long as both poor governance, and poor or no coordination between major reconstruction actors, prevail.

Postscript

After two years, the reconstruction process remains onerous. Out of the 750 affected national heritage sites, the NRA has completed the reconstruction of 20, while 132 are still under construction. In the private housing sector, 554,996 households (86% of eligible households) have received their first reconstruction installment, 14,466 households have been verified for their second installment, and 595 households for their third installment. As of April 21, 2017, only 22,234 houses have been completed, which accounts for only 3.5% of the total rebuild target (National Reconstruction Authority 2017). To tackle the extremely low housing rebuild rate, the NRA has deployed more than 2,000 engineers and assistant sub-engineers to the villages to provide technical assistance and conduct inspections. On May 15, 2017, the NRA issued its first ever appeal urging I/NGOs, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations to expand support for these vulnerable communities by providing top up grants of NRs. 50,000 and/or technical assistance. All these are positive signs that the authority recognizes the social dynamics of earthquake victims and their communities, and that it also notices the need for more flexibility in reconstruction policies.

In addition, local elections were held in 34 districts on May 14, 2017 for the first time since Nepal's new constitution was promulgated in September 2015. The local level has been without people's representatives since 2002. We hope these 34,203 directly-elected representatives will give local communities a louder voice in national decisions. Particularly, in the earthquake affected districts, elected local representatives can have the independent authority to mobilize local resources to make the decision faster. They can also monitor reconstruction efforts against the misuse of funds. We hope these elected representatives can play a more active role in building stronger connections between the central government, citizens and donor agencies. Good governance is the key to rebuilding and revitalizing Nepal.

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Endnotes

1. On March 10, 2017, the Nepali government has adopted a 744 local body system, fulfilling the requirement of the new constitution of Nepal that was established in 2015. All old municipalities and villages (of which there were more than 3,900) were restructured to total only 744 new Municipalities and Villages. Katunge village, together with Marpak and Semjong, have been merged into 'Netrawati Gaunpalika (Netrawati Rural Municipality)' (The Himalayan Times 2017). Although the old Katunge village doesn't exist any longer, we still refer to it as 'Katunge' throughout the paper as this is what we and the villagers are familiar with.

2. Since the earthquake, the tourism industry has also fallen very low due to the damage to famous world heritage tourist sites and the fear of an earthquake. Nepal received 251,148 fewer tourists in 2015, representing a sharp drop of 31.78 percent, compared to the 2014 figure (Nepal Economic Forum 2016; Prasain 2016; Thapa 2016). The fall of tourism arrival has not only affected the hotel business but it also severely damaged the business of vendors who ran small and local business in the famous visiting sites.

3. Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005. Over 80% of the city of New Orleans was flooded and estimated property damage was over 125 billion USD. The death toll was 1,836, and 15 million people were evacuated from their homes. The Indian Ocean Tsunami happened on December 26, 2004, and it killed over 230,000 people in 14 countries.

4. Our anti-seismic house design is a lightweight steel structure with a solid stone foundation. The steel frame is designed with diagonal bracing and double beam systems, which connect each column with horizontal beams in both directions to reduce the column slenderness ratio, thereby resisting the horizontal seismic loads. The main steel frame components are pre-fabricated in China and transported to the village for installation. This lightweight steel frame structure could simple be established by bolts and nuts that enable the villages to erect the frame easily. Alternatively, sometimes due to the family's economic situation, their small family size, or the location of their land, the steel frame structure is not suitable. In such cases, a traditional home can be built using stone, clay and cement using simple architectural techniques to make it safer in the event of an earthquake. Our initiative presented these alternative structure designs to the local community.

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