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Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID

# Resilience Policymaking in Nepal: Giving Voice to Communities

Workshop Report  
January 2019



Bringing together community  
and policymaker perspectives  
on disaster resilience.

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Working in three rural villages in Nepal, this research project examined communities' perceptions of disaster risks and their views on their ability to mitigate those risks and cope with future emergencies. The project brought often hidden community voices into dialogue with stakeholders responsible for making and implementing policies to promote resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction in Nepal.

This report describes the research and policymaker engagement processes, and sets out the project's key findings and recommendations.

# Project overview



Through conducting Participatory Video-based research in three villages, we sought to understand:

- Community members' views on the disaster risks their communities face;
- How they have dealt with previous disasters (such as the 2015 earthquakes);
- What measures they are taking to mitigate future disaster risks;
- What they see as the roles of government and other organizations in assisting their community to mitigate risk and be better prepared to cope with future disasters.

Through bringing our participants into dialogue with policy stakeholders, we sought to understand:

- Whether communities' views of the future disaster risks they face match government-level perceptions and plans;
- The level of awareness in communities about government plans and policies;
- Similarities and differences in perceptions of how the resilience of communities like these could be improved, and how resilience-building and Disaster Risk Reduction activities are being experienced on the ground.



## Research process

### Participatory Video projects

Dr. Jiban Karki and Dr. Sarita Panday provided film-making training to groups of participants in each village and supported them in making short films addressing issues of disaster, risk and resilience in their communities. This involved the participants deciding on the priority issues in their village, interviewing fellow local residents, and editing the footage they had collected into a short film designed to convey key messages from their villages to policy audiences. All of the decisions about what to show in the films, and how to show it, were made by the filmmaking teams themselves.

In addition, Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were held with local officials and residents.

### Workshops and screening events

After the films had been completed, village-level screening events were held to gather the views of other community members on the films.

These were followed by screening events/workshops involving policymakers and stakeholders at all levels of government: in the relevant rural municipalities, districts, provinces, and at two national-level workshops held in Kathmandu. Participants included government officials, politicians, academicians, media reporters, and representatives of national and international NGOs.

### Participating villages:

Sindhupalchok District:

- Jugal Rural Municipality Ward 7 (previously Hagam VDC)
- Balefi Rural Municipality Ward 2 (previously Jalbire VDC).

Gorkha District:

- Dharche Rural Municipality Ward 2 (previously Keraunja VDC).

**The films created by the participants are available at:**  
**[www.bit.ly/Nepal-Resilience](http://www.bit.ly/Nepal-Resilience)**

## Themes and Findings

One of the key issues we were seeking to explore through the series of screening events and workshops was to identify differences in perception or understanding between the government and communities in order to identify whether there was a gap that needed to be bridged to enhance the effectiveness of future disaster-related policies. The films produced in the three villages were used to open up discussion, allowing participants from the communities and from the policy-level to explore and more fully understand the causes and nature of those differences.

Here we report on four key differences that were repeatedly in evidence in the workshops:

### **1. Perceptions of 'disaster' and vulnerability**

We found significant disparities between government officials and community members in the definition of 'disaster' and the perceived vulnerability of communities to future disasters. During the work in the villages, we found a wide variety of understandings of the term 'disaster'. The 2015 earthquakes naturally dominated people's initial responses to questions about disasters. But when prompted to think about future disaster risks, villagers spoke about a wide range

of potential future 'disasters' that could impact them and their communities, including economic problems and threats to livelihoods. These types of issues were far less evident in discussions with policymakers, who focused largely on future earthquakes and, to a lesser degree, landslides and floods.

This points to some interesting and important differences in perception as to what constitutes a 'disaster', how government and communities perceive future threats, and what types of activities might be needed to mitigate disaster risks.

**Finding:** Policymakers showed a tendency to focus on technical forms of disaster risk reduction, particularly the resilience of housing and key infrastructure to future earthquakes. They mostly talked about high level policies such as disaster management planning and government policies on creating disaster management units at the provincial and local levels. At the village level, there is a perceived need for a broader range of social, economic and regulatory interventions to mitigate diverse future disaster risks. Clear examples of this included a demand from some of the communities for greater regulation of illegal quarrying and road-building, seen as causing significant risk of landslides, and for improved community-level

education on disaster preparedness and response.

### **2. Perceptions of progress in post-earthquake reconstruction**

As three villages that have been severely affected by the 2015 earthquakes, community members were naturally preoccupied with the ongoing reconstruction process.

We found very different perceptions about the progress being made in reconstruction, particularly around the construction of earthquake-resistant housing. While policymakers tended to focus on the positive progress that had been made, community members concentrated on implementation deficits, especially the plight of members of their communities who had not yet been able to reconstruct. In general, as would be expected, we found that policymakers at lower levels of government (municipal- and, to a lesser extent, District-level governments), had a more detailed understanding of the ongoing challenges the study communities are facing in the reconstruction process. Most government officials tended to see the progress of reconstruction as encouraging, and thought there was a need for communities to have more realistic expectations. However, even at lower levels of government, remoteness seems to have been an important factor in policymaker knowledge. We

found that government participants had limited knowledge of the progress of reconstruction in the most remote village, Dharche Rural Municipality Ward 2, Gorkha, and that a number of issues highlighted in that community's film provided new information to District-level officials, which they subsequently undertook to address.

At the national level, we found evidence of a disparity in perceptions of the resources (both material and social) available to residents in the study communities. This was apparent in discussions over the level of government support required for reconstruction, with some government officials believing that undeserving beneficiaries were seeking government support that they did not really need – a view strongly contested by community members.

**Finding:** We found repeated evidence of two-way gaps in communication between the government and communities over the implementation of reconstruction policies and programmes. On the one hand, community members felt that government sometimes believed that things had been done in the communities that had not. They also felt that residents in their communities were not always clear about what government support they were entitled to, leading to some failing to claim their entitlements and others having unmatched

expectations about the support they would receive. From the government side, we regularly encountered frustration that communities did not adequately recognize the significant assistance that government *had* already provided and that community members frequently failed to pursue their grievances about missing support through the appropriate mechanisms. Government officials often saw communities as having the primary responsibility for reconstruction issues, with government as a facilitator.

### **3. Perceptions of the impact of disasters on marginalized groups**

The workshops opened up discussions of how the experience of the earthquake and the subsequent reconstruction process had impacted upon marginalized community members.

Although policymakers often referred to the strong community spirit in Nepali culture as an advantage in coping with disasters, we found mixed evidence of the social resilience of the study communities. In all three villages, residents had come together to support each other in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. However, there were also instances of tensions, and even violence, over the distribution of aid materials. Our Participatory Video participants gathered examples of individuals who had been excluded from receiving emergency aid

(for example, widows), but at the same time there was evidence of social barriers being broken down as communities came together in the immediate aftermath. Policymakers noted that government and its partners had made significant efforts to ensure that marginalized communities received targeted support in the post-earthquake period. However, there were concerns from the communities about the longer-term adverse consequences of the earthquakes increasing the vulnerability of marginalized groups. At the High-Level workshop in Kathmandu, for example, there was discussion of people trafficking (especially of young girls), which some participants felt had increased following the disruption of the earthquake, and increased incidence of outward migration. There were also concerns raised around how Dalits were experiencing the reconstruction process, with some having lost their land and being forced to relocate to areas of higher risk, including landslide-prone areas.

**Finding:** There is a lack of rigorous evidence on how the 2015 earthquakes and subsequent reconstruction efforts have impacted upon marginalized groups, and whether they have reduced or increased inequalities. Even where there is evidence, the information flow between government and the community is often

poor, mostly because of geographical, social and hierarchical barriers. We found that there have been some efforts by government, NGOs and international donors to focus attention and resources on marginalized groups, but there are perceptions from the study communities that these have been inadequate or ineffective.

#### **4. Perceptions of institutional effectiveness**

Post-earthquake, the government of Nepal has adopted a number of new policies and programmes and created new institutions such as the National Reconstruction Authority. In the communities, we found very limited knowledge of the relevant government structures beyond the immediate village/municipality level and a frequent inability to distinguish between the sources of support that the community had received. This was reflected in the belief amongst many of the government participants that community members were tending to attribute what had actually been government assistance to NGOs and that government was not being given appropriate credit for the things that had been done. During the workshops, there was often discussion of the mechanisms that those needing support should be utilizing in order to claim it, met with skepticism from community-level participants about the

effectiveness of these systems in practice. There was also evidence of divisions between different levels of government, with blame for implementation failures often being passed 'upwards' or 'downwards'. **Finding:** Limited political literacy in the rural communities involved in this study led to an incomplete understanding of government structures and mechanisms, and a resulting inability of some people to properly access support. For example, there was often confusion about how people not currently on the government's list of earthquake victims could get on the list, and a lack of knowledge about the timing of the installments of government grants for housing reconstruction. It is currently uncertain how this will be impacted by the shift to a federal government structure, which in theory brings decision-making closer to the people, but which may increase opportunities for gaps to emerge between different levels of government.



# Recommendations

1. There is a need for a broader approach to Disaster Risk Reduction, including **socio-technical approaches** that look beyond the construction of earthquake-resistant buildings and infrastructure.
2. There is a need for **improved messaging** between government (at all levels) and communities, and for better managing community expectations.
3. There is a need to more fully address inequalities in reconstruction and resilience building. There is a need to look at **more inclusive processes**, not just measures of output.
4. At the government level, Disaster Risk Reduction, disaster management and post-disaster reconstruction are currently dealt with through separate institutions and processes. There is a need for **better institutional integration across the disaster cycle**. This will be especially important given the shift to a federal government system.



## Acknowledgements and project details

This research was funded by the ESRC-DFID Development Frontiers Research Scheme (Grant Ref. ES/R000514/1).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Nepal Health Research Council and the University of Sheffield, UK.

We are grateful for the assistance of PHASE Nepal, the NGO partner for this project.

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## Photo credits

All photos: Sarita Panday.

Page 1: Participatory Video Screening in Hagam, Sindhupalchok.

Page 2 (from top): Participatory Video interview with a woman in Dharche, Gorkha; Participants shooting videos in Hagam, Sindhupalchok; Participants editing videos in Hagam; Participatory Video Screening in Jalbire, Sindhupalchok; Participatory Video Screening in Hagam, Sindhupalchok.

Page 3: Participants learning to shoot in Hagam, Sindhupalchok.

Page 6 (from top): District Level Screening in Gorkha; Participatory video making in Gorkha; Community members in Hagam, Sindhupalchok; Covering a roof after the wind blows out plastic in Hagam, Sindhupalchok; Mules carrying stones for the reconstruction of houses in Kerauja, Gorkha.

Page 8 (left to right): Participatory video participants with facilitators in Kerauja, Gorkha; Participatory video participants with facilitators in Hagam, Sindhupalchok; Participatory video participants with facilitators in Jalbire, Sindhupalchok.



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