

## Victims for Victims: Exemplary Resilience of Community People in the aftermath of Nepal Earthquake 2015

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**Abstract:** Role of community people in the post-disaster scenario has always proved to be crucially important. In the aftermath of Nepal Earthquake 2015, all walks of Nepali people displayed a high degree of resilience from the beginning of the 'Response Operation' there. Appreciably, despite loss of lives of near and dear ones and even much before outside help began to arrive, community people used their local resources, knowledge and skills to cope with the catastrophe. The strong relationships between community members and joint family structures of Nepal appeared to be a strong social capital that led them to get involved with response efforts rising above the self-interest. The study revealed that on the first and second day of initial response, it had been the community people who dominated the response operation with their contribution as 91% and 51% respectively while on the third day, their contribution had significantly reduced since other agencies gradually took over. Importantly, the community people showed such bravery despite the fact they had hardly any training in this respect and they themselves had been facing many difficulties. As such, the capacity and potential of community people should not be overlooked, and they need to be made very part and parcel of any disaster risk reduction programme.

**Key Words:** Community People, Earthquake Response, Immediate Response Phase, Law Enforcing Agency, Nepal Earthquake, Resilience.

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### I. Background

Nepal experienced a devastating earthquake in April 2015 that left more than 8,000 dead. The hardy people of this land-locked country showed exemplary bravery by responding to the calamity with whatever resources they had been possessing. However, the most precious resource proved to be its people with their unique social bondage, who never stopped working, even if it meant staying under the open sky. Historically, the communities, because of their close proximity to the disaster areas, possess vital and decisive situational information and hence, they are generally the real first responders<sup>1</sup> to reach out to help disaster victims<sup>2</sup>. This finding has been reinforced once again by the resilient people of Nepal in 2015. They reiterated the earlier research findings that the community people are the best assessors of their own vulnerability and essential requirement<sup>3</sup>. The lessons learnt from response operations to disasters amply suggest the need for the communities to remain prepared because during the initial 72 hours after any disaster<sup>4</sup>, it is the neighbouring people who extend majority of the assistance<sup>5</sup>. Community people hardly sit idle after any disaster and this was very much true for Nepal. Thapa<sup>6</sup> while speaking on the catastrophic Earthquake of Nepal on 25 April 2015 highlighted the communities as main actors for disaster reduction. Search and Rescue are very crucial in disasters like earthquakes where crush syndrome kills most of the injured people within 24 hours<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, fast response by neighboring volunteers, either singly or in groups, is more important than the response of well-equipped urban SAR team primarily because the latter generally takes days to arrive even from within the country. Accordingly, there had been a paradigm shift in the approach disaster management, where the top-down command and control style of management was re-focused to a people-centered approach where local participation was central<sup>8</sup>. With this backdrop, the study was conducted in Nepal in the beginning of 2016.

### II. Objective

#### A. Primary objective

The primary objective of this study was to see how community people displayed their resilience and contributed enormously in the 'Immediate Response Phase' of April 15 Earthquake.

#### B. Specific objective

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- a. To study the participation of community people in rescue and relief operation at Katmandu in first 72 hours.
- b. To compare the response operation by community people with other response actors.
- c. To study the major difficulties the community people themselves faced in the initial response phase.

### **III. Methodology**

The paper has been prepared after carrying out an on ground interview of community people of Katmandu, Nepal between 15 March 2016 and 18 March 2016. The main purpose of this study was to see their spontaneous participation in rescue and relief operation during the 'Immediate Response Phase' of first 72 hours after the April 2015 Nepal Earthquake despite various difficulties they had been facing. The sampling was purposive one and the respondents were mainly the earthquake victims of different age group including some victims still staying in temporary shelters under open sky. A total of 45 respondents were taken into consideration for this study to collect invaluable primary data. Besides, a wide range of literatures available in books, journals, organizational reports and research papers etc. have also been consulted.

### **IV. Results and Discussion**

#### **A. Participation in Rescue and Relief Operation in General.**

In case of Nepal, local people organized themselves very quickly after the quake occurred and they showed their feelings for other victims. 'Victims for victims' were very common undertakings in Nepal at least in the initial 72 hours after the earthquake. This study reveals that a very significant 42% (19 out of 45) of the respondents said that they took part in the relief and rescue operation immediately after the earthquake though majority of them (49%) did not take part in any such activities. On the other hand, 9% of them did not answer to this question. Some of the respondents during face to face interview expressed that they had to leave the valley for native villages abandoning the capital fearing disease epidemic and that was why they could not take part in the rescue and relief operation. Some of them also said that there had been announcement from some vested people (would be looters) that there would be another big earthquake soon and people should vacate their houses. From her study on Nepal earthquake 2015, Periyanyagam<sup>9</sup> also observes that response is always local in the initial seventy two hours after any disaster. Besides, neighbours also share their scanty resources including temporary shelters with other victims. Importantly, untrained local people also come forward spontaneously to form Search and Rescue teams for saving people from demolished structures much before the intervention by outside agencies.

#### **B. Rescue and Relief Operation on the First Day.**

The respondents were asked to answer a question framed as "who played the pioneering role in rescue and relief operations in the initial 24 hours?" It was a closed question with four options: (a) Community people, (b) Law Enforcing Agencies, (c) Local NGOs, (d) Foreign Rescuers. The findings are projected in TABLE 1 and Fig. 1 below. It is interesting to note that a very appreciable 91% (41 out of 45) of the respondents opined that the Community People played the pioneering role in the first 24 hours of response operation followed by a negligible 4.5% saying it had been local NGO people and another 4.5% answering in favour of Law Enforcing Agencies. A significant finding here is that the foreign rescuers had no contribution in the initial response on the first day at the community level. Though various sources said that some of the foreign rescuers entered the Valley within 24 hours of Earthquake, none of the respondents came across such rescuers during that period. However, it is revealed from interviewing some of the key persons of Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA), Katmandu that the foreign rescuers, on the first day, were primarily busy with situation analysis and making necessary coordination with the local counterparts. However, Subba<sup>10</sup> concludes that Multinational Military and Civil SAR Teams rescued only 6 victims alive on the first day. This also reconfirms that the participation of foreign rescuers was only nominal on the first 24 hours.

#### **C. Rescue and Relief Operation on the Second Day (25-48 Hours).**

To see the contribution of various group of players of rescue and relief operation with the progress of the time, the respondents were also asked to answer another question framed as "who played the pioneering role in rescue and relief operations on the Second Day?" It was again a closed question with four earlier options. The findings revealed (Figure 1) that still a significant 51% (23 out of 45) of the respondents answered that the Community People played the primary role on the second day of response followed by an appreciable 36% (16 out of 45) saying that it had been the Law Enforcing Agencies. However, 9% (4 out of 45) of them answered that it had been the local NGO people who carried out the response operations and 4% respondents credited Foreign Rescuers for such operation. It was evident that as the time progressed, Law Enforcing Agencies gradually took over the rescue and relief business and accordingly, the role of community people was reduced (51% from 91%). Besides, it was also noticed that the role of local NGOs has increased now (9% from previous

4.5%) and a new agency the ‘Foreign Rescuers’ got into the business. It was revealed from interviewing aerodrome people at TIA that the congestion at the only international airport of Nepal surfaced as the major bottlenecks of planned response operation by the foreign rescuers.

**D. Rescue and Relief Operation on the Third Day (49-72 Hours).**

In response to an open question as “Who played the pioneering role in rescue and relief operations on the third day”, the respondents were allowed to express their experience about all the agencies operating in initial three days. From Figure below, it is appealing to note that a very considerable 42% (19 out of 45) of the respondents opined that the member of the Law Enforcing Agencies played the pioneering role on the third day followed by 18% (8 out of 45) concluding that it was local NGOs conducting the rescue and relief operation and 9% (4 out of 45) saying that it was the Community People and another 9% remarked that it was Foreign Rescuers. However, a significant 22% (10 out of 45) of them mentioned about many other new agencies like ‘Friends’, ‘Police’, ‘Government’, etc. It is very interesting to note here that the Law Enforcing Agencies dominated the rescue and relief operation on the third day and the role of local NGOs was remarkably increased (9% on the second day to 18% on the third day). The role of community people has sharply reduced (52% on second day and only 9% on the third day). Another important finding revealed through face to face interview with some of the victims that many Nepali people left the valley right from the second day fearing disease epidemic. This might also cause the sharp reduction of community people’s contribution in response operation on the third day.

**Table 1:** Group-wise Contribution in Response Operation in Nepal 2015.

Various Groups of Initial Response Operations	First Day (%)	Second Day (%)	Third Day (%)	Remarks
Community People	91	51	9	
Law Enforcing Agencies	4.5	36	42	Army, Police etc.
Local NGOs	4.5	9	18	
Foreign Rescue People	-	4	9	
Others	-	-	22	
Total	100	100	100	



**Figure 1:** Earthquake response operations by various groups of people.

### **E. Staying in the Field under Open Sky.**

Nepali people showed extreme resilience by staying in the open field even under open sky and without having proper washroom facilities. In most cases there was no proper cover at all. They mostly made makeshift shelters with their bed sheets and other clothing materials. It is revealed from the field level interaction and interview that almost everyone rushed to the neighbouring open area (wide street and playground) immediate after the devastation on 25 April 2015. Then they looked for their near and dear ones and finally settled in large fields. Out of 45 respondents, 44 (98%) said that they had stayed in the open field for different duration ranging from 1 day to 60 days. Only one person (2%) said that he had not stayed in the field. However, a great majority of 40% (18 out of 45) stayed outside for 3 days or less followed by 38% (17 out of 45) saying that they stayed in the open field for 4 to 7 days. An appreciable 20% of them stayed for more than 7 days under open sky. The Katmandu Valley, the research area, has a number of playgrounds and other large open areas which served as the temporary shelters for the earthquake victims.

### **F. State of Training of Community People.**

The respondents were asked whether they had received any training at the community level on preparation for earthquake. Only one (2%) out of 45 respondents said that he received some training in this regard while another one person did not answer to this question. Thus a very significant 96% (43 out of 45) said that there had been no training arranged for the community people. This finding has special implications for Nepal and for other countries vulnerable to earthquake. It is well taken by everyone now that community people should be very part of the disaster management planning. They need to be trained because nobody can understand local opportunities and constraints better than the local communities themselves, and nobody can be more interested in understanding local affairs than the community whose survival and well-being is at stake in case of an event like earthquake.

### **G. Access to Relief Materials.**

In a chaotic disaster environment it takes some time to reach relief materials to the victims. In case of Nepal it was observed that no relief material had reached to the victims on the first two days. A total of 25% respondents did not receive relief materials at all and 20% of them either did not accept it or did not look for it since they could manage their requirements from their own stocks. Some of them also expressed that they did not accept relief materials considering that someone else might require them badly. In fact some shops at Katmandu Valley started operation, though irregularly, right from the first day but the price was generally double the actual price and in case of essentials it was even triple from the normal price. With these limited supplies, the affluent Nepali people met their own requirement and never looked for any relief goods. More so, the face to face interview revealed that most of the Nepali families had some stock of food and water at home, which were collected time to time mostly by the male family members. However, 9% respondents said that they received first relief either on the 3rd day or 4th day while 16% of them received first relief material either on the 5th day or 6th day. On the 7th day and beyond another 14% people received their first relief materials. On the other hand, 16% of the respondents did not answer to this question (TABLE 2).

**Table 2: Receipt of First Relief Materials on Different Days.**

	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Day	3 <sup>rd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> day	5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup> day	7 <sup>th</sup> day & beyond	Not Received	Did not Require	Did not answer	Total
Access to Relief	0%	9%	16%	14%	25%	20%	16%	100%

### **V. Conclusion**

Disaster Management is always a very crucial operation especially in the immediate response phase. It is even more critical in case of a major earthquake when the devastation is huge and reaction time for saving the valuable lives is too short. Initial 72 hours in general, but first 24 hours in particular, is important for rescuing earthquake victims. On the first day, international agencies and many national agencies can't reach the victims with required support when victims stand beside other victims. In 2015, after the earthquake in Nepal, the Nepalese people could rise above all odds and extended much needed rescue and relief effort to save many lives. Countries preparing for such eventualities should learn lessons from Nepal and other earthquake scenarios, and make their people prepared so that they can also emerge as invaluable fast responders in case of disasters. Along with other capacity development programmes, if the community people are empowered with training and equipment in a planned way, the earthquake response would not be much difficult task.

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