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Nepal Earthquake One Year On: Building a More Effective Relief Effort

By Maxim Shrestha

Synopsis

One year since the devastating Nepal earthquakes, the international relief effort holds lessons for future emergency response. While reconstruction efforts remain stifled, the immediate international relief operations experience offer some insights on how to deliver humanitarian assistance to mega disasters more effectively.

Commentary

THE RECENT wave of disasters, from earthquakes in Myanmar, Japan, Ecuador, to flooding and droughts in America and Africa respectively, have once again highlighted the increasing frequency and magnitude of natural calamities across the globe. It is also becoming increasingly clear that many national governments are often unable to cope and grapple with the fallout singlehandedly. Help from the international community in responding to such disasters becomes instrumental in saving lives and minimising suffering. Last year, Nepal was a case in point.

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake which struck Gorkha district in central Nepal on 25 April 2015 (and the resultant aftershocks), took close to 9,000 lives, injured 22,000 plus, and fully destroyed more than half a million homes. It also ended up displacing over 60,000 people and resulted in economic losses upwards of US\$ 9 billion. Doubtless, these numbers would have registered much higher without the overwhelming support from the international community in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

The International Response

Within hours after the quake, the government of Nepal issued a request for

international assistance. Altogether 34 countries from around the world responded to the call by sending over Search and Rescue (SAR) teams, medical professionals, engineers, air support and logistics personnel, disaster experts, as well as relief materials, goods, and supplies.

Many countries also provided crucial assets like debris clearance machinery, air assets (helicopters and aircrafts), and various other equipment necessary for search and rescue and delivery of aid, which Nepal severely lacked. This was all on top of the overwhelming support provided by major humanitarian organisations like the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, various branches of the United Nations, Medecins Sans Frontiers, Oxfam, Save the Children, to name but a few.

The response to Nepal earthquakes served as a milestone for a number of countries. It was the largest international humanitarian assistance and disaster response mission for India and China, involving 1,415 and 942 people respectively. From a regional perspective, Nepal was the first and/or largest mission for a number of Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore) in responding to disaster outside of the ASEAN region.

Researchers in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), have been conducting research on the international response to the 2015 Nepal earthquakes. This research reveals a number of challenges facing international relief efforts.

Critical Response Times and Country Knowledge

The most critical element of responding to any disaster is response time. What the Nepal experience re-emphasised was that it is the most immediate neighbours (in this case India, China, and Bangladesh) often arrive first and are of greatest use and help. Immediate neighbours also have a longer history of engagement, and would understand the local socio-political-economic landscape better than most. A strong disaster management regional framework along with regular regional disaster relief simulation exercises are therefore something to be developed for more effective humanitarian action.

Secondly, national militaries and civil defence forces are often the most organised and effective responders on the ground and are often seen as the first choice responders by populations and governments, rather than a “last resort”. Establishing clear guidelines on engagement with local uniformed groups in the affected country (and not just with national governments) in the immediate aftermath and developing strong communication channels is of utmost importance.

This seems obvious, but it is surprising how rarely this is put in practice. The situation in Nepal was no different where most of the immediate relief was coordinated by the Nepal Army while administrative matters like customs clearance arrangements and issue of visas, were under the purview of civilian agencies. Research shows that very few international responders had direct communications or links with both the civilian as well as the military sides.

Lack of Understanding of Local Context

It thus becomes important for international responders to better understand local disaster governance structures but also undergo sensitivity training. For high risk countries that are already on the radar of national governments and other international HADR institutions, this is something which could be done even before the event of a disaster. Many who went to the aid of Nepal were caught off-guard by the challenges which the topography posed for access and delivery of relief aid.

There was also a lack of understanding of the local context, for example, how second-hand clothing is generally unacceptable culturally; or the local climate where May is the start of summer, hence there was not much need for blankets; or seasonal patterns like in Nepal when knowledge of the local cropping cycles would have revealed that Nepal had just completed its spring harvest and there were relatively enough food stocks at the household and sub-national level where the disaster struck. With such knowledge, much relief would better match the needs of the affected population.

Finally, working with other humanitarian responders from different sectors is eventually inevitable, and it is important for international responders to prepare how to engage and work with these other actors on the ground. This will be important in terms of minimising duplication of effort as well as a better overall response on the ground.

As greater emphasis and attention is being given to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief internationally and regionally, it is important for international responders to build on the knowledge gathered from experience. The lessons from Nepal experience as well as other mega-disasters thus become invaluable to build a more effective response and more importantly assist those in times of need.

Maxim Shrestha is an Associate Research Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg