

Recent Flooding in Kathmandu

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Background

Nepal is a disaster-prone country mainly due to predominantly mountainous areas full of steep, weak and fragile slopes.

Every year, a number of natural disasters occur in Nepal causing heavy loss of life, property and infrastructure. The Government of Nepal has traditionally dealt with disaster on a case-by-case basis, usually forming committees for disaster relief at different levels. Past experience shows that disaster relief activities and a few disaster-related plans were prepared at the central level without having comprehensive information about the disaster on the ground. Therefore, in many cases, the post-disaster relief and rehabilitation activities that were designed neither reflected physical reality nor the needs expressed by the victims. On top of this, with scarcely trained human and financial resources, implemented activities most of the time remained inadequate and ineffective.

Many rural communities are isolated in Nepal due to inaccessibility. These isolated communities have developed several indigenous mechanisms to manage and cope with their impending disaster-related problems and odds.

Nepal, being located in a high disaster risk area, is prone to greater threats of disasters all year round. With a population of over 24 million and about 40% living below the poverty line, natural disasters including floods are causing major problems in the country. If we look at the magnitude of disasters in the last twenty years in Nepal, each year on average 105 people die and properties worth millions of rupees are destroyed.

A Case Study

Bagmati is the biggest river in the Kathmandu valley. The river originates from Shivpuri hills 25 km north of Kathmandu city at an altitude of 2650 m above sea level. Major tributaries such as Bishnumati, Dhobikhola, Manohara and Tukuche converge with the Bagmati as it meanders through the valley. Apart from its religious, social, economic, environmental and aesthetic value, the river is also the source of water for the valley's population of over 2.3 million.

Rapid urbanization and increasing industrial activities have transformed this once pristine river into an open sewer, unleashing epidemics and poisoning the farms downstream. The degrading quality of the Bagmati river is becoming a matter of national concern.

The extensive use of this river water for various purposes in daily life is a potential cause of seasonal outbreaks of water borne epidemics in the valley. In the upper stretches of the river at the northern end of the valley, where the river is less affected by anthropogenic activities, one still sees the Bagmati as it used to be. Here, the river is used for bathing, washing vegetables, clothes and utensils, irrigation, etc. In most of these activities, it is the women who are predominantly involved.

Local women's groups are already active in Kathmandu valley in the areas of urban environmental management in general and solid waste management at the household level, in particular. To increase and strengthen this involvement, analysis of the role played by women's groups is imperative.

July 1, 2006 was a devastating day for those who lived nearby the bank of Bagmati. The flooding of the Bagmati river following torrential rain the previous night washed away almost a dozen houses in the vicinity of the Bagmati. According to the Chief District Officer (CDO) of Kathmandu district, 227 persons—mostly women and children—from 57 families have been displaced. Victims complained that they had no time to retrieve their possessions from their houses as everything happened so swiftly.

The government immediately formed a seven-member committee to investigate and find out the extent of the damage and to make a list of the victims. The ministry has promised to provide US\$54 as immediate compensation to each displaced family. This has been criticized by the victims who say, "This is a very meager amount and is hardly enough for us to survive."

Conclusion

Recently, several organizations including experts, researchers and policy-makers have been making efforts to study water induced problems in order to analyze Nepal's flood problems. This group of analysts may be able to sketch a clear roadmap about how disaster can be linked to development to guide planners and the community. In this way, limited resources will be maximally utilized to avoid and/or mitigate disasters.