

DISPLACED AND LANDLESS: AN UNABATED ORDEAL OF DISASTER SURVIVORS

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KEY MESSAGES

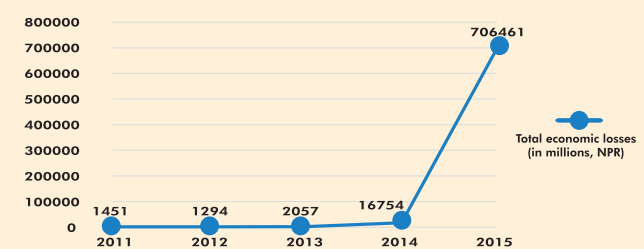
- Disaster is one of the major reasons for displacement and migration worldwide. Annually 25.4 million people get displaced by various disasters. In Nepal approximately 3 million people were displaced by disasters in 2015 and 2016. Majority of the displacements were caused by earthquake in 2015.
- Displaced families continue to live in indecent and undignified living conditions even after several years of the disasters. Protracted displacements have serious health and social consequences among the displaced population. Women, children, elderly and disabled suffer disproportionately from disasters. Limited amenities and services within the settlements are not adequate to address special needs of these groups.
- The government programme to resettle the displaced families is lacking in speed and grossly inadequate. It has only prioritized 'land for housing' not the livelihoods of the survivors. The National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) and other concerned stakeholders must prioritize the livelihoods such as leasing out agriculture lands, providing subsidized loans to run small enterprises, employment, and access to utilities for the displaced families.
- Disasters have predominant impact on land resources as they not only result in loss of physical land area; loss of property and livelihoods base is all the more serious as it has devastating effect on the survivors' lives.
- The present disaster database is silent about the impacts of disaster on land resources—no records of disaster-induced land loss or degradation are available. The government should establish a system and practice of documenting and keeping record of loss and degradation of land resources due to various disasters including the number of families displaced and rendered landless by disasters.
- Disasters are one of the major causes of landlessness in Nepal. In Nepal, disasters such as landslides, erosion are, among others, the major causes of landlessness. There is an increasing trend of people losing their land due to disasters and becoming landless.

Introduction

Disaster is one of the major reasons for displacement and migration worldwide. On an average, the world witnessed 25.3 millionⁱ displacements annually from 2008 to 2016 – a figure almost equal to nearly the total population of Nepal. Weather related disasters top the list, accounting for 86 % of the total displacements. As the global temperature continues to rise, likelihood of an increase in the frequency and magnitude of weather related disaster events such as floods, landslides, cyclones, and storms cannot be ruled out. More people are likely to get displaced over the years.

Nepal is vulnerable to various geophysical, climatic and biological hazards. Nepal ranks 20th among the most multi-hazards prone countries in the worldⁱⁱ. Major hazards in Nepal include earthquake, floods, landslides, drought, storms, hailstorm, thunderbolt, avalanches, cold waves, forest fires and Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs). Annually, Nepal is exposed to about 500 disaster eventsⁱⁱⁱ. Between 2011 and 2015, 11,163 people were reported dead and 24,773 injured due to various types of disasters in the country^{iv}. In the same period, Nepal's total economic loss amounted to millions as mentioned in figure below.

Total economic losses by disasters between 2011 and 2015 in Nepal



Source: Nepal Disaster Report 2015, MoHA & DPNet Nepal

Impacts of disasters go much beyond economic losses. Injuries, disabilities, illness, loss of sleep, loss of appetite etc are types of physiological impacts disaster can have on individuals. Similarly, distress, insecurity, grief, helplessness, guilty feeling etc are some of the psychological impacts. Disasters can lead to disruption of social fabric, life style change, breakdown of traditional social status, sexual abuse and domestic violence, migration, family and social disorganization. These impacts go far beyond disaster period, often lasting for life time, if not pass on to generations^v.

Disaster is detrimental to poverty reduction ambition of the country. Nepal has made commendable achievement in meeting the MDG target to reduce the extreme poverty (<USD 1) to half^{vi}.

Majority of the population are living just above the poverty threshold hence sensitive to any forms of shocks or hazards^{vii}. With increased incidence of disasters, more and more people are falling back into poverty with loss of wealth, income and livelihoods source. The 2015 earthquake has pushed back 3% of the country's population to below the poverty line^{viii}. Poor people are affected disproportionately, hence most vulnerable to disasters. They are more exposed to hazards and possess least resources for self-recovery. Disaster will further push this population into poverty. Post-disaster response, recovery and reconstruction are very expensive. Very often the money for social development, health, education is diverted to finance damaged infrastructure. This will adversely affect the country's poverty reduction ambition and graduation to middle income country.

In Nepal, 2.6 million people were displaced in 2015, largely because of the April and May 2015 - earthquake followed by hundreds of aftershocks and landslides triggered by them^{ix}. In 2016, 31,000 people got displaced by various disaster events, mainly floods and landslides. This paper focuses on the situation of the people displaced by two major disasters - flash floods in 2014 and 2015-earthquake.

Situation of the Displaced: Undignified and Indecent

Protracted displacements have serious health and social- consequences to the displaced population. Evidences reveal profound social, physical and mental health impacts on individuals, families and entire communities, and delayed economic recovery of displaced households and local areas in the worst affected prefectures^x.

Families are living in congested settlements in temporary shelters made of corrugated and tarpaulin sheets. Most of the shelters are broken and dented over the years making it harsh to live during rain, heat and cold. Many family members have health problems and a couple of premature deaths have already been reported. Water and sanitation facility is limited and deteriorating with time. Water supply is irregular and inadequate. Toilets made of bamboo or tarpaulin sheets are tearing out over the years. Women, children, elderly and disabled are suffering disproportionately. Limited amenities and services within the settlement are not adequate to address special needs of the displaced community.

They no longer practice agriculture for their livelihoods as their land is not safe and fertile. However, they are willing to continue agriculture if they get land. Therefore, many are working as daily wage labour in stone quarry or as house maid. Some are working as agriculture labour in others' farm land. Some male members have migrated to India (in case of Bardiya district) or a nearest city in search of work. In Rasuwa, some humanitarian organizations or charity are still providing food support to the displaced families.

Equity in Resettlement: Too Little Too Late

Resettlement is still a distant dream for displaced families. The government programme for resettling the displaced families is lagging behind and till date not a single family is resettled in both the districts. Late realization of displacement problem, time taking policy making and bureaucratic process and procedures are all contributing to the delay. All these are costing the families dear as they continue to live in undignified and indecent conditions since many years.

The displaced families reported that the government grant is inadequate. With this money, the family can neither purchase a minimum piece of land nor can build a decent house. The resettlement programme only prioritizes 'land for housing' and not livelihoods support. For majority of displaced families, who are farmers, it will be difficult to regain their livelihoods without any dedicated support for agriculture.

There is no uniformity in resettlement packages for survivors of different disasters. The package includes cash support to purchase land and build house. However, the total amount of support provided to the displaced families varies despite the similar nature of disasters and scale of loss incurred by the disasters. The resettlement package is not determined on an objectively.

Gender and Disaster

Disasters have different impacts on women, men and children. Women and children who make up more than 75 per cent of displaced people, are particularly affected by disaster. 'Protection' issues mainly trafficking, child marriage, sexual and gender-based violence, lack of civil documents and discrimination based on gender, caste and ethnicity are common in post-disaster context in Nepal^{xi}. Lack of documents like citizenship and marriage registration certificate, land ownership certificate etc. have deprived females and women-headed households of government support.

CASE STORY 1:

Surviving in Temporary Shelter

“We have spent more than three years in these temporary shelters. Our children suffer from diseases like pneumonia, dysentery, fever, typhoid etc. In rainy season, the area gets inundated and our roofs leak. We are unable to cook food and eat in time. We have made our children sleep with empty stomachs several times. In winter, it is extremely cold. While summer heat is extreme, and we can not sleep inside we go outside in the field to spend the night.”



Bimala B.K is one of the victims of 2014 flood in Tulshipur, Bardiya district.

Despite the vulnerabilities, women have greater role to play in reducing disaster risk. Evidences from various disasters have shown that engaging women and building their capacity on disaster risk reduction have proven very effective during emergencies. Male members often migrate to cities or abroad leaving behind women to solely protect their family members and property during disasters. This state of affairs calls for more access for women to services and entitlements on property and land. The new post-earthquake provision to make joint land ownership mandatory for receiving resettlement grant for displaced families is an encouraging step in this direction.

Land Tenureship in Post-disaster Recovery and Reconstruction

Land distribution, tenureship, land use, land holding size and documentation determine people's vulnerability and adaptive capacity to withstand and recover from disaster. Many landless families, tenants and bonded labourers and affected families with informal land tenureship, fail to produce land ownership certificates. Without secured tenancy or land certificates, landless people are denied government services, credit, citizenship certificates, while landlessness impacts on their individual rights as well. Thus, land ownership often becomes the determining factor between a life with dignity and security and exposure to different vulnerabilities and uncertainties. Landless, marginalized and small farmers are more exposed to hazards as they live in hazards-prone areas such as river banks and steep slopes in the hills. A small piece of land they own is a major source of livelihoods for majority of these families. Often the land is only place of shelter for them. Impacts on land by disaster affect livelihoods base, erodes adaptive capacity and enhance vulnerabilities of these families.

Securing equal rights of both women and men to land is essential for post-disaster recovery, social equity and economic growth. For women, land ownership plays a vital role to guarantee their fundamental right. Without the legal documents, the bereaved women and other women-headed families are unable to access relief and support during reconstruction and recovery.

Disasters Causing Land Degradation and Landlessness

Disasters have predominant impacts on land resources. Flood, inundation, landslide and earthquake have direct impact on land. The impacts can be in the form of loss of land mass, soil and land erosion, land degradation and so on. Disaster impacts on land result in loss of physical land area and, more importantly, in the loss of property and livelihoods based on land. Impacts on land can cause loss of houses and other property built on the land, loss of agriculture production leading to subsequent food and livelihoods insecurity, loss of other natural resources like forest, water within the landmass.

Evidences have shown that there is increasing trend of people losing their land to disasters and becoming landless. Besides, topographical, demographic, socio-economic and political disasters and climatic factors are often the causes of landlessness^{xii}. In Nepal, disasters such as landslides and erosion are, among others, the major causes of landlessness. Other reasons are low productivity of land, deforestation, internal migration and land grabbing.

Disaster is often a cause of landlessness in Nepal. The displaced families are often 'functionally landless' as their lands are no longer habitable and not suitable for cultivation. They are living in public or private land not owned by them with a looming threat of being evicted. Moreover, siltation caused by recurrent flood has gradually reduced land productivity, which is likely to force farming families to move on in the long run. There is no accurate number of how many families have become landless because of disasters, but the case apparently indicate that disaster is one of the causes of landlessness.

CASE STORY 2:

From Land Rich To Land Poor

Raghya Bhandari, 60, was a well-off farmer cultivating 1 hectare of land at Rampur Tappu village. His family grew paddy, maize, wheat, mustard, lentils, beans and other vegetables. Agriculture yield was sufficient to feed his 12-member family for the entire year. Surplus was sold in local market that earned him more than NPR 25,000 annually.

He recalled that on 14th August 2014, a massive flood washed away his house, land, 14 goats, 5 cows and other property. His family members were rescued by a boat after several hours. Now the entire village is converted to sand dunes and his land is not fertile for cultivation. He said it is sand everywhere and difficult to distinguish even his own land.

Since the last 3.5 years, his family has been living in a shanty house built on public land. He has no land to grow food and feed his family. He, his wife and daughter in laws are cultivating other people's field as sharecropper. They get half of the yield, which is not sufficient for the family for year-long. His sons have migrated to India for extra income. Now, his family does not own any land.



RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT-TERM:

- The government and the stakeholders concerned should act urgently to expedite resettlement and proper rehabilitation of all displaced families both in Rasuwa and Bardiya districts.
- In case of Bardiya district, the Ministry of Land Reform and Management should consider segregation of land parcel among displaced families as special case and relax the administrative order to stop land fragmentation. This will help the displaced families to obtain land ownership certificates, which will facilitate release of subsequent installments of resettlement grant.
- In case of Rasuwa district, the National Reconstruction Authority should immediately roll out the work procedure on relocation and rehabilitation of the families displaced by the earthquake and allocate 'safe' land areas for the displaced families to reconstruct their houses.
- National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) and other concerned stakeholders should prioritize livelihoods such as leasing out agriculture lands, subsidized loans to run small enterprises, employment, access to utilities and others of the displaced families along with the current grant assistance that only focuses on reconstructing houses. Development agencies should be engaged in complementing the government programme to build sustainable livelihoods of the displaced families.
- Single women, orphans, elderly, disable and other vulnerable groups require special assistance during post disaster reconstruction and resettlements. These families need to be identified and affirmative actions should be taken to simplify and ease access of government's assistance to them.

LONG TERM:

- The government of Nepal should develop a holistic and standard resettlement package, including livelihood support programme for families displaced by different disasters. The package should address the special needs of women, children, elderly and disabled persons.
- The government should establish a system and practice of keeping record of losses and degradation of land resources caused by various disasters including the number of families displaced and rendered landless by disasters.
- The government should adopt both structural and non-structural mitigation measures to reduce impacts of disasters on land resources. There is a likelihood of more land areas getting impacted given the increasing frequency and intensity of weather related disasters due to the rise in global temperature.
- The government should make it mandatory for all municipalities and rural municipalities to develop land use plans and identify 'safe' and 'unsafe' areas for human settlements.
- The government policy and plans on DRR should not be limited to short term reliefs but need to have long term planning to resolve the issues of loss and damage caused by disasters. Such policies and plans must consider diversity in livelihoods and adaptation strategies in agriculture.
- A comprehensive research on impacts of disasters and climate change on land resources considering global discourse on 'loss and damage' need to be commissioned.

Endnotes

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