



Reducing Disaster Risks and Building Resilient Communities

This Briefing Note provides an overview of the response of Helvetas Nepal to the increasing number of natural disasters occurring within the country. We aim to support increased resilience to external shocks within communities and to foster livelihoods that can cope with changing circumstances.

Due to its unique geographical location at the center of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, Nepal is prone to both climate induced disasters and geo-hazards. These include earthquakes, landslides, floods, cold waves, lightning strikes, fire, GLOF (glacial lake outburst floods), and avalanches. According to UNDP, Nepal stands 11th and 30th in terms of earthquake and flood vulnerabilities. The German Watch rated Nepal 4th in the 2017 global climate risk index. The 2015 earthquake claimed some 10,000 lives and ruined the livelihoods of many thousands more; economic losses were in billions of dollars. According to Nepal DRR Report 2019¹, in 2017-2018 alone 968 people lost their lives in disasters. It is the poorest and most disadvantaged, often women, who are particularly likely to be killed, injured or displaced as they tend to live in locations or be subject to behavioral norms that expose them to risks. Disasters induced by climate change are expected to increase and could be exacerbated with the spread of settlements in vulnerable mountain and plains areas. A single disaster event can jeopardize decades of development gains. Therefore, Disaster Risk Management is a crucial part of supporting communities to become as resilient as possible, thus sustaining development achievements.

¹ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Nepal

Resilience refers to the ability to recover from shocks and to adapt to disturbances. Our concept of building resilience is to connect humanitarian and development responses and promote multidisciplinary interventions across different sectors. Reducing disaster risk and building resilience are core aspects of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. Understanding of the disaster risk, strengthening disaster risk governance, enhancing disaster resilience, mainstreaming the DRR in development works, and building back better in post disaster response are the objectives of the **National Policy for Disaster Risk management, 2018**. Helvetas Nepal ascribes to these global and national narratives and since 1956 has gained solid thematic competences in building the resilience of rural communities and small-holders against climate-induced disaster risks - also helping them to build back better in the case of such events.

Our approach

Given the rising incidence of climate-related and other disasters, Helvetas is increasingly engaged in assessing disaster risks, developing scenario planning and establishing response mechanisms. Our Disaster Preparedness Plan guides our readiness and response. We do not engage in immediate search and rescue work but mobilize resources for recovery and beyond. We focus on disasters in areas in which we already work and have close contact with the communities and authorities; here we are often able to build on pre-existing development interventions to tailor recovery processes. In keeping with our commitment to support Nepal's federalization, we only intervene if requested to do so by the local government. Furthermore, our interventions lie in our areas of competence- cash transfer, WASH, agriculture, shelter, and skills building, all with a strong emphasis on the needs of women, girls, and the most disadvantaged. Our approach rests on these four pillars, as shown in the figure on the right.



<p>PHYSICAL MITIGATION MEASURES</p>	<p>Mainstreaming DRR in development actions: In all our relevant development interventions, we assess disaster risks, the drivers of such risks, and the potential impacts. We then adapt the design of our interventions to mitigate the risk as far as possible. Examples include reinforcement bands in concrete water cisterns for resilience against earthquakes; covering small irrigation channels and planting vegetative cover over banks in areas subject to landslips and landslides; and micro-pile foundations and “river taming” measures for trail bridges in the Terai to mitigate the effects of flood-induced bank erosion.</p>
<p>PREPAREDNESS MEASURES</p>	<p>Building Local Capacity: Helvetas aims to reduce the vulnerability and increase the resilience of men and women who are exposed to the risk of disasters - placing special emphasis on the needs of poor and disadvantaged communities. Institutionally in Nepal's federalized context, this means working particularly closely with local governments (municipalities and rural municipalities). We assist them, when requested, in developing their Local Disaster and Climate Resilience Plans (LDCRPs) and support them in identifying those citizens most likely to require special assistance following a disaster. We also work towards strengthening ward level disaster management committees. At the level of individuals and households, we build awareness of disaster risks and mitigation measures – one way being through work in schools – and aim to build skills in preparedness measures. One good example in this respect is training</p>

local masons and water supply maintenance workers in earthquake-and landslide-resilient construction techniques. In this way, physical mitigation measures become the local norm and be maintained as such.

RESPONSE MEASURES

Coordinated Response: Helvetas seeks to work in synergy with other government and non-government agencies responding to a disaster, avoiding any duplication of efforts. In a major disaster such as the 2015 earthquake, this entails coordination with the UN cluster system as well as the relevant government authorities – eventually, the National Reconstruction Authority and its organs at district level. We also coordinated with members of Alliance 2015, Swiss NGOs and the Association of International NGOs in Nepal to ensure the effectiveness of our response. In more recent times, in line with federalization, we have coordinated with provincial authorities and local governments in responding to post-disaster needs. For example, in the cold wave of 2019-2020 in the Terai, we coordinated with local governments to identify pockets of greatest hardship for warm blanket distribution. Over the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked with both local and provincial authorities, chiefly in Karnali and Province 2 but also in Province 1, where the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation focuses its projects.

Local Partnership: Prior presence in an area affected by a disaster really helps in quick action. Therefore, we have a register of trusted local partner organizations with whom we engage in disaster responses. We work with them to reach the locality rapidly, identify the immediate needs and the people who are most vulnerable, and establish rapport with other actors in the area.

Adaptive Management: Following a disaster, the context can often change quite rapidly; we therefore aim for flexibility in our interventions as far as possible. For example, government regulations may change (such as with respect to grants paid to households for house reconstruction following the 2015 earthquake); we respect such decisions and respond accordingly. Similarly, the availability and price of construction materials may change over several years. Thus, we have learned to ensure that any multi-year shelter project can be adapted to use the optimum materials available at a given time in accordance with the needs of the participating households, rather than following a single “blue-print” model.

Accountability to the Affected People is built into our project designs, in the form of grievance mechanisms and carefully monitored follow-up. For example, in the project Rehabilitation of facilities of Earthquake Affected People (REAP) II, the software CommCare was used to log and follow up complaints received via a hotline or face to face, allowing for efficient and effective grievance handling. In the case of cash transfers under the project Emergency Response to Earthquake Affected People (EREAP), the list of selected households was published at schools and the ward office and then ward meetings were held to allow for grievances to be openly discussed.

Cash transfers: Helvetas recognizes that giving cash is often the most effective means of helping disaster-affected people in the immediate period of recovery, at least in situations that markets are functioning. How this cash is transferred depends on the context. Following the 2015 earthquake, Helvetas and Solidar Swiss implemented a Swiss Solidarity a project that identified households with especially high losses and offered unconditional cash transfer to help them recover. In this case, the cash was transferred through local agriculture cooperatives. Similarly following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Nepal Agriculture Services Development Project (NASDP), a bilateral project of the Swiss and Nepal governments to which Helvetas provides technical assistance, supported local governments in developing a food voucher system for priority households. In this case, the food was provided through selected retailers.

Rehabilitation and Recovery

Leave no one behind is an oft-stated humanitarian and development aim, but requires concerted and deliberate planning from the start, including budgetary provision. Those in the community who have least voice and are most disadvantaged prior to a disaster (generally women, Dalits and ethnic minorities) are generally those who have greatest difficulty in recovering. We advocate for special provision for such vulnerable and disadvantaged people and uphold a transparent process for their identification in collaboration with the local authorities. This entails ensuring that the rules are clear to all in the community, and that grievance mechanisms are available and can be accessed by all.

Humanitarian Development Nexus: we recognize that long-term relief assistance can generate dependence, undermining the capacity of individuals and communities to rebuild their lives. We design our recovery activities in a manner that “builds back better” according to development principles such as sustainability, poverty reduction, community ownership with appropriate institutions, and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Selected post-earthquake reconstruction activities (see separate briefing notes)

Improving renewable energy infrastructure: Water mills in Nepal are traditionally used to grind grains, spices and other food items, serving as an important means of reducing drudgery for rural women. Nevertheless, their use is limited due to poor efficiency. In the areas badly affected by the 2015 earthquake, many water mills were destroyed. Helvetas used this opportunity to “build back better” by introducing improved water mills which both grind more rapidly and efficiently and have additional user-friendly features such as a toilet and special provision for disadvantaged individuals.

Earthquake resilient housing: The Nepal government and multi-donor (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), DFID and World Bank) Employment Fund project (2008 – 2015), managed by Helvetas, established many good practices in providing skills training for over 100,000 young people. Following the 2015 earthquake, this knowledge was used to develop reconstruction projects financed by SDC and DFID. The EF-SR developed a 50-day on-site training module, during which young men and women learned earthquake-resilient construction techniques at the same time as building a house. The skills they learned equipped them to earn a livelihood as skilled masons and carpenters. In total, 11,670 individuals (30% women) were trained through these two projects. An important selection criterion was that those trained would continue to use these skills locally for their livelihood.

Rehabilitation of agriculture in the post-earthquake context: Many irrigation systems were damaged by the 2015 earthquake, disrupting attempts to rebuild agricultural livelihoods. Building on Helvetas experience in small scale irrigation, funds from Swiss Solidarity were used to reconstruct irrigation channels and to train women and men the farmers in improved agricultural techniques, marketing and business skills. We also enhanced the provision of advisory services through agricultural cooperatives and the municipalities. As a result, farmers are now growing a wider range of crops using climate-resilient techniques and have a better income from farming than they did before the earthquake.

Community-based institutions for post-earthquake water services: Funds from Swiss Solidarity were also used in the rehabilitation of drinking water systems. Whether for drinking water or irrigation, Helvetas worked with all the users of each system to establish a robust user group and committee, with rules for decision-making, trained maintenance workers, a fee-based maintenance fund, a bank account and registration under the local municipality.



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