

Report-II

Natural Disasters and Displacement: Koshi River Flood in Eastern Nepal*

Displacement is one of the major outcomes of natural and human made disasters. Every year, a large number of people are displaced due to various types of natural disasters. In 2008, at least 36 million people were displaced by sudden onset of natural disasters, including over 20 million displaced by climate-related disasters.¹ Apart from displacement, it has shown increasing trend in the number of deaths and economic losses during the period of 2000-2007. In 2008 alone, 321 disasters killed 235,816 people which were three times more than the annual average of 66,812 for 2000-2007 and cost a total of US\$181 billion which is twice the US\$81 billion annual average for 2000-2007.²

Nepal has been affected by natural disasters such as floods, landslides, inundation, food scarcity, drought and earthquake. Floods and landslides are two major disasters which have been disrupting the lives of thousands of Nepalese each year. These natural disasters claimed an average of more than 200 lives per year between 1996 and 2006 and caused average annual losses of \$14.7 million worth of property between 2001 and 2007.³ Apart from deaths and economic losses, it has caused displacement of large number of people.

In 2008, floods and landslides took lives of 270 persons and displaced thousands of people.⁴ The heavy torrential rainfall and landslides in September 2008 affected approximately 200,000 people in eight districts of mid and far west Nepal.⁵ The flood in Koshi River, the biggest river in Nepal, breached its embankment at Paschim Kushaha on the 18 August 2008 and affected 42,765 people from 7563 families of Shreepur, Haripur and Paschim Kushaha VDCs of Sunsari district.⁶ Most of IDPs have returned to their original places but they are still seeking for assistance. In a Rapid Assessment Survey on IDPs by Natural Disaster conducted by Nepal Institute of Peace (NIP) in October 2009 to identify the needs and aspirations of the IDPs and returnees, their access to humanitarian assistance and basic services as well as state's effort regarding the relief, rehabilitation and resettlement revealed that the respondents were enchanted with the unfair and discriminatory distribution of relief packages.

* Refugee Watch, 36, December 2010

The displaced persons require proper assistance mechanism during displacement in the following sectors like food security, nutrition, health, education, non-food items, emergency shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, protection, camp coordination and camp management etc. Though these services were available in the camps, there was no monitoring mechanism to make the environment fair and healthy. The respondents raised the question for unequal distribution as they felt discriminated owing to their political affiliation, ethnic background and lack of education.

The current IDPs and Returnees

The flood has caused serious damage to lives, livestock and properties. Almost all cultivated land in three VDCs namely Shreepur, Paschim Kushaha and Haripur are covered by thick layers of sand. It was found that 8,200 bighas of land damaged by flood.⁷ The people who were known as owners of huge amount of lands are landless in the present condition due to infertile land. Farming and livestock have been the major sources of income of majority of people in this area. Except physical materials and land, they have lost large number of livestock in the disaster. According to the Regional Veterinary Service Directorate, Biratnagar, some 7,000 livestock were killed and 78,000 others affected in the aftermath of the disaster in Sunsari and Saptari district of east Nepal.⁸

The displaced people are facing numerous problems maintaining household expenditures, suffering from inadequate resources, lack of shelter, scarce of food, unemployment and communicable diseases as a result of displacement. Some of them have lost their body organs such as hands and legs during the disaster. The children are not getting access to schools and many families have lost their identification documents such as citizenship certificates as a result of the loss of household properties. As they have no land, they are unable to claim for Compensation Package which is provided for land and crops by government. For the last nine months, neither the government nor any other organizations have supported them except tube-well installation for drinking water. It was found that in the displaced families are struggling for their livelihood in the absence of employment and livelihood support programmes. The children and pregnant women are living under severe malnutrition. .

As most of the agricultural land is covered by sand and arable land is also suffering from the lack of irrigation facilities, they are unable to grow any crops. As farming is their traditional occupation, they are not able to switch to other profession due to the lack of skill in other field. Thus they seek an alternative source for income or livelihood support from government.

Assistance Package

The major relief packages distributed to the displaced people are *Cash-For-Food*, *Return Package* and *Comprehensive Compensation Package*. *Cash-for-Food* was provided with the basis of NRs 1,000 per person to household size less than five whereas a lump sum of NRs 5075 was given to families with household size more than five in April⁹. Similarly, Rs 50,000 was distributed under the Home Return Package¹⁰ by Ministry of Home Affairs. The returnees were not satisfied with this amount as it was very small amount as compared the the loss they suffered during the flood. From Comprehensive Compensation Package, Natural Disaster Relief Committee (NDRC), Sunsari has distributed around Rs 300 million to flood victims till date. The committee is still continuing the distribution to cover the loss of land and crops¹¹.

The survey revealed that the victims are demanding that the government should focus on employment, livelihood improvement mainly through agriculture, animal husbandry and small enterprises that help build sustainable livelihood in the villages. At the same time housing, drinking water, sanitation and community health should be prioritized.

Conclusion

In Nepal, every year people are displaced due to different types of natural disasters. Floods and landslides are two major causes of displacement and human casualties in Nepal. Thousands of people were displaced in Koshi flood and floods and landslides in western districts in 2008. Even one year after the flood, the displaced and returnees are yet to resettle and restart their normal life. The relief and compensation packages distributed by governments and other assistances by other agencies have supported in many ways but the victims need long term livelihood programs and employment opportunities to resume regular living as they do not have any sources of income.

There is a need to revisit strategies and mechanisms related to floods management to reduce vulnerability and mitigating the flood impact on lives and livelihood of people. Reports suggest that the lack of regular monitoring of spurs and embankment is the major cause of Koshi flood disaster. Thus it requires strict technical as well as social monitoring mechanism which can help in issuing early warnings to the surrounding dwellers. At the same time, regular repair of spurs seems necessary to avoid devastation. Apart from technical work, government should also identify the current problem of victims and address it as soon as possible.

Notes

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- ² UNISDR 2009/01, *Press Release*, 22 January 2009
[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/LSGZ-7NJKJV-full_report.pdf/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFFiles2009.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/LSGZ-7NJKJV-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf) ; Accessed on 2 March 2010
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- ⁴ Co-Action Nepal, *Disaster Situation Report 2008*
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- ⁹ OCHA, *Koshi Flood Response Update*, 6 May 2009
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- ¹¹ The Himalayan Times, *Koshi flood victims get Rs 300m aid*, 2009-11-15
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