**DISCUSSION ON CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY IN EARTHQUAKE RELIEF AND RECOVERY IN NEPAL**

**BACKGROUND**

There has been increasing debate about the conflict risks linked to the recent earthquake response in Nepal. Fears of aid being co-opted or politicised are surfacing. Unequal access to relief for women and marginalised groups may compound existing vulnerabilities and widen historical divides. But both the relief and recovery processes have a strong potential to contribute to social cohesion, equity and peace if designed, implemented and monitored appropriately.

This paper summarises a discussion of representatives of the peacebuilding community held in Kathmandu on 15 May 2015, convened and chaired by International Alert and hosted by the United Nations Development Programme. The meeting aimed to flesh out potential conflict risks and peacebuilding opportunities related to earthquake relief and recovery, as well as ideas for action among aid agencies to ensure that aid ‘does no harm’ and promotes peace wherever possible.

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**CONFLICT RISKS IDENTIFIED**

**Context**

- Relief workers’ lack of understanding of the conflict, political, social and cultural context where they are working, or rushed judgment to deliver relief quickly, risks doing harm. Some new people do not even know there was a civil war in Nepal.
- Some humanitarian staff are not familiar with or mainstreaming the ‘do no harm’ principle.

**Protection**

- There are equity issues in the delivery of relief. Vulnerable and traditionally excluded groups (e.g. ‘lower caste’, women and girls, ethnic, religious, and sexual and gender minorities) are at risk of not being included in support. This risks compounding their existing vulnerability and historical grievances, widening community divides.
- Security concerns for marginalised groups, particularly women and girls, are increased, as the rule of law is disrupted. Sexual and gender-based violence, for example, tends to go up post-disaster. How will security and social issues be woven into early recovery plans?

**Politicisation and corruption**

- Politicisation of the relief and recovery activities is an ongoing risk/reality and this may lead to resentment of the government and/or the international community, or to political opportunism to undermine state–citizen relations.
• Aid processes may inadvertently stoke corruption (e.g. the rapid emergency procurement system potentially having weak oversight), which fuels community resentment.
• Risk of undermining existing community capacities and making it more vulnerable; aid agencies’ poor coordination or displacement of local leadership can weaken communities’ collaborative culture or legitimise negative aspects, such as elite dominance.

Communication, monitoring and accountability

• Weak communication to communities of relief and recovery plans and activities. People have no proper information about what help to expect and when, so they have doubts. This can fuel frustration, panic, looting or anxiety around compensation for recovery.
• Weak assessment of communities’ varied needs, especially of excluded groups (e.g. what kind of shelter women/men/children need), and sharing this information.
• Weak monitoring (especially disaggregated based on gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, age) of who is getting what. There is also weak government–aid agency coordination.
• Weak downward accountability. People should be able to feedback on the type of aid they are receiving and to raise concerns, gaps, grievances and needs for response.
• Risk of raising expectations (e.g. government promising ‘everyone will get everything’). Failure to meet this will create frustration. There is a need for two-way communication between the government and communities.
• Any organisation focusing on only one kind of beneficiary (e.g. single women) cannot practically ignore the other people in affected areas during relief, and it is difficult to reach each and every area even within the organisation’s focused territory, so there is the possibility of conflict over resources.
• Lessons learned on district relief distribution: 1) try to cover a whole community at once to mitigate competition; 2) mobilise local youth groups and put them in touch with each other, and have them communicate with each other so that they can work together – there is then less risk of looting.
• Risk of creating dependency. Relief is disrupting local production systems, as many people are walking up to the district headquarters to get free rice rather than cultivating.

Knock-on effects nationally

• Migration from affected areas will likely increase and needs to be monitored. If hill people migrate to the Terai, for example, then over time old tensions between Pahadis and Madhesis may resurface. There is a need to understand internal migration patterns and what this will mean for resourcing and inter-communal relations.
• Unaffected parts of the country (the majority) may over time start to resent the drain of resources towards earthquake-affected areas (especially from Terai to hill districts or from the Far West region to Kathmandu valley).
• Ongoing conflict, governance and basic service problems in the wider country risk being ignored and worsening.
• At the central level, the power seems to have shifted towards the military – a potential national conflict risk.
PEACEBUILDING OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED

- Natural disasters in other nations have produced opportunities for positive change. Harness the response to build a more transparent and inclusive Nepal.
- The energy currently rising in Kathmandu and districts through youth group/civic mobilisation (including through social media) needs to be brought into wider discussions on relief and recovery effectiveness.
- The common pain among the people is working as a connector and it is an opportunity for programming to reinforce social cohesion and for the government to enhance relations with the people to reduce suspicion or mistrust.
- More socially inclusive leadership can be developed through the response. Traditionally excluded groups (e.g. women, Dalits, indigenous people) can play leading roles. This could be seen as a threat by existing power-holders, which should be mitigated. Recovery strategies should include the empowerment of excluded groups.
- Considerable aid is being channelled through smaller organisations and there are opportunities for it to strengthen national civil society. Connecting grassroots efforts with bigger aid processes is needed.
- The government aims to create a mechanism to channel all reconstruction aid. It is important that aid agencies accompany resource allocation and reinforce do no harm and social inclusion principles and strong oversight.
- Civil society could play a complementary role to the government through civic monitoring of aid to boost transparency and accountability, and by gathering information on people’s needs or reporting gaps. Approaches could range from inclusive, interactive public hearings or community scorecards to using social media.
- Recovery programming could strengthen local government if funding administration and oversight is structured appropriately. Local elections could be expedited to boost the accountability and legitimacy of local leaders.
- The post-disaster situation could be an opportunity for pushing forth a notion of federalism in Nepal based on development rather than ethnicity, though this could represent a threat for those supporting ethnic federalism.
- The opportunity for private sector support to relief and recovery is big. But business needs to be engaged on do no harm and coordinated public–private partnerships established, for example in building earthquake-resistant houses.

IDEAS FOR CONCRETE ACTION BY THE GOVERNMENT AND AID AGENCIES

Social cohesion

- Develop recovery initiatives that bridge historical divides between groups, such as building interaction and cooperation between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, or between Brahmins, Chettris, Janajats and Dalits.
- Developing ways to enhance the relationship between the government and traditionally excluded groups (e.g. ethnic, caste, religious, gender) and geographical communities.
Inclusion and participation

- Include different groups of people (especially the traditionally excluded) in relief and recovery, so that their needs are identified and addressed. And respond holistically in coordination with the state to mitigate gaps and risks.
- Monitor the equitability and accessibility of relief, especially for vulnerable people, in coordination with the government and involving civil society. Common guidelines among aid agencies and the government should be followed.
- Do not let the response displace the other pressing issues (e.g. constitution development, decentralisation, transitional justice, etc.) that are crucial for strengthening peace in Nepal.

Operational approaches

- Conflict analysis of the socio-political context prior to reconstruction and recovery design.
- Boost the conflict-sensitive capacity of aid agencies, through technical support and partnerships with peacebuilding agencies.
- Shared conflict-sensitivity strategies among aid agencies and with the government.
- Increase discussion on conflict-sensitivity issues (e.g. online forums and resources) and re-assert Basic Operating Guidelines collectively across aid agencies.
- International community should increase funding for reconstruction through the government fund and form a monitoring mechanism to ensure its proper utilisation, in line with social inclusion and peacebuilding principles. This will boost national ownership while reinforcing peace and lowering management and operational costs.
- Ensure monitoring of conflict-sensitivity (e.g. what is the impact of your work on local social/political dynamics) and share this with staff/partners.
- Provide context orientation to incoming aid organisations or new staff, so they understand the context (e.g. social divides, accountability, federalism, etc.), and taking translators when travelling to the field.
- Develop an easy to use conflict-sensitivity checklist for field use.
- Have an inclusive programme team, i.e. think about the identity of staff and give respect to local knowledge, including your locally-recruited staff. Respect and help develop local/national leadership.

Coordination and collaboration

- Dialogue between government and non-government agencies, to de-politicise rehabilitation and reconstruction.
- Strengthen and cooperate with local government Structures, while also strengthening and including formal and informal national civil society (e.g. NGOs, self-help initiatives, emerging social movements, etc.). Promote civil society participation in decision-making, reporting and sharing ideas and experiences.
- Engage peacebuilding organisations to play advisory and watchdog roles.
- Expand the conversation, developing ways to include wider actors in the discussion of conflict-sensitivity (e.g. workshops to review aid agencies’ project proposals/plans).
- Focus on shelter immediately, but support a sustainable, inclusive, extensive reconstruction plan. And enact a disaster management act and policies with sustainable mechanisms.