

The 2015 earthquakes highlight that Nepal is not a passive recipient of aid, nor should it be treated as such

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*Case studies like Nepal offer the opportunity to reassess how individuals and communities affected by natural disasters can be better served by humanitarian efforts, writes **Jeevan R Sharma**. He argues the future of international assistance lies in developing constructive relationships with the state and effective partnerships with the local organisations who often end up leading the relief effort on the ground.*



This article forms part of our [Nepal Earthquake Anniversary series](#). Read further posts [here](#).

Based on a reflection on the political history of foreign aid, local perceptions of aid agencies and discourses around sovereignty and nationalism in Nepal, this brief piece examines the inability of humanitarian organisations and the Nepali government to effectively provide assistance to the victims of the earthquakes in April and May 2015.

The Nepal experience shows that international humanitarian response systems urgently need a major reshuffle. It is invariably local organisations and the affected populations themselves who do most to provide assistance, even though they lack the resources of the big agencies. Furthermore, international aid is increasingly resisted (if not outright rejected) by the State on nationalistic and sovereignty-based grounds, creating an environment of scepticism and hostility against donors. The future of international humanitarian assistance therefore lies in developing effective partnerships to facilitate work of the local organisations in disaster situations.

The earthquakes

While scientists had long predicted that an earthquake was overdue in the region, the disasters that eventually hit central Nepal on 25 April and 12 May last year resulted in loss of lives and livelihoods in 14 severely affected and 17 neighbouring districts. Around 9,000 were killed and approximately 2.8 million (around 10 per cent of Nepal's population) were left in need of humanitarian assistance.

In a country with low development indicators, the earthquakes disproportionately affected the poorer and those in remote rural locations. The [Post Disaster Needs Assessment](#) carried out by National Planning Commission showed that total losses are estimated at one third of Nepal's GDP, and the World Bank reported that an additional 3% of the population have been pushed into poverty.

Response

Nepal's ability to respond quickly and effectively was hampered by the geographical remoteness of affected communities, poor infrastructure and indeed a lack of physical infrastructure (such as the fact there is only one international airport in the country, which in turn has just one runway). However, it has also been undermined by a lack of strong political leadership. When the earthquakes hit, Nepal was going through an intense process of state restructuring and reconciliation following a decade-long violent Maoist insurgency. Local bodies had been run by government staff for 13 years and the absence of elected representatives meant there was no ready system to deliver relief aid to districts and villages. In an [op-ed](#) published in English daily in Kathmandu, the then Chief Secretary wrote,

"I admit that we didn't have capability and preparedness to handle a disaster of such magnitude.

Even if we did, we would not be able to maintain that scale of resources, all the time, in anticipation of such disaster.”



Nepali soldiers unload aid and relief supplies delivered by a U.S. Marine Corps. Credit: [Sgt. Jeffrey D. Anderson](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

International humanitarian assistance was therefore inevitable and necessary. Given the long history of foreign aid in the country, donors and several development-humanitarian agencies were already on the ground. Within hours further rescue and relief teams from neighbouring India and China began to arrive, followed by humanitarian teams from other countries and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). Journalists and locals began to capture and share the images and descriptions of suffering, which quickly circulated internationally through traditional and social media, espousing aid from around the world. A UN Flash Appeal for support launched on 29 April 2015 requested a total of \$422 million USD to meet critical humanitarian needs. Relief aid was mainly distributed through traditional humanitarian players, such as the UN, the Red Cross and major INGOs such as Save the Children, Oxfam and World Vision. This aid ultimately filtered through to local organisations who began to carry out the work on the ground through sub-contractual agreements. This convoluted process raises important questions around transaction costs and the accountability of humanitarian assistance.

A major donor conference was organised in Kathmandu in June 2015 and donors pledged a massive \$4.1 billion USD for reconstruction. While donors were enthusiastic to promise aid, they have since been reluctant to release and disburse funds citing poor governance (unsurprising given the track record of the Nepali State). The formation of a Post-earthquake Reconstruction Authority was then marred by political interference and incompetency and only received legal backing in December 2015. In addition to the coordination challenges, the government has been the subject of criticism for its patronage in appointments relating to reconstruction work and for severe delays in getting aid to those in need. Although the government had promised to provide the worst affected families with a grant of Nepali Rupee 200,000 (approx. \$2,000 USD) and a loan with little interest to assist in rebuilding homes, only recently a few hundred households received partial aid of Nepali Rupees 50,000.

Nor did broader developments such as the promulgation of the Constitution in September 2015 result in political stability as hoped. Instead it triggered deadly protests in the Terai region and blockages on the Indian border which caused severe food and fuel shortages, adding to the miseries of the already suffering population.

Aid politics

The history of [foreign aid in Nepal is contentious](#) . In different periods of Nepal’s political history, foreign aid has

played instrumental role in consolidating the regime, as well as for promoting democracy and regime change, according to the donors' own agendas.

The bitter relationship between the State and the donors pre-dates the 2015 earthquakes. Following the imposition of neo-liberal policies in late 1980s and early 1990s, development donors have been critical of the inefficiency, poor governance and failure to meet conditionalities. On the other hand, the Nepali State has been critical of international donors for the restrictive aid conditionalities, channelling funding through INGOs and private contractors for managing development programmes (where transactional costs and overheads are very high), and ultimately demonising the State for being inefficient and unaccountable. The inefficiency of the Nepali State and lack of coordination are well known, and any analysis and the criticisms of the State ought to take into account the effects of neoliberal policies on the capacity of the State.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, it should be recognised that the government faces a significant paradoxical challenge to balance its role between coordination and regulation: there is a widespread expectation on the State to manage international aid, but it is expected to do it in such a way that is not seen to be controlling it and thus denying those most in need.

Given the resources and the political capital at stake, the Nepali State has been attempting to manipulate post-earthquake aid using nationalistic and sovereignty discourses. Not only does availability of large amount of resources create opportunities for 'corruption' (or at least the perception), political parties are often known to use development resources to build and sustain their own patronage networks.

Survivors

In this highly contentious debate, the survivors' concerns around security and their livelihoods have been ignored. People are taking responsibility into their hands to rebuild their lives while the State and the donors bicker with one other. While there are open questions on the responsibility and the accountability of the State, the donors and the intermediary organisations, for the local people what really matters is the assistance they actually receive. This is welcome regardless of whether it is provided by neighbours, the Nepali State or international organisations.

Nepal's 2015 earthquakes show that the state and communities are not passive recipients and should not be treated as such. Access to information on aid flows and modalities mean that aid recipients are not just passive clients waiting for relief, but are actively involved in scrutiny of humanitarian processes both from the State, foreign governments and INGOs. The increasing criticism of international aid raises questions about the universality of Global North-led humanitarian objectives. Case studies like Nepal offer the opportunity to reassess how individuals and communities affected by natural disasters can be better served by humanitarian efforts.

This article forms part of our Nepal Earthquake Anniversary series. Read further posts [here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Jeevan R. Sharma is Lecturer in South Asia and International Development at the University of Edinburgh. He is currently researching on brokerage of foreign aid in Nepal and Malawi. You can reach him at: jeevan.sharma@ed.ac.uk



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