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Nepal

Disaster Profile - Nepal

Nepal boasts seven of the world's eight highest peaks, including Mount Everest. 80% of the land area of 147,181 sq. km is made up of mountains and hills. It is also a landlocked country with its nearest point to the sea being 960 km away. It has a unique altitudinal variation from 60m at Jhapa in the south to 7,848 m at Mt. Everest, quite a big variation in such a small country. The Terai plain, a low and flat land (100-300m), stretches along the southern part of the country next to the Indian Border.

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Nepal is exposed to most disaster types including earthquakes, floods, landslides, droughts, storms, avalanches, hailstorms, fires, epidemics and ecological hazards. A wide range of physiological, geological, ecological, meteorological and demographic factors contribute to the vulnerability of the country to disasters. Major factors contributing to disasters are rapid population growth, slow economic development, a high degree of environmental degradation, fragility of the land mass and high elevation of the mounting slopes.

Earthquakes Nepal lies in a region of high seismic activity. Earthquakes with magnitudes of 5 to 8 on the Richter scale have been experienced throughout the country and 279 earthquakes with epicenters in Nepal and magnitudes above 3.9 have been recorded. The country's high seismicity is related to the presence of active faults between tectonic plates along the Himalayas. Chains of active faults run for around 100km, interrupted by inactive sections. There are also active faults in the lower Himalayas and along the southern slopes of the Siwalik range. One main reason for Nepal's vulnerability to earthquakes is the poor construction of public buildings and houses especially in densely populated areas like Katmandu. The earthquake of 15th January 1934 was the most lethal natural disaster in Nepal's history: it killed 9,040 people.

Floods and landslides Floods and landslides are often interrelated in Nepal. Some landslides are triggered by riverbank erosion, and some flash floods are aggravated by landslides in the areas adjoining riverbanks. Both these phenomena occur during the monsoon season. Glacial lake outburst floods are common in the Himalayan region, and are triggered by a wide range of hydrological, and seismic factors. Disastrous flash floods usually occur in Nepal when landslides or debris block a river for several hours and the water is then released suddenly, inundating areas downstream. Continuous heavy rainfall may also cause flash floods in many rivers originating in hilly regions. Flash floods may also be caused by an avalanche, snowstorm or cloudburst.

A significant number of landslides estimated at over 12,000 occur each year. Various natural and man-made factors contribute to the high incidence of landslides. Natural factors include steep slopes, undercutting of riverbanks by rivers, weathered, fractured and weak rocks in the mountains, high rainfall and seismic activities. Man-made factors responsible for landslides are intensive deforestation, improper agriculture and irrigation practices, overgrazing on the slopes, quarrying for construction materials, and construction of infrastructure beyond the bearing capacities of the hill slopes. Landslides frequently occur in the monsoon season following an earthquake.

Fire: Most fires occur during summer, particularly in the Terai region when the temperatures are high and strong winds occur. Some of the reasons for the fire outbreaks are poor use of fire are also common in some hilly areas.

Institutional Structures

The national policy on disasters has two main components: precautionary measures, and emergency response and relief.

The policy on disaster management covers the following aspects:

- Identification of hazards and vulnerability, formulation of plans for preparedness, response, mitigation, reconstruction and rehabilitation and development plan.
- Identification of the activities of key agencies and preparation of standard operation procedures. Preparation of the necessary legal framework for land use planning, water and forest management, and ways of combating them.
- Preparation of the necessary legal framework for land use planning, water and forest management, and building codes.
- Building awareness of the causes and effects of natural disasters, and ways of committing them.
- Provision of rescue and relief measures.
- Mobilizing resources in the field of technology transfer, human resource development, and acquisition of material.

There are provisions made to ensure implementation of these policies, which include:

- Constitutional provision: there are 16 different national policies related to natural disaster.
- A master plan for the forestry sector, in order to reduce the risks of natural disasters such as floods, landslides, desertification and soil erosion.
- The National Disaster Relief Act proclaimed in 1982, which constituted a Central disaster Relief Committee under the chairmanship of the Home Minister. Similar Disaster Relief Committees have been formed at the Regional, District and local levels to carry out and coordinate rescue and relief operations and rehabilitation and resettlement programmes, and to conduct awareness raising programmes.
- The Nepal National Building Code has developed a strategy and model municipal by-laws and a draft act to assist their implementation as part of earthquake preparedness.

The Ministry of Home (MOH) is the key agency in the institutional structure for disaster management. MOH is the only agency that has the mandate for carrying out rescue and relief operations. The Central Disaster Management Committee and district and local committees are under the Ministry.

Other agencies involved include the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation, which is engaged in stabilizing natural and man-made landslides by afforestation and construction of check dams and other low-cost structures. The Ministry of Water Resources, through the Water Induced Disaster Prevention Training Center, aims to strengthen the government's capacity to cope with water induced disaster through training and technological development.

Agencies such as the Department of Irrigation, Mines and Geology, and Department of Roads have linkages with disaster management. The Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) in co-operation with the government handles relief distribution for the government. It maintains warehouses of disaster relief materials in all districts. This is the primary agency for responding to any kind of disaster. Only in areas where NRCS is unable to operate does the government take over responsibility for relief distribution. The main gaps in the existing structure and policy are:

- Absence of a well-developed disaster preparedness and prevention component: the disaster policy emphasizes post-disaster operations such as emergency response and relief.
- Although the need for environmental protection is recognized in disaster policy and in the related constitutional provisions, the absence of a proper policy on human settlement results in exposure to risk and in environmental damages.
- Absence of coordination between the different agencies attending to disaster-related issues is a major gap. There is no single agency to coordinate and integrate the efforts of various organizations.
- The engagement of people in disaster management at present is minimal. The conventional methods of mitigation and rehabilitation are expensive and make communities more dependent on government assistance. The absence of simple, low-cost, human-scale methods of disaster preparedness and mitigation is a significant weakness.
- The lack of disaster-development linkages in locally planned development activities is another area of concern. Disaster risk analysis is virtually non-existent in many development plans.
- The prevailing outlook toward disasters seems to act as a major barrier in bringing about disaster preparedness and mitigation. Disasters are often seen as acts of God, which cannot be prevented.
- The absence of early warning systems and public awareness focused on disaster preparedness.

Links & Sources

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