Open Spaces in Kathmandu: A Portal for Humanitarian Response

Kathmandu is the most at-risk city in the world to a major earthquake. Current assessments suggest that a magnitude 8.0 earthquake in the Kathmandu Valley would result in at least 100,000 deaths, 300,000 injured, and over 1 million persons displaced. In addition, major bridges and critical infrastructure, such as the only international airport, would be severely affected which could isolate the Valley from outside assistance. This poses significant challenges for an immediate and effective response. Inside the Valley, vulnerability is largely due to poor building practice including infrastructure that is densely constructed and without reference to resilient materials or technique.

When the next earthquake will strike cannot be predicted; but it will happen and it will create a humanitarian crisis. With over 1 million persons expected to be displaced, a major issue will be coordinating humanitarian services to the affected population.

The earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti was the first time government and humanitarian actors had to operate within a complex urban environment. Experience from Haiti taught governments and humanitarian practitioners the chaos that can ensue after a disaster and the critical need to prepare and plan for disaster. Ratindra Khatri, a former Nepal Army Colonel who served in Haiti, described the earthquake as “an absolute nightmare. The sights were unbelievable. Everywhere I looked, there was debris and dead bodies; it was truly a nightmare. It was also a very chaotic period because we did not have a plan in place to respond.”

Over the last 3 years, the Government of Nepal has taken proactive steps towards risk reduction and preparedness. In 2011, the government launched the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC); a unique coordination mechanism that brings together government, financial institutions, humanitarian and development partners.

Under the NRRC, 5 Flagship priorities for action have been identified. These Flagship priorities are: School and Hospital Safety, Emergency Preparedness and Response, Flood Management in the Kosi River, Community Based DRR, and Policy/Institutional Support for DRM. According to Mr. Lakshmi Dhakal, Joint Secretary for the Ministry of Home Affairs, the “NRRC is an important mechanism for the Government because it provides a framework where we can lead and coordinate with our partners to maximize efforts in reducing disaster risk. The government is committed to DRR and the NRRC provides a platform where can promote a disaster resilient society.”

Flagship 2 of the NRRC, coordinated by the

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Ministry of Home Affairs and UN OCHA, is focused on strengthening emergency preparedness and response. It is an ambitious attempt to build the ‘in-house’ capacity of the Government to coordinate, prepare and respond to disaster.

Under this flagship, the identification, allocation and planning of open spaces has been a priority. Open spaces refers to the areas in Kathmandu Valley of identified free space that can be used for humanitarian response (camps for displaced persons, logistics centres, distribution centres, security and incoming military coordination sites, etc.).

Regarding the importance of open spaces, IOM Chief of Mission Maurizio Busatti stated that “as a CCCM cluster lead; IOM has been playing a significant role globally in responding to the needs of IDPs during emergencies. Identification and protection of open spaces in earthquake prone cities such as Kathmandu Valley considerably contributes to a more effective and coordinated response, saving lives and assisting recovery.”

Planning and preparing these spaces will allow government and humanitarian organisations to respond quickly and effectively immediately after disaster. Andreas Wuestenberg, Emergency Preparedness and Response Officer for WFP, says “this is particularly important in regards to logistics which will be one of the major challenges. Through the open space allocations, the Logistics Cluster has been able to identify and secure 19 strategic sites within the Kathmandu Valley which will serve as logistics hubs in response to the disaster.”

In a demonstration of its commitment to risk reduction and preparedness, the Cabinet has now approved and secured 83 open spaces in the Kathmandu Valley; that equals nearly 4,000,000 sq.m of land. This is an

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unprecedented decision in a city where development is expanding and space is limited and a first anywhere in the world.

The 83 open spaces in Kathmandu will not be enough to handle the expected number of displaced persons from an earthquake; in Haiti, there were at least 1500 sites used by displaced persons.

However, the 83 open spaces identified will serve as crucial points for effective humanitarian coordination and response. According to Andrew Martin, Head of Office for UN OCHA in Nepal and Flagship 2Coordinator, “each and every open space, no matter how large or small, will be invaluable after a major earthquake. They will be our portals into delivering aid in a chaotic, anarchic environment.”

While the open spaces have been secured, the work is not complete. The Government of Nepal, with support from IOM and USAID, are in the stage of planning the exact function of these spaces. This process included a 2 day workshop held from April 25-26 that brought together partners to agree how each open space will be used.

IOM states that “next steps on this issue will involve coordination amongst Government of Nepal agencies, cluster members and local communities to identify roles of each site in an event of a mega scale earthquake, raise awareness about the sites and plan all preparedness activities in relation to the identified sites.”

The work is challenging, particularly in ensuring the open spaces remain protected and that all stakeholders come together under one approach; but this work is imperative for preparing the government and humanitarian partners to effectively respond to disaster.

For more information, please visit

www.flagship2.nrrc.org.np