

Rethinking democratic governance of disaster through scholar-activist engagements: *Revisiting the Lessons Learned from the 2015 Nepal Earthquakes*

Workshop Summary Report

Authors

Prekkshya Bimali | Nimesh Dhungana | Narayan Adhikari



1. Background

In April and May 2015, Nepal was hit by two major earthquakes that claimed over 9000 lives and caused massive societal disruption. Commonly referred to as “the Great Earthquake” (Mahabhukampa), the earthquakes not only unveiled major shortcomings in the State-driven governance of disasters but also sparked newer forms of democratic engagements, evidenced in grassroots activism and participatory movements aimed at holding the government of Nepal and aid organisations accountable to the demands of the affected communities. Over the last decade, considerable research has emerged that sheds light on the politics of possibility following the disaster, centred on examining the respect for (and violation of) the rights and demands of affected communities in earthquake response and recovery (Crawford & Morrison, 2021; Dhungana & Cornish, 2021; Raj & Gautam, 2015; Shrestha et al., 2019). Nepal’s experience with post-disaster democratic revitalisation aligns with a growing body of international research on the potential of disasters to advance just and inclusive models of disaster governance under challenging circumstances (Luft, 2009; Tekin & Drury, 2021; Xu, 2017). However, much of this scientific evidence remains confined to the academic discourse, which has, in turn, limited its application in promoting “full and meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders” in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), as envisioned by the international policy instruments such as the Sendai Framework for DRR 2015-2030 (United Nations, 2015, p.11) and promote “participation, transparency and transparency” in DRR governance, as one of the key policy commitments of the Government of Nepal in the wake of the 2015 Nepal earthquakes (National Policy for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2018, p.8).

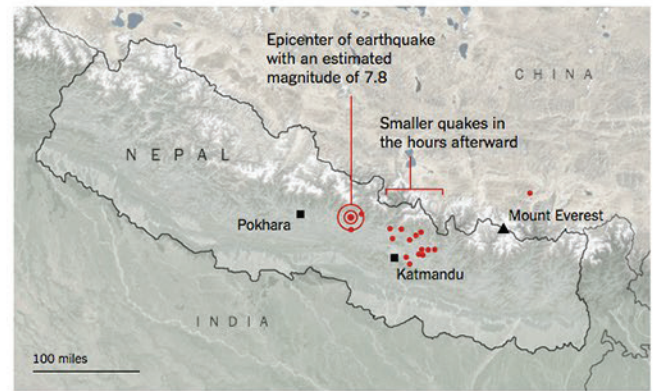


Discussion at the "Democratic Governance of Disasters" event on the 2015 Nepal earthquakes.

2. About the workshop

This report captures insights from a participatory workshop held on 22nd April, 2025, in Kathmandu to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the 2015 Nepal earthquakes. Titled “Democratic Governance of Disasters: Revisiting the Lessons Learned from the 2015 Nepal Earthquakes,” the workshop was organised as a scholar-activist platform, as part of a long-standing research engagement between Dr. Nimesh Dhungana (Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester, UK) and colleagues from Accountability Lab Nepal (Narayan Adhikari, Prekkshya Bimali). The workshop sought to revisit what disaster historians have termed “a bottom-up account of disasters” (van Bavel et al., 2020), providing a space for a diverse group of actors to reflect on their experiences of having witnessed and responded to the 2015 Nepal earthquake, but also question and challenge the dominant or State-driven narratives of disaster response and recovery.

Learning from experience also means creating a systemic and critical archive of the long-standing political failures that create the conditions for the occurrence of the disaster (Farmer, 2011).



- Governance ‘gaps’ and ‘good practices’ that characterised both the immediate response to and the subsequent recovery from the disaster;
- Contextual factors—social, political, and bureaucratic—that influenced or undermined the prospects for an accountable and inclusive disaster response and recovery
- Practical alternatives to enhance the current understanding and approaches to democratic governance of disasters in Nepal

The workshop convened 30 individuals from diverse backgrounds, including frontline disaster practitioners, rights activists, politicians, investigative journalists, community youth organisers, researchers, and government officials representing the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA), as well as local government officials.

The workshop began with Dr. Nimesh Dhungana providing a general intellectual and applied context for the workshop. Drawing on long-standing research on the interplay between democracy and disasters, he emphasised how democracy, particularly participatory forms of democracy that prioritise the voice and agency of local communities, can make State authorities responsive to the social and political disadvantages that both produce and exacerbate disasters and their unequal impacts (Dreze and Sen, 1989; Curato, 2019).



He also presented his research findings from his long-standing partnership with Accountability Lab, focusing on the opportunities and challenges of youth-led activism in furthering accountable disaster response (Dhungana, 2020). This was followed by additional reflections from Mr. Narayan Adhikari (Accountability Lab) on the advantages of scholar-activist engagements to improve the prospects for evidence-based approaches to accountable and just governance of disasters, drawing from their experience leading an accountability campaign in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquakes and the Covid-19 pandemic. He also highlighted the role of community leaders, what they called Civic Actions Teams, catalysing feedback loop and problem-solving approach to improve bottom-up disaster response and reconstruction.

The workshop followed a reflective methodology, with individual participants sharing their hands-on experiences and memories about their involvement in the 2015 earthquake response and recovery. The first session asked participants to reflect on the following question: based on your experience of responding to the 2015 Nepal earthquake, what does it mean and take to govern disasters democratically? It was followed by a participatory discussion, featuring small breakout sessions and group work, to propose actionable alternatives for improving the future response to disasters. While the 2015 earthquakes served as an entry point for discussions, participants also reflected on their experiences of responding to other recent disasters, notably the COVID-19 pandemic.

The workshop adhered to Chatham House rules regarding the reporting of workshop insights. This allowed for the reporting of general discussion points from the workshop, substantiated by some anonymised quotes as relevant.



Image Credit: <https://memento.epfl.ch>

A woman works amidst the rubble of her collapsed home after the 2015 Nepal earthquake

3. Key highlights of discussion

3.1 Disaster as a window of opportunity

Participants reflected on how the April and May 2015 earthquakes, despite the massive humanitarian crisis they brought, renewed calls to bring disaster preparedness to the centre of the DRR discourse. The participants provided examples of how the earthquakes sparked public and media scrutiny over the lack of enforcement of the building code of conduct and haphazard urban construction that fueled disaster risk. Others recalled the subsequent introduction of the New Building Code, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategic Action Plan 2015-2030, and (Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion) GEDSI-integrated frameworks for disaster management as the outcomes of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, alongside the establishment of the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) as an institutional intervention to bring coherence and standardisation in reconstruction efforts. Others stressed how the earthquakes brought to the public's awareness the role of volunteers and local communities as first responders, especially when the government's response capacity proved severely limited. One key area of public participation was evident in the use of digital technologies, such as crowdsourcing, infographics, and social media, to identify affected communities and mobilise relief aid. One participant noted that the earthquake catalysed the adoption of digital alert systems in ongoing DRR initiatives.



Image Credit: www.aljazeera.com

Women console each other amid the ruins after the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

3.2 Gaps in local accountability

Although the 2015 Nepal earthquake spurred public participation in disaster response, the participants also recalled how the immediate response suffered from accountability gaps, representing Nepal’s wider democratic vacuum. During the 2015 earthquake, the absence of elected representatives in local bodies (e.g. wards and municipalities) led to a lack of clarity in the lines of democratic accountability for coordinating relief efforts. One participant noted how this “democratic gap” has persisted beyond the 2015 earthquakes. Local representatives, in an attempt to please constituents, often endorse development projects that overlook or sideline associated environmental risks, leading to disasters such as floods and landslides. Such politics of appeasement has marred fair distribution of relief efforts, as one participant recalled how a local politician sought to justify misuse of relief distribution following a recent disaster under the guise of citizens’ benefit:



***Sarkar bata aaune paisa jantale khaoun”—“
Let the money that comes from government
be taken by our people”***

“Let our people take the money that comes from government”. Although disaster management committees exist, including the National Emergency Operation Centre, their role remains questionable in promoting risk-sensitive practices and exercising oversight over relief distribution. This has not only created the gap in DRR and response but also undermined people’s trust in local governments’ ability to ensure an equitable and fair response to disasters.



7 Public hearing organised by ALN in the wake of the earthquake Image Credit: Nimesh Dhungana

3.3 Response-centric disaster governance

Participants stressed that, despite several lessons from the 2015 Nepal earthquake and other recent disasters, Nepal’s DRR community remains largely “reactive” with a focus on emergency response, and far less on preparedness. One participant mentioned that the absence of substantial preparedness progress was clearly evident during the recent 2023 Jajarkot earthquake, where victims were housed in temporary shelters for months due to the delayed detailed impact assessment, and formulation of guidelines for reconstruction, and compensation.

“The government has still made no efforts to identify and acknowledge the people with disabilities resulting from trauma caused by the earthquake.”

Participants stressed that more attention should be given to disaster preparedness, which takes into account longer-term social, political and economic vulnerabilities facing disaster-prone communities.



Image Credit: apimagesblog.com

Boudhha Temple is being reconstructed after the earthquake.

3.4 Corruption and secrecy in aid distribution

Participants recalled how the 2015 Nepal earthquake brought to light cases of corruption in the distribution of relief and recovery aid, involving high-level government officials. Relief distribution further suffered from a lack of transparency (e.g., in cash compensation). Misappropriation of relief aid was exacerbated when people's attention was centred on addressing individual needs, as one participant argued,

“ People don't really question the government during a crisis because everyone's focus is on dealing with the humanitarian situation. But there are so many things related to public finance that need to be transparent, for instance, where the relief fund is coming from, what the fund transfer along the budget head looks like, how the executive level is informed about the budgetary decision, transparency in the procurement process, and more.”

Another participant mentioned that, instead of seeing public scrutiny as a form of democratic engagement, it is viewed by the authorities as a hindrance to relief distribution. Erosion of transparency and allegations of corruption during the relief phase, in turn, fueled public mistrust in the government-led recovery and reconstruction efforts for residential houses and public infrastructures.

3.5 Questioning government's disaster management capacity

Although participants acknowledged that the 2015 Nepal earthquakes led to some reforms in DRR policies and legislation, they also expressed serious doubts regarding the State's implementation capacity for disaster preparedness. Participants cited examples,

such as a lack of sufficient funds for disaster preparedness and inadequate data management systems, as indicators of the State's limited political will to support DRR capacity. Reflecting on the implementation of the "one window policy" during the 2015 Nepal earthquake, participants noted that the policy aimed to bring uniformity and coherence to disaster aid while avoiding duplication of efforts and strengthening accountability.

In practice, however, the 'one window policy' suffered from the government's limited capacity to manage resources and coordinate timely relief efforts, increasing tension between state and non-state actors. By restricting direct interventions from civil society and local networks, the policy undermined the emergence of the broader disaster response ecosystem. Additionally, the State's capacity is compromised by a lack of institutional memory; for instance, 27 secretaries have been transferred within five years at NDRRMA, further undermining coherence and consistency in institutional planning and response.

3.6 Disregard for local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

Participants noted that state agencies and international NGOs heavily dominate the disaster management landscape in Nepal. Limited attention is paid to the vital role played by local CSOs, not just in mobilising relief aid post-disaster but also in improving the prospects for rights-based and participatory disaster relief and recovery. **For example, Accountability Lab Nepal, through its network, was able to apply the CivActs Team, a community-based model that supported bridging the information gap between the community and government, and led grassroots-level activism for transparent and accountable reconstruction.** Despite such grassroots focus, most of the CSOs find it difficult to operate effectively, especially in promoting fair and equitable aid distribution, because of the unfavorable and lengthy bureaucratic process of seeking and securing resources from the government and large NGOs:



the time our proposal gets approved for crisis response, the community would have often moved into the recovery phase. The whole effort then feels meaningless and ends up depriving people of the support they actually needed at the time”.

The second half of the workshop focused on identifying some practical alternatives/recommendations towards a democratic governance of disasters in Nepal:

4. Recommendations

4.1 Improving participation and localisation in DRR

Although Nepal's current government policies and guidelines acknowledge the role of local communities and government bodies in disaster risk reduction (DRR), their involvement is often limited to immediate relief distribution. Participants called for a strong and sustained engagement of local communities in various phases of disaster management: preparedness, response, recovery, and reconstruction, especially the participation of marginalised communities such as women, disabled communities, and elderly communities, among others.

This necessitates moving beyond the current State-centric and top-down approaches and creating meaningful spaces for public participation, particularly in developing a collective understanding of disaster risk and addressing long-standing socio-political vulnerabilities to disasters. Embracing a longer-term view towards DRR also involves recognising disaster preparedness as a fundamental human right. Public participation should additionally focus on critically examining and deliberating on globally circulated concepts such as 'building back better' and 'resilient communities,' as well as their relevance and application in the Nepali context.

The impact of public participation is closely intertwined with the capacity of local governments. **The earthquakes of 2015 made it clear that democratising DRR involves granting more authority and resources to local governments, including a greater role in identifying disaster risks, mobilising resources, and addressing local grievances.** The local governments should also be empowered to develop and distribute context-specific social protection interventions, one participant stressed.

4.2 Transparency and accountability

As Nepal's leading disaster scholar, Ajay Dixit, argues, accountable governance is key to drive disaster management (Dixit 2016). Disaster response should go beyond providing material relief and aid. It should also ensure a strong mechanism of accountability and transparency throughout the disaster management cycle. **People's fundamental democratic right such as the right to know/information about relief aid should not be compromised in the name of emergency response or exceptional circumstances.** Both state and non-state actors involved in planning, implementation, and recovery should ensure openness in informing the public about their relief funds, the collection of donations and aid, emergency response mechanisms, and the availability of and access to grievance mechanisms. To address the risks of corruption and abuse of public resources, one concrete recommendation that came during the workshop was the use of dedicated disaster budget codes at all levels of government. These codes would enable better tracking of disaster-related expenditures and enhance transparency. They would also serve as a tool for both proactive planning and retrospective accountability. The role of local CSO should be given special attention in improving public participation, but also improving the accountability and transparency in DRR. At the same time, Nepal's DRR sector should pay special attention to the political aspirations of the local communities to exercise their right to monitor and shape DRR discourse and action (Dhungana and Cornish, 2024)



Community-led reconstruction in Sankhu

Image Credit: Nimesh Dhungana

4.3 Investment in the local DRR capacity

There is an urgent need to invest in and enhance the implementation capacity of local governments and communities, which are often the first responders to disasters. Such measures should include granting local bodies more authority to mobilise and manage disaster response funds, organising regular training sessions and drills, maintaining updated data and timely assessments, and ensuring effective communication channels between institutions and communities. Focusing on disaster preparedness with the establishment of a well-equipped training centre, for example, the ‘National Disaster Academy’, could further help strengthen the implementation capacity of local bodies. Currently, training provided by the Armed Police Force (APF) has been reported as prohibitively expensive, excluding many willing participants. As one participant noted, the high cost eliminates interested responders from accessing training.

“Rescue and response training are expensive and the cost varies depending on disaster and training institutions. For example, training of eight people will require a tentative sum of six lakhs and even then with limited equipment. Not everyone can afford to access such training.”

A national academy, which works closely with disaster volunteers and local actors, would offer more affordable and consistent learning opportunities for aspiring responders.



Workshop on data-driven monitoring of housing reconstruction Image Credit: Nimesh Dhungana

4.4 Strengthen the disaster management ecosystem

To strengthen Nepal's disaster management ecosystem, it is essential to emphasise the role of the CSOs and create a more enabling environment for their involvement in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. **As the 2015 earthquakes demonstrated, CSOs' potential spans a range of activities, from serving as first responders, improving people's access to information, applying people-centred technologies for relief distribution, and demanding accountability from the State.** While organisations like Accountability Lab Nepal have demonstrated the transformative potential of community-based models in bridging information gaps and amplifying grassroots voices, their activism suffers from a lack of wider State recognition and support. Nepal's state DRR machinery, including the NDRRMA, should be more proactive in providing more space for CSOs to shape DRR policies and practices.

4.5 Promoting disaster research and knowledge sharing

Nepal's Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) efforts suffer from knowledge gaps, particularly regarding lessons learned from disaster response. Participants emphasised that DRR knowledge should not merely be the realm of DRR experts and government officials. **Efforts should be made to further democratise DRR knowledge, paying attention to what one participant mentioned 'vernacular knowledge'.** One example of this could be the practice of public hearings during the reconstruction process, similar to those held for the rebuilding of Rani Pokhari and Patan where the focus was placed on maintaining authenticity, preserving heritage, and preserving cultural values. The government should make concerted efforts to make disaster knowledge more interdisciplinary and widely accessible to the public through systems of research-driven discussions, data sharing and dissemination, further contributing to the process of making DRR more transparent and accountable to the public.

5. Conclusion

The 2015 Nepal earthquakes should be remembered not only as an event of unprecedented human suffering but also as an opportunity for transformation in the governance of disasters in Nepal. Building on recent academic insights into the interplay between democracy and disasters, as well as the bottom-up politics of memory of disasters, the workshop aimed to reflect on the merits of safeguarding and promoting democracy under the challenging circumstances created and sustained by disasters. The discussion points highlighted here are not exhaustive but are indicative of some key democratic deficits raised by the workshop participants, particularly in ensuring participatory and equitable governance of disasters. The recommendations are expected to guide future discourse in advancing participatory and rights-based approaches to DRR, recognising the diverse voices and agency of local communities that are at the forefront of disaster preparedness and response. The workshop also called for further efforts in democratising disaster knowledge through the establishment and promotion of knowledge exchange platforms.



Image Credit: nepaltimes.com

"The integrated settlement of Gumsipakha.

The authors would like to thank all participants of the Kathmandu workshop for generously sharing their insights and experiences. We also extend our gratitude to everyone consulted during site visits and informal meet-ups for their valuable contributions.

6. References

1. Crawford, G., & Morrison, C. (2021). Community-led reconstruction, social inclusion and participation in post-earthquake Nepal. *Development Policy Review*, 39(4), 548–568. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12512>
2. Cretney, R. (2019). “An opportunity to hope and dream”: Disaster Politics and the Emergence of Possibility through Community-Led Recovery. *Antipode*, 51(2), 497–516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12431>
3. Curato, N. (2019). *Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Spectacular Tragedies to Deliberative Action*. Oxford University Press.
4. Dhungana, N. (2020). Doing Civil Society-Driven Social Accountability in a Disaster Context: Evidence from Post-Earthquake Nepal. *Politics and Governance*, 8(4), 395–406. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i4.3154>
5. Dhungana, N., & Cornish, F. (2024). Community-Based Monitoring as an Early Warning System: Detecting and Countering Risks in Government-Driven COVID-19 Responses. *Nat. Hazards Rev.*
6. Drèze, J., & Sen, A. (1989). *Hunger and public action*. Oxford University Press
7. Farmer, P. (2011). *Haiti After the Earthquake*. Public Affairs.
8. Hayward, B., & Johnson, S. (2022). Lessons for Democracy from a Decade of Disasters. In S. Uekusa, S. Matthewman, & B. C. Glavovic (Eds.), *A Decade of Disaster Experiences in Ōtautahi Christchurch: Critical Disaster Studies Perspectives* (pp. 335–351). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6863-0_16
9. Luft, R. E. (2009). Beyond Disaster Exceptionalism: Social Movement Developments in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. *American Quarterly*, 61(3), 499–527. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27735005>
10. Matthewman, S., & Uekusa, S. (2021). Theorizing disaster communitas. *Theory and Society*, 50(6), 965–984. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-021-09442-4>
11. Raj, Y., & Gautam, B. (2015). *Courage in Chaos: Early Rescue and Relief after the April Earthquake*. Martin Chautari.
12. Tekin, S., & Drury, J. (2021). Silent Walk as a street mobilization: Campaigning following the Grenfell Tower fire. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 31(4), 425–437. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2521>
13. United Nations. (2015). *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015—2030* (p. 37). https://www.preventionweb.net/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf
14. van Bavel, B., Curtis, D. R., Dijkman, J., Hannaford, M., de Keyser, M., van Onacker, E., & Soens, T. (2020). *Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108569743>
15. National Policy for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2018. (2018). Government of Nepal, Home Ministry.
16. Xu, B. (2017). *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*. Stanford University Press
17. Dixit, A. (2016). *Nepalma Bipad*. ISET-N, Action Aid, Practical Action.



Accountability Lab Nepal (ALN) makes governance work for people by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders and accountable institutions. We are part of the global translocal network of Accountability Lab, dedicated to building accountable, inclusive, and responsive governance systems. ALN pioneered a community-based feedback model during the 2015 earthquake that laid the groundwork for “information aid” and advocated for inclusive decision making in crisis. ALN continues to promote equitable and inclusive governance through citizen-led approaches.

www.nepal.accountabilitylab.org



Humanitarian and Conflict Response (HCRI) based at the University of Manchester is the leading global centre for the study of humanitarianism and conflict response, global health, international disaster management and peacebuilding.

www.hcri.manchester.ac.uk