

Assessing conflict in earthquake-affected districts of Nepal

October 2016 – March 2017



Photo: Anurag Acharya/Saferworld

Executive summary

Nepal stands at a historic juncture. A new constitution and the refinement of governance structures hold the prospect of contributing to greater stability, growth and peace. But this is not guaranteed, and the risks of continued or worsening fragility are significant. Weak and inefficient governance following the 2015 earthquake – especially at local levels such as Village Development Committees (VDCs) – remains a key challenge. Almost two years on, many victims still await compensation to rebuild their homes, while others who lack land ownership certificates cannot make compensation claims in the first place. Large sections of the public felt disappointed in the government's lack of disaster-preparedness, compounded by an inept approach to coordinating relief and reconstruction with national level authorities and other civil society groups. Their general lack of sensitivity towards specific needs and concerns of both women as well as male earthquake victims only

made matters worse. All of these factors have led to a loss of confidence in the ability of the state to provide effective services while remaining inclusive and democratic. These frustrations have the potential to escalate tensions in the coming months and years, reviving grievances that have remained following the civil war that ended ten years ago.

To find out more about the thoughts and experiences of people who were affected by the earthquake in Gorkha, Sindhupalchok and Dhading districts, Saferworld conducted a series of focus group discussions and key informant interviews, with the findings serving as the basis of this report. Most respondents saw political actors as responsible for managing aid, including the distribution of relief. Many of them expressed disappointment in these politicians and administrators, accusing them of channelling aid and support toward those who were aligned to them politically. A few community members said that they were willing to give the political parties a second chance in the upcoming elections, while others

mentioned that they would speak up when local candidates visited around the elections.

There was a mixed reaction towards civil society in terms of providing humanitarian support during and after the earthquake. Some civil society groups were discredited for being corrupt in their management of aid. On the other hand, some community members were appreciative of the support from civil society groups, including from volunteers, international workers, and international and national non-governmental organisations (I/ NGOs) that came forward to support those affected by the earthquake. However, there was also a high degree of scepticism towards donors and I/ NGOs, with speculation that money directed to local people was being spent by I/ NGOs and their intermediaries on high salaries and other operational costs.

Respondents also highlighted a number of unique challenges facing women and girls. Political discussions continue to be the domain of men, with women largely excluded. This will have a large impact on the results of the upcoming local elections. Women and girls also face a specific range of challenges following the earthquake, such as heightened fears of sexual and gender-based violence and abuse from men who have taken to drinking more heavily after the disaster. However, women have played a crucial role in reconstruction efforts, especially in the coordination with NGOs. This has helped them be more confident in voicing their opinions. It remains to be seen whether this will translate into a greater say in governance, politics or economics.

In the coming months and years, civil society groups and NGOs must take stock of what worked and what did not during assistance to earthquake-affected communities. This will help better inform their future programming and ensure that they do not trigger existing conflict drivers that could lead to greater violence.

Acronyms

FGD - Focus group discussion

GBV - Gender-based violence

INGO - International non-governmental organisation

KII - Key informant interview

NGO - Non-governmental organisation

UCPN (M) – Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists-Centre)

VDC - Village development committee

Introduction

On 25 April 2015, a powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake shook Nepal's western, central and eastern regions, leaving mass devastation in its wake. According to available data, almost 9,000 people were killed and over 22,000 injured during the initial earthquake and the following weeks, when powerful aftershocks continued to jolt the region. Fourteen out of the 75 districts in the country were worst affected, with over 600,000 houses completely destroyed and another 285,000 partially damaged. In addition, more than 6,000 government buildings, 1,000 hospitals and health-posts, and around 8,000 schools buildings were also destroyed.¹

Over the last decade, Nepal and especially Kathmandu featured prominently on international lists of earthquake-prone areas, with resources being heavily invested in preparations for possible disaster. However, when the earthquake struck, government measures were not sufficient to ensure public safety.

Rescue and recovery operations were underway within a few hours of the earthquake, with all three state security agencies coordinating among themselves as well as with their government and international counterparts. On the political front, the government and political parties spearheaded the long-delayed constitutional drafting process, which finally ended when the Constituent Assembly approved the new Constitution on 20 September 2015. However, in the preceding months and immediately following its ratification, violence broke out in the Mid-West hills (Surkhet) and intensified in the Terai, causing more than 50 deaths – both of security personnel and members of the public – in a span of just five months.

The districts that were most affected by the earthquake, such as Gorkha, Sindhupalchok, Dolakha, Dhading, Nuwakot and Ramechhap, among others, are now recuperating from the disaster while at the same time coping with conflict-related grievances such as social and political marginalisation, a lack of elected local bodies, corruption, low transitional justice, poverty, scant employment opportunities and high rates of gender-based violence.

Given the rapid changes in the political landscape, and with upcoming local elections scheduled for 14 May this year, Saferworld carried out an assessment in three of the earthquake affected districts – namely Gorkha, Sindhupalchok and Dhading – to see how much progress they have made in addressing some of the key factors that could lead to violence.

Saferworld's field research was carried out in these districts from November to December by a team

consisting of both men and women.² The team covered four earthquake-affected Village Development Committees (VDCs) and the district headquarters in Sindhupalchok and Dhading. In Gorkha, they focused their data collection only around the district headquarters, mainly due to resource and time constraints.

The methodology for this assessment was based on qualitative research techniques using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with community members and district-level officials, as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with community members. We conducted a total of 102 KIIs, with 36 female respondents and 66 male respondents, and a total of 16 FGDs with eight groups of women and eight groups of men.

The research focused on identifying key conflict drivers within these districts, including: political tensions and conflicts; identity-based tensions or conflicts; resource-based tensions or conflicts, including those related to post-earthquake reconstruction aid management; gender-based violence (GBV) and tensions; and governance or other security-related issues. The findings are discussed below.

Key findings

Governance challenges and politicisation

All three districts face serious governance challenges, which have been exacerbated by the earthquake. Respondents saw corruption within the local government administration and politicisation of local development efforts as major challenges, underscoring public concern over the absence of elected representatives at the VDC level and weak infrastructure for delivering effective services – particularly in health, education, water and sanitation, and disaster response. Local communities were particularly concerned about what they called 'embezzlement of earthquake aid and relief' by local leaders for their personal and political gains.³ Community members at the VDC level complained that most of the aid and relief had been usurped by political actors and provided to locals affiliated with political parties, who had not been open or transparent about the funds, relief materials or the

² The field research for this report was carried out by Anuj Tiwari, Eshita Pandey, Pramod Acharya and Ramesh Shrestha, who led the research, and was coordinated by Ashim Pandey and Ojaswi Shah. Ojaswi Shah analysed the findings and authored the report, with written contributions from Anurag Acharya. Chris Underwood provided additional review and Ilya Jones copy-edited the report. This policy briefing was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency - Sida.

³ Respondents frequently named major political parties, including the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist- Centre) [UCPN (M)], Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) and Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal when expressing dissatisfaction over the conduct of local leaders in responding to the earthquake.

¹ Nepal Disaster Risk Reduction Portal.
<http://drrportal.gov.np/ndrrip/main.html?id=1>

distribution process.⁴ Corruption and politicisation were seen as endemic and mostly linked to political actors and government authorities, although some attributed this to civil society and the private sector as well, especially regarding management of earthquake-related aid distribution. Additionally, respondents also raised concerns over incoherent supply of post-earthquake aid materials and rehabilitation packages for short and long-term support to earthquake-affected survivors by both government and non-government stakeholders, causing much confusion among local communities.⁵

All three districts have VDCs that are remote and difficult to access by road. Residents felt that they were overlooked by the national government when it came to governance and development schemes.⁶ Participants of FGDs from these areas felt that hill-based ethnic groups, including the Dalit communities who tend to be marginalised, had less influence over national politics and were therefore not prioritised when it came to services – largely because most of them were living in remote areas and had more difficulty accessing public funds and services such as health, education and irrigation.

While there were many community members⁷ who were happy to receive aid and cash support from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and national and local non-government organisations (NGOs), broader civil society,⁸ journalists⁹ and local government authorities¹⁰ felt that I/NGOs were creating long-term dependency, inflating market prices and adopting insensitive practices that would lead to tensions socially and economically (see ‘Inflation of market prices and local consumerism’ section for more information).

Emerging political fault lines

As a result of continued politicisation of governance and services, people have less trust in political parties.¹¹ But in some cases they expressed a

renewed hope that the constitution would bring about new administrative structures in the form of *gaupalika*¹² and an increased number of municipalities (*nagarpalika*).¹³ However, some feel wary about how the new constitution will be implemented in the coming months and how the new administrative structures will function – particularly on issues of inclusivity and decentralisation. While these discussions seem to have taken a backseat in all three districts following the earthquake, there was some dissatisfaction around the lack of consultations with local people during the planning stages of these new local systems. For example, in Jalbire VDC of Sindhupalchok district, locals were angry about the decision to move the local trade hub to nearby Balefi VDC.¹⁴

“They [the government] send District Development Committee workers to find out...where people want the [gaupalika] centre to be – after that we from the VDC told them what we wanted. When they went back, the political leaders and the government tried to influence [the outcome of the consultations] in order to get the most votes and suppress people. That is why we were not satisfied and went to the district to protest. When they said that no matter what, they will make Jalbire the trade hub centre, and then suddenly it’s not being done. This is the main political debate.”¹⁵

Many respondents blamed national level politicians for this decision and have refused to take part in this or any other local public discussions as a result. Participants were vehement about their decision to not allow national politics to dictate their local decision-making and noted that, *“Regarding gaupalika, our main goal is that everyone will be independent and will not approach any party [until Jalbire is made the centre]. In VDC meetings and all party meetings, we have stopped participating. We have also sent letters to all [political] parties. We have decided that in Jalbire VDC, we will not allow [political] parties to carry out any programmes.*

⁴ Two separate FGDs with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 January 2016 and 2 December 2016; two separate FGDs with women and young men community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016 and 15 December 2016; FGD with young male community members, Sindhupalchok, 2 December 2016

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ KII with businessman, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; two separate KIIs with women civil society members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016 and 1 December 2016; KII with male journalist, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; two separate KIIs with male civil society members, Dhading, 15 December 2016

⁹ KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; two separate KIIs with journalists, Dhading, 15 December 2016 and 17 December 2016; KII with female journalist, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

¹⁰ KII with government authority, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; KII with government authority, Dhading, 14 December 2016; KII with government authority, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

¹¹ Two separate FGDs with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 January 2016 and 2 December 2016; two separate FGDs with women and young male community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016 and 15 December 2016; FGD with young men

community members, Sindhupalchok, 2 December 2016; KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

¹² *Gaupalika* are new federally-mandated structures to be introduced at the local level, replacing the previous administrative structures of Village Development Committees. These new structures came into existence after the 2015 constitution came into effect.

¹³ Two separate FGDs with older and younger male community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016; two separate FGDs with older men and women community members, Sindhupalchok, 2 December 2016 and 30 November 2016; KII with male civil society member, Dhading, 17 December 2016; two separate KIIs with women journalists, Dhading, 17 December 2016; KII with local businessman, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; two separate KIIs with men and women from civil society, Sindhupalchok, 2 December 2016; two separate KIIs with male and female journalists, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; KII with female civil society member, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; KII with local businessman, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

¹⁴ Two separate FGDs with young and old male community members, Sindhupalchok, 2 December 2016; KII with local male government authority, Sindhupalchok, 2 December 2016

¹⁵ FGD with male community members, Sindhupalchok, 2 December 2016

*Wherever they set up the gaupalika, they can go and do their programmes there.*¹⁶

Similar cases of disenchantment with national-level politics was evident in Dhading and Gorkha because of political interference in local governance.¹⁷ If these sentiments were to be exploited by a third party, tensions could potentially escalate to conflict, particularly since many people at the community level felt betrayed by politicians and disappointed in the role they played during and after the earthquake.¹⁸ It is also worth noting that a few respondents identified the Naya Shakti Party¹⁹ as an additional political party, and while they did not seem overtly hopeful of this party bringing positive change, there were some allusions to the acceptance of new political parties following the adoption of the new constitution in 2015.²⁰

*“People in the community are very angry. They say that they will fight those who will come and ask for [electoral] votes. People have realised that political parties cannot help them in times of need.”*²¹

Even with elections just around the corner, there is not much political activity at the moment in the three districts, especially at the VDC level. However, political discussions and debates at the district headquarters have already begun, and it seems that this will only increase in the coming months. A key issue to watch out for during election campaigning will be the quarrels among political actors over which party provided more post-earthquake reconstruction support to locals, as interviewees mentioned that this would be one of the main factors as to who would win the local elections.²² However, disputes over resources will also have political implications, particularly in Dhading and Gorkha, where hydropower construction and compensation as part of land settlements are already causing disputes among communities and between local political actors.

¹⁶ FGD with male community members, Sindhupalchok

¹⁷ Three separate FGDs with men and women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; four separate FGDs with men and women community members, Dhading; two separate KIIs with female civil society members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; KII with male journalist, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; and KII with male journalist, Dhading, 15 December 2016

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Naya Shakti Party was established by Dr Baburam Bhattarai, who was one of the main leaders of the UCPN(M) and a former Prime Minister of Nepal. He left the UCPN(M) and established his own political party, but has a difficult road ahead in terms of garnering sufficient votes to win any elections due to the small size of the party.

²⁰ KII with male journalist, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; KII with male civil society member, Dhading, 15 December 2016

²¹ FGD with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

²² Two separate FGDs with male community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016 and 2 December 2016; FGD with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; two separate FGDs with male community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016 and 17 December 2016; two separate KIIs with male political actors, Gorkha, 18 December 2016 and 19 December 2016

Women, inclusivity and politics

Women’s participation in local politics continues to be pushed aside for two reasons. First, some respondents – mostly men – felt that women and girls receive too much attention from I/ NGOs and as a result are influenced by these ‘rights-based trainings’ organised by ‘outsiders’.²³ Second, women are still considered to have a lesser understanding of politics and economics compared to men²⁴. In villages like Baramche and Kunchok in Sindhupalchok, women themselves felt that they had less understanding of politics than men,²⁵ which indicates that remote villages are still influenced by patriarchal values that reinforce repressive gender norms that discourage women from taking decisions. These norms are only strengthened when women themselves believe in them, and pass them on to younger generations. For instance, a few older women from Sindhupalchok said: *“What do we women know about politics? Ask the men, they know. We stick to taking care of house.”*²⁶ Furthermore, while the constitution pushes for increased representation of women and people belonging to marginalised groups – such as the Dalits – in local and national-level state bodies, there are very few women and people from marginalised groups who are able to effectively voice their opinions without aligning themselves to an existing major political party.²⁷

However, changes can be seen at the district level, where more women and marginalised groups now have representation. But at the VDC level, they continue to face backlash if they express strong opinions about their rights – with many even being accused or shamed for attempting to destroy traditional culture and values.²⁸ With the new provision in the constitution that ensures inclusive representation at the local level, there is hope for positive change in the coming years and a chance for more women and marginalised groups to become part of wider political and local governance processes.

²³ FGD with men and women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; FGD with older men community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; FGD with older men community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016; FGD with older men community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016; KII with local businessman, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

²⁴ Two separate FGDs with older women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016 and 2 December 2016; FGD with young men community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016; FGD with young women community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016; FGD with older men community members, Dhading, 16 December 2016; KII with male political actor, Dhading, 18 December 2016; KII with female political actor, Gorkha, 18 December 2016

²⁵ Two separate FGDs with older and younger women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016 and 1 December 2016

²⁶ FGD with older women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ FGD with younger women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; FGD with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

Identity-based concerns in the aftermath of the earthquake

Identity-based tensions as a source of conflict have remained relatively dormant after the earthquake in all three districts. However, one of the two issues that was frequently discussed, although implicitly, was the increase of religious proselytisation, particularly during post-earthquake aid and relief distribution.²⁹ Interviewees gave several examples of Christian missionaries reaching northern VDCs, close to the Tibet border in Dhading³⁰ and Gorkha³¹ – with an increase in the average number of churches per VDC and an accompanying growth of converts to Christianity. The reason for this increase is unknown, and although it is not uncommon to see missionaries travelling to contexts struck by disaster or violent conflict, understanding this phenomenon in Nepal requires more focused research.

Caste-based discrimination was the second-most discussed issue by communities. Both women and men raised examples of how caste hierarchy played out when it came to sharing resources or helping each other in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake.³² A young Dalit woman from Dhading mentioned that, *"We are forced to follow 'untouchability' practices from my mother-in-law. She does not eat food cooked by me. She sprinkles food I bring her with gold water before touching it"*.³³

However, many people felt that since the earthquake there had been more solidarity among different caste and ethnic groups, as well as more resource sharing based on proximity rather than social status. For them, caste and ethnicity were secondary factors in determining distribution of aid by both the government and civil society groups. For example, in Dhading community members felt that while the 'untouchability' issue had always existed in their village, after the earthquake people felt obliged to make compromises in order to help each other. This contributed to broader social harmony.³⁴

²⁹ This came up in all FGDs apart from the one held with older women community members in Sindhupalchok on 30 November 2016; KII with female journalist, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

³⁰ KII with female journalist, Dhading, 17 December 2016; two separate KIIs with female and male civil society members, Dhading, 15 December 2016; FGD with male community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016

³¹ Two separate KIIs with male and female journalists, Gorkha, 18 December 2016 and 19 December 2016

³² Two separate KIIs with male and female journalists, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; FGD with women community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016; FGD with male community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016; KII with female journalist, Dhading, 17 December 2016; two separate FGDs with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

³³ FGD with young women community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016. Untouchability is a harmful traditional Hindu practice wherein, based on one's caste group ascribed through profession and by birth, one would be considered impure and not fit to be touched by the 'upper caste groups'. If someone from this groups is touched directly or indirectly, water touched by gold is sprinkled for purification.

³⁴ FGD with women community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016

The main factor determining distribution of aid was access to political actors and elites who controlled its distribution.³⁵ But there were some cases where ethnic identities governed how resources were used, leading to local-level disputes. For example, in Sindhupalchok after the earthquake, a local dispute arose over access to a shared river between an upstream village, mostly inhabited by the Tamang community, and a downstream village mostly inhabited by Chhetris, Bahuns and Newars. The water levels had begun to decline after the earthquake – as a result, the Tamang community was accused of preventing the river water from reaching the downstream villages. This led to physical altercations between the men of these villages. However, reportedly the respondents mentioned that the actual cause of the dispute was linked to identity rifts, causing resentment towards the Chhetri and Brahmin villages over the arbitrary manner in which they destroyed alcohol production and banned the Tamang village from producing it. They had also shamed them for being a 'Matwali'³⁶ community.³⁷

Impact of the earthquake on crime and security

Prior to the earthquake, insecurity within these districts, particularly in Sindhupalchok and Dhading, revolved around organised crime – for example, illegal crushers³⁸ and mining, illegal extraction of sand and stones, trafficking of women and girls for sex, and illegal smuggling of contraband such as poached animal products and fake currency. However, according to community members, local crime fell in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake even though residents felt less secure because of the loss of houses and shelter.³⁹ Their fear and insecurity was linked mainly to basic necessities such as shelter, food, water and loss of livelihoods. This then moved on to fear of robbery, sexual and gender-based violence, and alcoholism.⁴⁰ These fears were compounded by cases of looting of relief vehicles that

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Matwali is a caste group within the Hindu social system. The term Matwali translates to 'liquor drinkers' and, according to the historic Muluki Ain code adopted by the Rana rulers, Tamangs fell under the enslavable liquor-drinkers, reducing their social status within the socio-economic stratification system. As a result, they were considered impure and were often not allowed entry into kitchens of the so-called 'higher castes'.

³⁷ FGD with male community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

³⁸ For more information on illegal crushers, please read: <http://nepalitimes.com/page/crushing-tale-of-Chure> and <http://admin.myrepublica.com/society/story/37474/crushers-continue-illegal-operations-in-chure-region.html>

³⁹ FGD with older women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; two separate FGDs with male community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016 and 2 December 2016; two separate FGDs with men and women community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016 and 15 December 2016

⁴⁰ FGD with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; two separate FGDs with younger and older women community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016 and 16 December 2016; KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; KII with businessman, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

were on their way to remote VDCs – mainly by young men.⁴¹

Organised crime groups in particular were inactive during the earthquake and the following few months, but with the reduced capacity of local security providers and a shift in policing priorities crime has returned to previous levels – with increased people trafficking in Sindhupalchok and illegal mining in Dhading. Interestingly, civil society⁴² and community members⁴³ mentioned that in all three districts alcoholism spiked among men, both young and old. One private sector respondent from Sindhupalchok said, *“We can tell which day cash assistance is distributed, because there will be a long queue at the local bank in the morning and then the queue shifts to alcohol shops in the evening”*.⁴⁴

Alcoholism has increased so much that some men sell their rice sacks – which they receive as relief assistance – to local dealers in exchange for alcohol money.⁴⁵ There has also been a steep increase in illegal alcohol production. Respondents cited examples of peoples selling rice sacks to local alcohol vendors for a much lower rate than would be normal. Another important point to note is the shift in policing priorities, both due to the earthquake and damaged or destroyed police infrastructure. Additionally, the police and the government’s focus on upcoming elections has meant that traffickers have found it easier to get their paperwork signed without too much scrutiny from distracted officials, using ‘labour migration’ as a cover for their activities.⁴⁶ However, despite these reports from community members, we were not able to verify this increase using police records⁴⁷ in the three districts. This could either mean that women are leaving Nepal legally, only to be trapped when they cross borders – which would still constitute

‘trafficking in persons’⁴⁸ despite it not being reported to police – or that the increase is only a perception caused by a handful of cases after the earthquake, despite numbers having remained relatively constant for over four decades.

Women and public security

Women and girls were found to be the most vulnerable in all three districts, with complaints of sexual harassment, domestic violence, fear of sexual violence and reported incidents of sexual violence such as rape, attempted rape and molestation. A group of women from local Sindhupalchok community noted that, *“People hesitate to talk about domestic violence. It is happening but people do not talk about it.”*⁴⁹

In Sindhupalchok, young women and girls reported an increase in sexual harassment at night. They felt less secure as the temporary shelters, set up after the 25 April earthquake, were not separated by gender and were not child-friendly, and the fear of violence only worsened when men drank.⁵⁰ Young women from Sindhupalchok and Dhading complained of men becoming more aggressive and harassing them in secluded areas. They attributed this to a rise in alcohol consumption following the earthquake.

*“One woman who was living in an open hut [temporary shelter] was raped by her own neighbours. Another woman was scared to live alone in her house and ended up being raped when she left to stay with her friend. A third case was when, after the earthquake, a husband left the district to work and married another woman, while his previous wife was verbally and physically assaulted at home by her in-laws.”*⁵¹

Last year, the media and a few NGOs reported that trafficking of women and girls had increased dramatically in the earthquake-affected districts.⁵²

While local security providers⁵³ and some community members⁵⁴ denied these reports, official police data⁵⁵

⁴¹ Two separate FGDs with young men and women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016 and 30 November 2016; FGD with older men community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

⁴² Two separate KIIs with male and female journalists, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016 and 1 December 2016; KII with female journalist, Dhading, 17 December 2016; two separate KIIs with female civil society members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016 and 2 December 2016; two separate KIIs with female and male civil society members, Dhading, 15 December 2016; and KII with female civil society member, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

⁴³ Two separate FGDs with male community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016 and 2 December 2016; two separate FGDs with male community members, Dhading, 15 December 2017 and 16 December 2017

⁴⁴ KII with businessman, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

⁴⁵ Three separate FGDs with male community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016, 1 December 2016 and 2 December 2016; KII with local businessman, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016; KII with male civil society member, Gorkha, 18 December 2016; KII with male security personnel, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; and two separate FGDs with older men and women community members, Dhading, 14 December 2016 and 15 December 2016

⁴⁶ For more information on people trafficking and routes, please read: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf>

⁴⁷ KII with male security personnel, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; KII with male security personnel, Dhading, 15 December 2016 and KII with male security personnel, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

⁴⁸ According to the UN, ‘trafficking in persons’ refers to the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”. <http://www.unqift.org/knowledgehub/en/about/human-trafficking.html>

⁴⁹ FGD with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

⁵⁰ FGDs Sindhupalchok and Dhading

⁵¹ FGD with young women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

⁵² Jones S (2015), ‘Nepal earthquakes leave bitter legacy as children become quarry for traffickers’, The Guardian, October 25 (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/oct/25/nepal-earthquake-six-month-anniversary-children-orphans-people-traffickers>)

⁵³ KII with male security personnel, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

⁵⁴ FGD with older women community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

⁵⁵ KII with male security personnel Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

suggests an increase in human trafficking in 2016 compared to previous years. However, the police have not attributed this increase solely to the earthquake, citing a growth of trafficking in other parts of the world. There have been a few reported cases, but nothing close to the alarming rate that had earlier been reported. Additionally, in Sindhupalchok, civil society⁵⁶ and community members⁵⁷ displayed a sense of resignation while discussing people trafficking, particularly since this has been on-going for decades and continues despite NGO and government interventions. This indicates that there is an urgent need to revise existing strategies to prevent trafficking.

However, this is not to deny that some of the interventions have helped rescue women and girls who were on their way to being trafficked or who had already been trafficked – but prevention efforts overall have been ineffective. In Gorkha, there were few cases of sexual harassment reported last year, but local civil society⁵⁸ and journalists⁵⁹ argue that many cases go unreported, as women and girls are uncomfortable due to fear of backlash and social pressures to hide their concerns.

A rift over resources

Dhading, Gorkha and Sindhupalchowk were among the districts worst hit by the earthquake. Government sources reveal that nearly 5,000 people died in the three districts and over 200,000 homes were destroyed.⁶⁰ The destruction also crippled the livelihoods of many survivors, leading to a sustained need for relief aid and reconstruction.

Almost two years after the earthquake, many victims are still waiting for compensation to rebuild their homes. And while there has been a spike in the number of false claims for compensation, those without land or official ownership documentation have struggled to make their cases. Survivors who participated in the FGDs also complained about corrupt officials at local government bodies, as well as politicians hoarding relief and reconstruction money for themselves.⁶¹ The absence of local representatives and the mobilisation of VDC Secretaries⁶² to cover large swathes of the hill areas,

often inaccessible by road, have also created blockages.

A local member of the business chamber also expressed worries about growing local inflation, especially housing costs, and blamed NGO activities for distorting the local market.⁶³ Many villages in all three districts reported that underground water sources had dried up after the earthquake, leading to disputes over a limited water supply.⁶⁴ At least four or five villages in the Dhuwakot and Bhumisthan VDCs of Dhading district have reported frequent disputes over water.⁶⁵

Weak governance and a lack of focus from regulatory bodies in the districts hit by the earthquake has also led to a rise in illegal resource extraction by sand mining and stone crushing industries. There are frequent disputes between the owners of these illegal mining companies and local communities who complain about the degradation of hill-slopes that lead to landslides.⁶⁶ The competition among mining companies has also led to frequent violence between youth who are mobilised by all sides. Participants mentioned that illegal businesses were being sheltered by local officials and powerful politicians, forming a corrupt partnership.⁶⁷

The dispute between the Budhigandaki Hydroelectric project management and affected families in Dhading and Gorkha has also led to localised conflict, which could escalate if unaddressed. The reservoir project will affect at least 27 VDCs in Dhading and 37 VDCs in Gorkha, all of which were affected by the earthquake.⁶⁸ In the absence of a systematic division of the land, there is no way for the government to ascertain the real value of the land it acquires from local people. Disputes over compensation have already created tensions in Gorkha, leading to a spill-over effect in Dhading, albeit at a much smaller scale, as the project moves ahead.

Inflation of market prices and local consumerism

Most respondents at both community and district levels were vocal about market prices rising following the earthquake. Community members were angry about inflation, saying that they had no control over their own expenses. There were a few different contributing factors respondents outlined. First, cash injected into the communities through cash assistance programmes meant that people actually had liquid cash to spend on immediate needs such as

⁵⁶ Two separate KIIs with female civil society members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; two separate KIIs with female and male journalists, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

⁵⁷ Two separate FGDs with older women and young men community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016 and 2 December 2016

⁵⁸ Two separate KIIs with male and female civil society members, Gorkha, 19 December 2016 and 18 December 2016

⁵⁹ KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016

⁶⁰ Awale S (2016), Human trafficking on the rise, The Himalayan Times, September 25 <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/human-trafficking-rise/>

⁶¹ FGDs with women and men community members, Dhading, Sindhupalchowk and Gorkha with the exception of one FGD with older women in Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

⁶² VDC Secretaries are the authorities appointed by the government to administer local development policies and plans at the VDC level reporting to District Development Committees

⁶³ KII with local businessman, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Two separate FGDs with male community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016; two separate KIIs with local women community members, Dhading, 15 December 2016

⁶⁶ KII with male journalist, Dhading, 15 December 2016; KII with businessman, Dhading, 15 December 2016

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Budhigandaki Hydroelectric Project Development Committee, Government of Nepal. <http://www.bghep.gov.np/about-the-project.php>

food and shelter. Second, the arrival of a large number of external volunteers and NGOs willing to pay large sums of money in exchange for services led to local consumers losing out – one example was of the exorbitant amounts paid for rent by an INGO (at more than 300 times the regular rate).⁶⁹

“Before [name of INGO withheld for confidentiality] gave us seeds and 2,000 rupees to buy tools for farming as part of the cash support scheme. Their vendor asked for 750 for an axe. If we could have purchased the axe made locally here then it would have only cost us 250-300 for an axe, but we were forced to buy from their vendor. When we protested, they added 8,000 more to our [2,000 rupees] cash grant but still made us buy [at inflated prices] from the same vendors.”⁷⁰

Third, the private sector monopolised market prices after the earthquake, especially of consumable goods such as food and fuel. This was exacerbated by the blockade along the India-Nepal border during the last few months of 2015 up until the first quarter of 2016. All of these factors have led to difficulties for local people in accessing markets for commodities such as rice, vegetables and poultry – and also means that they have fewer opportunities to save money should another disaster strike.

Lastly, an interesting dynamic linked with I/ NGOs support was the gap between social mobilisers on the ground and project designers. Local women and men from Sindhupalchok said:

“This organisation [name withheld for confidentiality] recruited a Dalit social mobiliser from another VDC to distribute money here, who was responsible for creating a list of earthquake-affected villagers that should receive cash support. Our local [mostly male] leaders here just gave him a few harsh words and threatened to beat him up if he did not include them and their families on that list, so he had to.”⁷¹

Similar cases were found in a few other locations within Sindhupalchok and Dhading, demonstrating the difficulties in operating in a disaster-affected context, but also the need to better prepare to mitigate such risks and ensure that the beneficiaries are legitimate. This means gaining an understanding of the context beforehand and ensuring that the local power and gender dynamics are considered during programme design.

Conclusion

Two years after the earthquake, the situation in Dhading, Gorkha and Sindhupalchok remains bleak. The relief and reconstruction process has not

progressed as expected, with many families left to fend for themselves. To improve delivery of services, there is an urgent need for closer coordination and monitoring among government and non-government bodies involved in the process.

Weak governance, coupled with an absence of local representatives, have led to festering corruption and nepotism. This has limited the capacity of local governments to deliver quality public services and take action against illegal businesses – including unauthorised stone crushing industries – as well as prevent crime and gender-based violence. The role of local political actors, especially in the aftermath of the earthquake, was also lacking, with locals blaming leaders affiliated with major political parties for manipulating relief distribution and the reconstruction process in order to serve their own needs.

The delay in reconstruction of damaged homes, complacency by local authorities in delivering quality services to the people and a lack of prevention of environmental degradation, as well as failure by security bodies to check localised incidences of crime and violence (including GBV) could lead to an escalation of tensions and lead to conflict in the districts.

Recommendations

Civil society actors – mainly international or national NGOs and voluntary start-ups that are working in these districts – should:

- improve coordination in order to avoid duplication. Respondents reported that earthquake-affected survivors often received compensation from more than one entity. Additionally, there is an urgent need to share information about where various service providers are working and to consolidate all of this information in one platform. While there are many such initiatives, it is difficult to find ones that provide regular updates.
- strengthen and improve communication with government stakeholders – mainly local agencies at the VDC and district levels, but also with the National Reconstruction Authority. The research clearly showed that there is a communication gap between I/ NGOs and government authorities, with both pointing fingers at the other. Improved communication between them can help clear up this confusion and lead to better coordination. They should also develop and deliver long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction support, rather than investing in short-term packages. While this is something that the I/ NGOs have been talking about already, respondents still felt that there

⁶⁹ KII with female journalist, Gorkha, 19 December 2016; KII with male journalist, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016; FGD with young men and women community members, Sindhupalchok, 1 December 2016 and 30 November 2016

⁷⁰ FGD with young men community members, Sindhupalchok, 30 November 2016

⁷¹ Ibid

was an urgent need for long-term projects as opposed to short-term assistance.

- adopt a conflict-sensitive lens at all levels. In particular, this should involve determining market prices and ensuring that fluctuations are sensitive to local needs.

Government actors at the local and national levels should:

- adopt accountability and transparency measures to ensure that there are checks and balances in place for all involved agencies and organisations providing post-earthquake reconstruction and rehabilitation support – particularly in terms of monitoring how aid is being spent, and providing this information to local and affected communities in a transparent way.
- lead on the development and management of a database that consolidates all information regarding reconstruction, while coordinating with donors and I/ NGOs that provide support or have previously provided support.
- reach out to local communities and map out their existing needs and concerns in a gender-sensitive manner. The government has access to all the relevant information needed to do this, and because it is leading on the federalisation process of local and regional structures, it should also take the lead on mapping what support needs to be provided and by whom.

Political actors at the local and national levels should:

- engage with communities in a more conflict-sensitive manner, making sure not to stoke political tensions. With the upcoming local elections, it is imperative that political actors do not provoke hostility by constantly accusing each other of not providing enough post-earthquake relief. Although there should be open discussions, such negative campaigning would invariably lead to quarrels about the general lack of support from politicians during the earthquake rescue and relief operations and could increase negative perceptions and lead to conflict or political violence.
- prevent politicisation within the aid sector, particularly around aid for post-earthquake reconstruction. A key finding of this report was around how aid and relief were acquired and distributed by political parties or groups

that were close to them. This has led to bitter resentment among community members that have differing political beliefs, and is not something that should be stoked as it can easily escalate tensions in the coming months, particularly with the upcoming local elections. However, political parties need to engage with the government and civil society to be more accountable and transparent in their reconstruction efforts, especially in supporting affected communities to help minimise grievances and resentment.

Donors and the international community should:

- advocate strongly for improved coordination between and among government stakeholders, civil society, and the Nepali private sector involved in reconstruction and rehabilitation.
- encourage the government and civil society to adopt a conflict- and gender-sensitive lens in the short-term, in order to avoid triggering potential conflicts or stoking tensions, particularly in light of the upcoming local elections. In the long-term, it is important that donors continue to develop programming that addresses existing conflict drivers, particularly in relation to political and identity-based concerns, which have been identified in this report. They should also advocate for increased gender and social inclusion within local federalisation processes.

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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

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Saferworld – 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT, UK
Registered Charity no 1043843
Company limited by guarantee no 3015948
Tel: +44 (0)20 7324 4646 | Fax: +44 (0)20 7324 4647
Email: general@saferworld.org.uk
Web: www.saferworld.org.uk