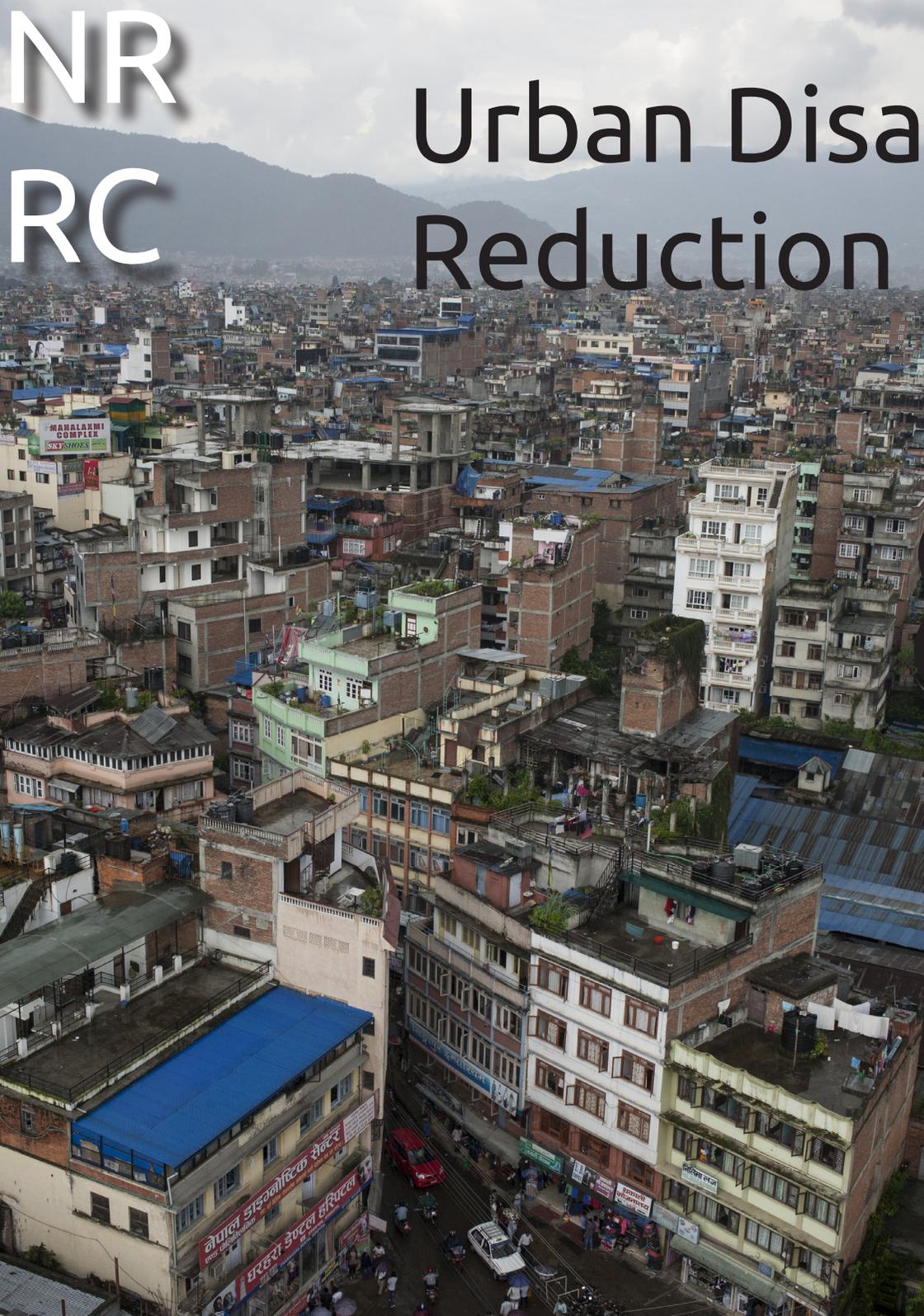


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# Urban Disaster Risk Reduction in Nepal

8 Questions  
For

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Programme  
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# 1 What is urban risk management? Why is it important for Nepal?

In my understanding, urban risk management is a multi-sectoral effort for reducing risks associated in cities and towns. This means assessing exposure to hazards and reducing vulnerability of urban populations due to poor governance, environmental degradation and overstretching of resources. The overall aim of urban risk management is to strengthen resilience of urban communities.

This is an important issue for Nepal because many urban areas are at high risk of various disasters; Nepal is the 11th most vulnerable country to earthquakes and 30th most vulnerable to water induced disasters. Nepal is the fastest urbanising country in the world. Much of this urbanisation is unplanned resulting in increased vulnerability in urban areas.

The Kathmandu Valley, which is the economic and political hub for Nepal, is the most vulnerable city in the world to earthquakes. From my experience, the risk in these urban areas is increasing due to high population density, unplanned development practices, unsafe construction, lack of urban planning, poverty, and high inequality in terms of access to public services. In addition, the lack of disaster preparedness initiatives and limited awareness amongst public officials and community members has created a high risk urban environment. Reducing this risk is a critical component of strengthening overall disaster preparedness and resilience in Nepal.

We have seen some important steps in strengthening disaster risk reduction, such as establishing the emergency operating centre network or identification of open spaces for emergency response in Kathmandu Valley. However, there are still not enough agencies implementing disaster risk reduction projects in urban settings. There has also been less attention paid towards protecting urban populations or the political-economic value of Kathmandu Valley from all stakeholders.

It is urgent that government, donor agencies, humanitarian and development actors and civil society take the appropriate actions to protect its citizens, economy, environment and culture from the risk of disaster. This is the only way we can ensure sustainable development.

# 2 What makes urban CBDRR different from CBDRR in rural areas? What dynamics/challenges are special to the urban context?

There are several important differences between rural and urban contexts. These differences include population concentrations, infrastructure, complexity of poverty, social inequality, political and economic value, the types of hazard faced and potential impact of those hazards, community integration and social cohesion and the capacity of communities to cope with disasters.

In rural settings, the population is small and scattered; infrastructure is built in an organic way and generally safer than urban areas. Social inequality in terms of economic distribution is huge in rural areas but not as significant in its contribution to the overall economy. Urban areas are centres of economic and political power where major decisions that affect the country are made. However, social integration and harmony are far more fractured in urban areas leading to weak support systems.

In terms of capacity to cope with disasters, rural populations generally have less capacity to cope with disasters; but disasters are likely to have a larger impact on urban areas due to high populations and the complex nature of urban settings.

With the differences in mind, my experience has shown that implementing the community based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) model is much more challenging in urban settings. There are several key challenges we face when addressing vulnerability in urban areas. These challenges include:

- A lack of reliable secondary information to assess risk and capacity due to a lack of prioritisation and awareness of urban risk by stakeholders

- It is very difficult to obtain community participation as people in urban areas have different daily routines and economic backgrounds
- There is overall low stakeholder engagement in urban DRR due to a lack of awareness on the issue of risk and vulnerability
- Coordinating amongst government such as municipal authorities or ministries not traditionally involved with disaster risk reduction and agencies working in this field has been challenging as well as obtaining commitment from civil society
- The overall complexity of urban areas and the coverage required to make a substantial impact on reducing vulnerability
- Ensuring disaster risk reduction is mainstreamed in urban development plans and policies are crucial for sustainability but remain a challenge. Related to this is the proper enforcement of key policies that reduce risk such as risk sensitive land use planning and national building codes

### 3 What is being done now to overcome these challenges?

To overcome the challenges I mentioned, Oxfam has made a tremendous effort in collecting and verifying information at different levels, consulted with government and non-government agencies to promote greater stakeholder engagement, and mobilised local volunteers, particularly youth, to increase community participation in the project. It has been very difficult to garner community participation due to people's working schedules. However, our partners have been scheduling activities to suit the availability of urban communities, such as on Saturday, Sunday or public holidays.

To address the issue of low awareness amongst stakeholders, Oxfam has been focussing resources on strengthening capacity of stakeholders through training, interactions and policy analysis followed by consultation meetings and media mobilisation. We are also supporting efforts to strengthen disaster risk reduction



at different levels, which includes working with schools and government line agencies. For example, Oxfam has reached a joint MoU with municipalities, local implementing partners, Tribhuvan University and NARC to promote ownership and cooperation in implementing projects related to the open spaces for emergency response in Kathmandu Valley that have been approved by the Government.

In addition, we are actively participating with the relevant clusters to ensure we not only share and disseminate information but also avoid duplicating efforts.

We are also working closely with the District Disaster Relief Committee to develop District and Local Disaster Risk Management Plans and to build the capacity of municipalities to implement these plans as part of their development agenda to ensure these plans are mainstreamed into all processes.

These combined efforts highlight not only the scale of the challenge but also the diverse approach Oxfam is pursuing to reduce vulnerability in urban areas.

## 4 What do you think are the most critical areas that need to be addressed to reduce urban vulnerability?

I think the following are critical areas that need to be addressed:

- We need to raise disaster risk awareness among the people to ensure they have the information to act and reduce their risk
- Strengthen capacity of communities, organisations and government to cope with the impact of a disaster
- Reduce physical hazards in settlements. This includes a need to strengthen water resource management, drainage systems and solid waste management which currently pose serious WASH issues
- Urban areas must have long term urban plans in place that take into consideration disaster, social, cultural and environmental risk. Related to this, we need to enforce building codes to ensure construction of buildings does not increase vulnerability to disaster
- Enhance emergency response capacity of households and communities to respond to large scale disasters
- Now that safe open spaces for emergency response have been secured, we need to strengthen planning and emergency facilities for these spaces
- We need to strengthen safety measures for informal settlements and promote safe construction of non-engineered buildings
- We must endorse a Disaster Management Act which would codify the Government's role in risk mitigation, preparedness and response. This would also ensure that disaster risk reduction would be mainstreamed into development plans and policies to promote sustainable development

## 5 How can urban DRR programmes promote greater participation from vulnerable groups?

Participation and empowerment of vulnerable groups in disaster risk reduction is very important for achieving resilience. Oxfam has ensured this at each and every stage of the project cycle. We have ensured that community participation and baseline studies are proportionate and reflect the interests and needs of these groups; this includes at least 50% female participation in capacity building activities.

Women are at particularly higher risk when a disaster occurs; this includes increased likelihood of sexual intimidation and, in some cases, rape. By including women in emergency response task forces, we empower them to lead response efforts and reduce their risk to these issues.

We have established women empowerment centres to reach women and vulnerable groups to develop leadership skills. In these centres, women discuss sensitive issues that they are exposed to such as poverty, domestic violence, sexual intimidation and violations to their rights as citizens. It has been in Oxfam's experience that the women participating in these centres emerge as powerful voices in their communities, bringing gender related issues to the forefront of community agendas. Currently, Oxfam has successfully employed women empowerment centres in its disaster risk reduction program in 5 districts in Nepal. This is a relevant achievement because it boosts the confidence of women to lead and engage in their community activities, such as Disaster Management Committees. We need to replicate these initiatives to the urban setting to ensure vulnerable groups can engage and lead on urban disaster risk reduction.

Active representation of women is an effective medium for transferring knowledge and skills to strengthen disaster risk reduction. Oxfam has committed to collaborate with organisations that have expertise on these vulnerable groups to ensure we are addressing their needs and strengthening their capacity to reduce risk.



## 7 Aside from CBDRR, what other activities is Oxfam doing to address urban vulnerability in Nepal?

Oxfam has been working in Nepal since 1982 on disaster risk reduction, food security and advocacy. Currently, we are working in three major areas; humanitarian and disaster risk reduction, governance and women empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods. Within each of these pillars, there are efforts to reduce urban vulnerability. This includes 'My Right My Voice' campaign, climate change adaptation measures, and hospital safety and mass casualty management for emergency preparedness programme which is supported by ECHO under Flagship 1 of the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium. Each of these initiatives addresses urban vulnerability through mitigation, preparedness, awareness raising and advocacy.

## 6 How is Oxfam ensuring that urban DRR fits within the Flagship 4 minimum characteristics framework?

The Flagship 4 minimum characteristics framework is the common framework that has been agreed by all member agencies. Oxfam is a committed partner of Flagship 4 and our urban DRR approach is aligned with the nine minimum characteristics. This includes:

- Urban risk assessments
- Establishment of ward level disaster management committee
- Task groups with gender inclusion
- Establishment of an emergency fund for preparedness and response
- Light search and rescue and first aid equipment with a detailed mobilisation guideline
- Capacity building trainings to stakeholders and communities
- Development of disaster risk management plan
- WASH and disaster risk reduction campaigns through mobilisation of community groups and trained volunteers

As urban DRR is a new concept in Nepal and the Flagship 4 minimum characteristics were initially focused on the rural context; our work in the urban setting is strengthening our collective understanding of how these characteristics can be implemented in this environment.

# 8

With all the collective work happening in urban DRR in Nepal, what more needs to be done to reduce urban vulnerability?

I think the following need to be done to reduce urban vulnerability:

- Endorsement of the Disaster Management Act is key to prioritise and create the institutional framework for disaster risk reduction in Nepal
- We need to develop a multi-sectoral urban risk management strategy and action plan to ensure all sectors, such as health and education, are actively involved in reducing urban vulnerability
- Enforcement and compliance of risk sensitive land use planning and building codes will ensure we do not create new risk in these urban centres.
- We need to strengthen our national and local emergency response capacity. This includes capacity building of government, local organisations and community members and ensuring open spaces are prepared for response with proper facilities such as WASH and earthquake resilient infrastructure.

“It is urgent that government, donor agencies, humanitarian and development actors and civil society take the appropriate actions to protect its citizens, economy, environment and culture from the risk of disaster.”

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