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- AJITA ATREYA

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Last year’s earthquake dealt a devastating blow to Nepal, shaking every Nepali living in and outside of the country. It took more than 9,000 lives and injured more than 22,000 people; over half a million houses were fully or partially damaged, rendering three million people homeless. It did not spare monuments of historical, cultural and archaeological significance either.

Since then, many reconstruction efforts have been underway, although sluggishly. A key question that should considered by the Nepali authorities is whether the reconstruction efforts are in the right direction.

**Stronger people, stronger houses**

It is frequently said that “earthquakes do not kill people; buildings do,” which is not entirely false for obvious reasons. The focus of the reconstruction efforts should therefore be on building safe and secure houses. After the 1988 earthquake, Nepal drafted its first ever National Building Code (NBC) in 1994, which was approved in 2003 and legally enforced in 2005. Even then, only a handful of municipalities have adopted the building codes, and enforcement has been lax in those that have. But interestingly, some of the Village Development Committees (VDCs) around the Kathmandu Valley that are not legally bound to adhere to the NBC have voluntarily adopted the building codes.

After the quakes, the government’s negligence while enforcing the building codes generated much public outcry. But if we analyse the scenario critically, it is apparent that the people themselves opted out of the regulations and placed themselves in harm’s way. This suggests that we as individuals are ignorant of the hazards and consequences of earthquakes. It is time that we shifted our focus from the government—whose credibility is always up for debate—to improving our human capital.

Human capital refers to the skills, knowledge and experience of individuals and is one of the most important aspects of reconstruction efforts. Understanding the hazards and impacts of a calamity is critical to managing disaster risk. Knowledge and experiences lead to awareness, which in turn helps individuals to make informed decisions about where and how to construct their houses. When individuals are aware of the risks of a disaster, they are more likely to be prepared. To this end, effective communication plays a pivotal role.

**Communicating the risks**

One of the key points to consider for effective risk communication and to improve human capital is to make people understand the perception of the risks. Perception is everything when it comes to disaster management. Risk perception is the subjective judgement that individuals make about the severity of the risk. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding an individual’s risk perception, which examines their awareness, emotions and behaviour with regard to a hazard. Without the understanding of the perception, risk communication suffers from limited understanding of people’s interests, concerns and priorities.
Risk is often communicated in terms of probabilities. Individuals tend to underestimate the risk of low probability events such as earthquakes. A lack of understanding of risk probabilities is one of the major reasons why people do not invest in building strong houses that can withstand damage from earthquakes. But the risk of a disaster should be communicated to non-specialists not in terms of probabilities but in terms of the expected damage.

Dealing with myopia is also crucial in risk communication. When it comes to hazards, individuals tend to be narrow-minded and suffer from the “not in my lifetime” syndrome—a psychological state in which people tend to believe that once a big event has occurred, it is not going to happen again in their lifetime. Immediately after an event, the perception of risk is elevated and people tend to prepare for the next potential disaster; however, as time passes and memory fades, the perception also starts to fade away. Communication of the risk should therefore be conducted regularly to restore the memory of the last big event.

The saying that ‘seeing is believing’ applies to disasters as well. For individuals who do not have a direct experience of an event, warning them of the probability of occurrence might not be sufficient to get them to act proactively for their safety. So public risk communication strategy should consider explicitly addressing those individuals with little or no direct experience of a hazard.

One thing that comes across loud and clear from past tragedies is that there is a need to understand the risks we face in order to prepare for future disasters. We need to develop better strategies to make our communities more resilient, especially by investing in projects that influence individual behaviours and help them make right decisions.

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