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All shook up

The Saturday earthquake holds many lessons for donors, the people, and the government

- Sujeev Shakya (/author/sujeev+shakya)



SHARES

Apr 28, 2015-

The sunshine on Monday morning brought back hope of a new beginning as people started recounting their stories from the time the earthquake hit around Saturday noon. Another devastating shake 25 hours later sent people running to safer open areas. The spate of rumours, along with rain, did not make it very easy for people to spend Sunday night. For now, it seems the worst is over, but rebuilding and reconstructing physically and psychologically will take a lot of time.

Such events provide one with an opportunity to reflect on the lessons we learn. Such incidents give us a feeling that we are now living a new life. Things could have been even more terrible. Below are some of the takeaways I could think of.

A test of preparedness

In an earlier column more than a year ago, I had mentioned an organisation that boasts of being a pioneer in disaster preparedness but taking months to decide on a consultant. I had written then that if they take months to just decide on a consultant, we can only imagine what will happen when a disaster actually strikes. This disaster has provided an opportunity for people who have poured millions into organisations in the disaster-preparedness business to gauge whether the buck has travelled the final mile.

As we look for medicines, tents, and water, along with people who are willing to send money for the same, we do not have a list of certified vendors to whom we can reach out. Nepal's history of development assistance has been plagued by conferences and report-oriented short-term strategies with a lot of junkets. When push comes to shove, we miss many times. An evaluation report on whether the funding for the disaster-preparedness programmes over the decade has delivered or not will be interesting to learn from.

Rumour-mongers and hoarders

Bhupi Sherchan's poem on how Kathmandu is a city of rumours holds true every time we have a crisis. Fourteen years ago, after there was media gag after the royal massacre, rumours about water and milk being poisoned circulated. This time, it was a tiger in the zoo escaping, the exact timing of the next quake, and what it will measure on the Richter scale. Any firm that can predict a natural disaster with such precision would be valued at a price much higher than Apple or Facebook.

Indian television channels that compete with each other on scaring their audiences are being aped by our television channels too. On Sunday night, the combination of rumour and rain only did more harm. We need coordination between credible media agencies, especially FM stations, to broadcast 'rumour quellers'. Further, we need stronger laws that punish people who spread such rumours and baseless news through the media, including social media.

By Sunday morning, *chiura* or beaten rice, seen as the most reliable, nutritious, and affordable food, started to disappear from the shelves, with its price shooting from Rs 80 a kilo to Rs 200. A crisis should not become an opportunity for business people to make an extra buck, especially when the needs are humanitarian in nature. There is no point in contributing money made from charging extra during a humanitarian crisis to building a temple later! A couple of months back, a severe LPG crisis was created as panic-stricken customers started stocking fuel to last for a year as hoarding-prone vendors decided to curtail supply. This time, we need people to stock less and release more food for the needy. Kathmandu Valley folks, along with some people in other cities, may be fortunate to have easy access to food stocks, but there are those in the villages that sorely need such supplies.

Going local

The immediate question asked by many wanting to contribute to far-flung areas is, how do you do it? Which agency do you contact? If there were elected local governments, there would have been more accountability and responsibility. In this crisis, the absence of local governments has been sorely felt. Through social media sites, such local governments would have been able to get in touch with potential donors and the people who want to help. A syndicated operation of local government agencies by all political parties has just converted every opportunity into a rent-seeking one.

Many community kitchens have been set up and people are willing to provide recharge cards and transfer balances. People with open spaces have opened them up for neighbours and strangers alike and are sharing scarcely available water and allowing people to charge their phones on solar-powered inverters. Perhaps, we need to revisit the concept of community living once again, where we depend on and support each other. Having the community open centres with requisite tents and basic supplies in each neighbourhood would be a good start. Having individual kits at home is a concept for monochromic societies. In polychromic societies like ours, we cannot only have individual kits at home but also need to think of community containers, along with open spaces. We have to share--our rooms, bathrooms, water, and food. A new social initiative towards this end is worth thinking about.

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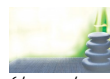
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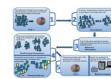
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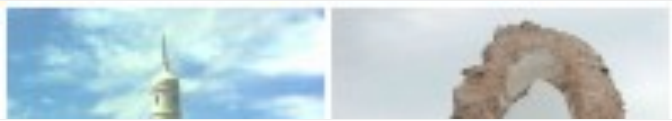
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