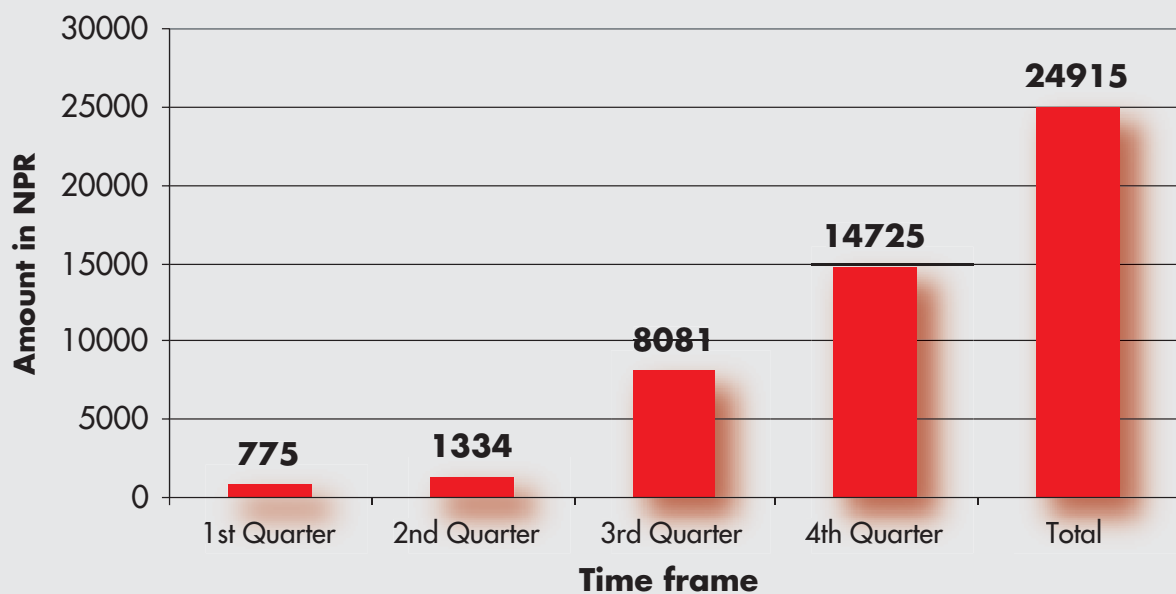# Reducing risks in Nepal's disaster-prone communities

Background

When communities are united and work together for the benefit of all, they can bring about big changes. Local-level initiatives that ensure maximum community participation have proved to be an effective approach to disaster risk reduction. In Nepal, a successful community-based disaster preparedness (CBDP) programme has shown that, through increasing communities' capacities, it is possible to reduce risks at the local level.

The intervention

- The Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) has carried out CBDP programmes in 35 of Nepal's 75 districts.
- A total of 309 communities, each comprising 60–100 households, have taken part in the programmes. These communities were selected from the disaster-prone areas that undertook a vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA).
- In each of the communities chosen to carry out a CBDP, an 11-member community-level disaster preparedness (DP) unit was formed; at least three of the members were female. The DP unit ensured that the interventions are implemented effectively.
- The members of the DP unit were then trained in disaster management including risk reduction, first aid and community management. Then, through a series of participatory exercises, each community prepared hazard maps, established early warning systems and developed a disaster mitigation plan.
- To ensure that each community is prepared to respond to a disaster, the DP unit and community members set up a stock of basic relief goods and food grains. They also collect cash with which to create a revolving fund: a minimum of 5 Nepalese rupees per month was deposited, although the amount increased if the community can give more. The money was mainly used as an emergency fund but the community DP unit could also decide to use it for other income-generating and/or mitigation activities. Communities participating in the CBDP programmes have so far collected Rs. 1,718,925 (approximately 30,000 Swiss francs), which they can use whenever necessary to respond immediately to disasters at a local level.

An example of revolving fund collection in Bhatkhola (Sayangja) since January 2003

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- Most of the communities participating in the CBDP programme have used the fund to respond to disasters. One concrete example of how the fund was used comes from the village of Bhatkhola, in western Nepal's Sayngja district. On 9 September 2004, the village, which participated in a CBDP programme, was hit by a landslide, which killed three people, destroyed six houses, swept away hundreds of hectares of cultivated land and heavily damaged other critical infrastructure including communication and transportation facilities. The village was completely cut off and villagers and local NRCS volunteers did not have the means to communicate the disaster to the outside world or to obtain external aid. The trained members of the local community DP unit, however, responded immediately. They helped the affected community members and distributed 200 kilograms of pre-stocked food and some basic relief and rescue kits. Dan Bahadur Rana Bhat for example, lost his two children in the tragedy but was too poor to pay for their funeral rites. The CBDP unit immediately loaned him Rs. 1,000 from the revolving fund to cover cremation costs. Five other families which were severely affected by the landslide received Rs. 500 each, as well as food assistance.

- In addition to the revolving fund, the communities also carry out other fund-raising activities such as lottery programmes, seasonal food grain collection and theatre performances. Sometimes the local government also provides support. The NRCS also provides Rs. 15,000–25,000 for small disaster mitigation activities. It is, however, the communities themselves that mobilize by far the greatest amounts, in cash and in kind, for their own risk reduction activities. This has been key to the success of the programmes. In Sundarpur's Sarlahi district for example, communities participating in the CBDP programme have constructed a 2,800 metre long dam, to protect the district's flood-prone villages. The dam cost about Rs. 750,000 to build, all of which was raised locally except for the Rs. 15,000 "seed money" given to the communities by the NRCS.

- An income-generating component has recently been incorporated in the CBDP programme to help to reduce economic vulnerability in communities and to improve their livelihoods.

- In many CBDP communities, an early warning system has also been set up, which allows community DP units to evacuate affected people to safer places rapidly.

Lessons learned

- The revolving fund set up by the Community DP units has been effective in quickly assisting disaster affected people.
- Community participation is essential.
- The participatory approach of community involvement and ownership encourages community motivation and opens dialogue on ways to reduce disaster risk.
- Local involvement in the raising of funds for the revolving fund has made communities more independent and less reliant on external aid.
- Community lead Early Warning Systems that evacuate people to safe areas save lives.

Conclusion

The CBDP programme was found to be effective in reducing disaster risk through building the capacity of communities. Small mitigation activities and revolving funds are best adapted in disaster-prone communities where people experience recurrent disasters. Early warning systems and hazard and vulnerability assessments have aslo proved useful.

Although the NRCS has been able to help communities take control of risk reduction in their villages, by only providing a small amounts of seed money. Communities have produced maximum results with financial contributions as well as free labour.

To ensure sustainability of the CBDP programmes, the NRCS recommends the integration of institutional development by way of the establishment and development of community based actions and income-generating activities. NRCS intends to explore possibilities to replicate and expand CBDP activities further to ensure that risks are reduced as much as possible in other disaster-prone communities in Nepal.