Introduction: Aftershocked

by Cameron David Warner, Heather Hindman and Amanda Snellinger

This article is part of the series Aftershocked: Reflections on the 2015 Earthquakes in Nepal (/fieldsights/741-aftershocked-reflections-on-the-2015-earthquakes-in-nepal)

Beginning at 11:56 a.m. local time on April 25, 2015 and continuing for over two months, a series of large earthquakes and significant aftershocks, numbering more than three hundred, have plagued Nepal. The earthquakes destroyed homes, historical monuments, and infrastructure such as dams, roads, and bridges, and they triggered an ongoing series of landslides, exacerbated by the monsoon. Around nine thousand people died in the initial aftermath, and another twenty-four thousand were injured. An estimated two million people are currently homeless in fourteen districts of central Nepal, which measure 8,744 square miles. More than 500,000 buildings collapsed and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that nearly 2.8 million people are in need of assistance, 864,000 of them in hard-to-reach areas. This is an ongoing crisis, which has exacerbated the precarious livelihoods of Nepal's most impoverished inhabitants, who lived in the rural, mountainous villages that were most affected.

In the days and weeks following the initial earthquake, many experts on Nepal from diverse fields such as history, political science, development studies, and especially anthropology began to discuss the underlying issues that made these earthquakes as much a human-made disaster as a natural one. Our discussions evolved into a larger investigation of the role of academia in a time of crisis. This Hot Spots series seeks to explore the diverse ways in which anthropologists and other social scientists become involved in disaster situations. How should scholars think about their role in disaster situations, reflecting upon their power, emotions, and limitations? What can social science contribute to relief and recovery in the midst of crisis and beyond? Over the past twenty-five years, scholars' engagement with their informants and research sites has developed from intimate, but ideally neutral methods such as participant-observation and archival research, to advocacy and eventually engagement with the worlds of development and policymaking. These changes are concomitant with debates over the value of objectivity and the place of activism in contemporary anthropology. The contributors to this series reflect on this transformation and their ambivalences about it. David Holmberg, Kathryn March, Michael Hutt, and Austin Lord discuss the impact of the earthquake on specific sites in Nepal. Sara Shneiderman extends this concern to think about multisited ethnography. Mallika Shakya provides insight into the complexities of belonging during times of crisis. Mary Cameron, Steve Folmar, Mitra Pariyar, Heather Hindman, and Bijaya Poudel write about how specific segments of society have been affected by or have responded to the earthquake. Matthäus Rest, Christopher Butler, and Andrew Nelson consider the influence of the earthquake on Nepal's future infrastructure development. Aidan Seale-Feldman, Nawaraj Upadhaya, and Seira Tamang track changes in mental health services and systems of governance. Sarah Schorr and Cameron Warner follow portrayals of the earthquake on global social media.

One concern of this collection is the question of how the grand narrative of Nepali modernity and development has been invoked during this crisis, often in negative terms. Nepal is referred to as a failed state and a country without local government, unable to create broad-based consensus on its constitution and riven with corruption. Even funding agencies that regularly support research in Nepal frame their calls for applications under headings like "conflict and fragility." Yet terms like *fragility*, *fate*, and *failed* might also take some of the burden of responsibility off the shoulders of individual and collective actors. Nepal is, after all, a seismically active zone with a relatively impoverished population, which only recently emerged from a prolonged period of political instability. In a short period of time, to its credit, the country has begun to respond to internal calls for greater equality in terms of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and to embrace—rather than be embarrassed by—its need for economic, social, and educational remittances. (On the other hand, some of our contributors point out the lack of a sustained concern for caste inequality within Nepali society and global academia.) While cognizant of the long history of "fatalism and development" in Nepal (see Bista 1991), these essays attempt to rethink this familiar trope and to offer alternative ideas about preparation for future earthquakes, as well as a political context for rebuilding that does not begin with claims of lack.

Earthquake Preparation

The tremors of April and May 2015 were not surprising to many in the region. Nepal has long been considered "overdue" for a significant earthquake. Yet with the 1934 earthquake a distant memory, Nepali citizens, the national government, and international institutions seemed more focused on immediate concerns, such as a civil war and its aftermath, political infighting, and the massive scale of labor outmigration. The United Nations and the government of the United States had worked extensively with the Nepali state to institute response programs and strengthen infrastructure. In some

instances, such as medical facilities, cooperation between local institutions and the World Health Organization was apparent, likely saving lives. In other cases, while policies were in place regarding construction standards and disaster risk management, implementation and enforcement often lagged behind ideal practices. In early April 2015, international experts on earthquakes and disaster relief met in Kathmandu to discuss the region's preparedness, and groups like GeoHazards International agreed that the country was far from ready for the events that would occur just days later. While these international interventions and supports can be credited with saving many lives, they also determined where support was focused: in the case of GeoHazards, the recent rapid urban expansion of Kathmandu. While many in Nepal were aware of the risks of an earthquake, many felt disempowered and placed little confidence in the government's ability to respond or protect its citizens. Indeed, the concerns of the everyday overwhelmed many peoples' ability to prepare for a potential disaster. One of Nepal's most noted writers described her own apathy towards the chaos of the civil war in the early 2000s, admitting: "I kept seeing signs of calamity. Something bad would happen. I was not prepared for it" (Thapa 2005, 137).

Political Context

Nepal was rebuilding differently when the earthquake hit. Since 2007, Nepal has been in a state of transition from a constitutional Hindu monarchy to a secular democratic republic. The 2006 People's Movement (or Jana Āndolan II) ended a decade-long civil war between the Maoists and the Royal Nepal Army, as well as the standoff between political parties and King Gyanendra Shah, who dismissed the democratically elected parliament in 2002. In 2005, the political parties and the Maoists united and, together, joined the 2006 mass movement that dethroned the king. Peace talks were brokered, an interim all-party government was established, the country was declared a secular democratic republic, and Constituent Assembly elections were held in 2008, all with the assistance of the United Nations' Mission in Nepal (UNMIN). After four extensions and failure to reach consensus on the structure of the federal government, the CA expired on May 27, 2012. Elections for a second Constituent Aseembly were held in November 2013. The Nepali Congress secured the most seats, with the previous victors, the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), coming in a distant third. The royalist party, National Democratic Party Nepal, came in fourth. This reshuffle of power made the current Constituent Assembly less diverse than its 2008 predecessor. Since the peace talks of 2007, there have been six governments in Nepal. Local elections have not been held since 1997, leaving villages and towns without popularly elected officials. Citizens have few tools to demand accountability, while political instability and frequent elections have soured many to formal politics. This lack of robust governance and national-level stalemate had an enormous effect on the government's ability to respond quickly to the earthquake. Prime Minister Sushil Koirala was abroad when the first earthquake struck, learning the news from Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's Twitter stream. Koirala did not make an official statement until four days after the initial seismic shocks, leaving many to ask: "where is our government?" (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/nepal/11569429/Where-is-our-government-ask-survivors-of-Nepal-earthquake.html)

In light of Nepal's protracted political instability, some parties adopted an approach to aid similar to that taken after Haiti's earthquake. Processes that work around the formal government, they insisted, would be more effective. We see this as dangerous logic. Just as physical rebuilding occurs on the shaken earth with remnants salvaged from the rubble, sociopolitical restructuring will be shaped by and out of existing political dynamics. As former United Nations official John Bevan has warned (http://recordnepal.com/perspective/aftermath), "any aid effort would have to understand and take into account the political dynamics and should not use the issue of humanitarian neutrality to justify an ignorance of the political and cultural context." One cannot assume that there is a clean slate from which to start anew, since claims to humanitarian neutrality are not only dangerous, but also complicit in reproducing the structural violence with which Nepal has struggled for centuries.

Implications for Rebuilding

Recent revelations about Red Cross reconstruction efforts (https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-red-cross-raised-half-a-billion-dollars-for-haiti-and-built-6-homes) after the Haitian earthquake suggest that "build back better" is not an adequate paradigm for disaster recovery. Already, in Nepal, concerns about international aid agencies' use of funds (http://nepalitimes.com/article/nation/less-than-one-percent-of-global-funding-going-to-local-groups-nepal,2344) are surfacing. Criticism of the slow government response has been widespread, but there are also concerns about oversight and a lack of centralized planning. Many on the ground see the agendas of international agencies or urban elites dominating the immediate concerns of rural residents about creating secure housing during the monsoon and threatening to produce forms of dependency by not attending to sustainable, if less photogenic forms of support, such as the reestablishment of rice planting. While in the aftermath of the earthquake, international media attention resulted in significant donations to various relief causes, the urgency of need curtailed reflection on how to avoid exacerbating longstanding tensions in the country. This was true in the political sphere (http://thewire.in/2015/06/13/nepals-slippery-fast-track-3798/) as well as international aid responses, as when the Constituent Assembly was able to break its eight-year deadlock on creating a constitution, but only by leaving out details, ignoring disputed issues, and neglecting the rights of many who were demanding a voice in remaking the "new Nepal." Serious rebuilding of the country's physical and political infrastructure will take more time and attention than capricious media outlets and donors are usually willing to devote. While it is clear that Nepal's insufficient preparation and government instability exacerbated the effects of the earthquake, past disasters demonstrate the importance of not allowing foreign actors to control the process of rebuilding. It is only by giving those who must live through and after this catastrophe—all of them—a voice in the reconstruction that Nepal will be built back better.

Conclusion

As anthropologists and humanists, all the contributors included in this series share a love of Nepal and a concern for its postearthquake future. We wonder what our research can contribute to a place in which we have deep emotional investment and long-term commitments. Much of what is often lost in the rush to rebuild is nuance and historical context, an understanding of the particularities of place in the form of reflections on the past and its implications for the future. As scholars, we seek to turn our years of study to support familiar places and people. Anthropologists working in sites of

disaster have contributed much to thinking about the aftermath of reconstruction, but they are often included in the discussion only when the urgency has passed. The essays we present here are an attempt to begin the conversation early—to introduce issues of inequality, regionalism, class, local control, the environment, and diversity even as the dust is still settling—rather than merely as a posthoc critique.

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