

ISET-NEPAL

Reframing the debates about reconstruction in post-earthquake Nepal

In the wake of the Gorkha earthquake of April 25 2015, ISET-Nepal helped influence public debates about how best to reconstruct communities in a manner that would address their immediate reconstruction needs as well as their long-term needs for prosperity and sustainability.

SETTING THE SCENE

In the aftermath of the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, many of Nepal's communities had to be relocated. Land had cracked and these areas had become vulnerable to slope failure and landslide hazards. In this context, the concept of 'integrated settlement' emerged as a potential strategy on which to base post-earthquake recovery and reconstruction efforts. Government and development agencies in Nepal had long struggled to develop basic services in the widely scattered rural settlements in the hills and mountains. It was therefore thought that relocating the earthquake damaged settlements to safer locations, while investing in developing infrastructure and services at these new locations, could facilitate reconstruction.

The Vice Chairman of Nepal's National Planning Commission first made the case for integrated settlement in an article for a leading Nepali daily newspaper. Following the article, public opinion expressed their support in national print and electronic media to build new settlements that would provide amenities including transportation, water, sanitation, energy, health, and education. There were, however, fundamental gaps in how the National Planning Commission conceived the implementation of this approach. Citizens were not consulted on their aspirations regarding the reconstruction of their homes and settlements, and issues such as cultural context, livelihoods, income-generating opportunities, and social connectedness were overlooked. ISET-Nepal decided to explore these gaps in order to help shape how the country might best engage in post-earthquake recovery efforts.

WHAT ISET-NEPAL DID

ISET-Nepal recognized that a sound physical settlement alone does not automatically create prosperous and sustainable communities. Rather, it should integrate the livelihood elements, institutions, and socio-cultural connectedness that rural Nepali communities value. This concept is best captured by the Nepali term *surakshitthath-thalo*, which means 'resilient homestead and livelihoods'.

ISET-Nepal first consulted diverse stakeholders, holding discussions with researchers, development professionals, and the media to raise these issues. ISET-Nepal then partnered with a community radio group to record survivors' thoughts on

resilient settlement and how they pictured their new homesteads. In the process, 500 individuals including victims, community leaders, development workers, and professionals were interviewed in eight seriously hit districts. These respondents all wished for their new homesteads to comprise earthquake-safe shelter for their family members and livestock. They envisioned feed and fodder storage facilities, land and natural resources to support crops and livestock production, on-farm enterprises and cottage industries – all integral to their homesteads and settlement. They wanted *surakshitthaath-thalo* to have access to basic amenities, while fostering community solidarity and observing traditions and practices. These findings were used to produce ten radio programs which were broadcast through twelve community radio stations located in earthquake-affected areas every week for two-and-a-half months.

The radio programs brought the notion of *surakshitthaath-thalo* at the center of public discussions on how best to pursue reconstruction. This contributed to a healthy debate around integrated physical settlement, rather than simply accepting it as the only approach to recovery and reconstruction. ISET-Nepal argued that it would be possible for communities to “bounce back” from natural disasters if the reconstruction approach was conceived holistically.

THE OUTCOME

As a result of ISET-Nepal’s efforts, the National Planning Commission, government departments, non-governmental actors, and development professionals began using the concept of *surakshitthaath-thalo* in their conversations around recovery and reconstruction. Similarly, national print and electronic media frequently used the term in their coverage of news stories and public debate. There is also evidence that the concept has been embraced at the community level. In January 2016 ISET-Nepal researchers attended a community-level meeting on the reconstruction of damaged settlements in Sindhupalchok District organized by a local civil society organization. In this community, people had taken the initiative to form community-level reconstruction committees and had developed plans for the reconstruction of damaged settlements informed by a *surakshitthaath-thalo* approach.

The volatility of the political environment in Nepal makes it difficult to predict whether the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) – the institution created by the Government of Nepal to coordinate earthquake recovery and reconstruction – will integrate *surakshitthaath-thalo* into the reconstruction efforts it is overseeing. At the very least, ISET-Nepal expects that the essence of the concept will survive in the discourse around reconstruction. ISET-Nepal plans to track to what extent the concept of *surakshitthaath-thalo* will influence the NRA as it begins to concretize and implement the recovery and reconstruction of rural settlements.

For more information on ISET-Nepal visit <http://isetnepal.org.np>

TTI’s Stories of Influence Series

This series, produced by TTI, shares stories about the impact Southern think tanks have on policy initiatives. All the think tanks featured in this series are supported by the Think Tank Initiative, a multi-donor program dedicated to strengthening the capacity of independent policy research organizations in the developing world. At www.thinktankinitiative.org, you can find profiles on the organizations in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia supported by the program, as well as publications, working papers, and general information about TTI.