



POLICY BRIEF

Safer School Policies, Practices, Gaps and Way Forward

Overview

Schools are centres of learning and education and they are the best tools for reducing disaster risk and vulnerabilities. The impacts of disasters can be minimized by promoting the safe school approach. The earthquake of 2015 damaged a good deal of Nepal's education infrastructure, mostly its schools. In fact, the school education sub-sector comprised 88.8% of the total damage in the education sector. From the earthquake of 2015, 8,242 public schools were affected, and 25,134 and 22,097 classrooms were totally and partially damaged respectively. Private schools also experienced significant damage: 956 and 3,983 classrooms were totally and partially damaged respectively. In addition, a total of 4,416 toilets and water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and 1,791 compound walls were damaged. It is reported that 584 students, 571 in school and 13 in higher education, lost their lives. A total of 49 teachers from schools and colleges also died. In addition, the earthquake directly affected, both physically and mentally, an estimated 3.2 million children. Of these, around 870,000 were left without permanent classrooms and an additional half a million required support to return to learning (PDNA, 2015). Earthquake reduced overall educational achievement by damaging school infrastructure, disrupting academic calendars, forcing children to drop out the school, and undermining the resiliency of communities. The cost of recovery in the education sector is estimated at almost \$415 m USD, and that figure doesn't even attempt to put a price on the psychological costs to both teachers and students (PDNA, 2015).

This policy brief is developed following an extensive literature review, interviews with government and non-government organizations working in the spheres of disasters and safe school at the local, district and central level; and review-and-reflection sessions with partner NGOs.

Impacts of earthquake on education sector

The earthquake utterly destroyed many school buildings and their associated infrastructures and damaged many others, rendering them unfit for immediate use unless those infrastructures are carefully repaired. School buildings were damaged, teaching materials and school supplies were lost, regular teaching was disrupted for long periods, teachers and students were injured or killed, and students regularly dropped out of school. Many children still attend school in makeshift temporary facilities without walls. Damaged schools need to be reconstructed as soon as possible because studying in cracked physical infrastructures is not just a physical threat but also disturbs children and teachers psychologically, therefore impeding their ability to study and teach, respectively. Improve the quality of education necessitates that physical infrastructures be rebuilt as soon and as durably as possible.

Capacity-building and working on multiple hazards decrease the risks associated with earthquakes

The majority of the SMC members at Indreswari School in Melamchi, Sindhupalchok, worried that the construction work after the earthquake of 2015 would not be completed on time and would not be good quality. They were wrong, however, as the school, the DEO, and humanitarian agencies constantly monitored and supervised the ongoing construction work. SMC members said that their enthusiasm and team spirit increased exponentially following their participation in capacity-building and involvement in the multi-hazard risk analysis process. The progress of reconstruction with safety features at school was speedy because the school shared its safe school approach to SMC, PTA, and relevant staff of resource centres and the DEO. Staff at resource centres were made aware of measures they could implement to make schools inclusive. The design school hostel is attractive and caters well to the basic requirements of children with disabilities (CwDs).

Organizing earthquake drills as part of extracurricular activities (ECAs) increased understanding about earthquake preparedness and reconstruction work. Child club wrote the scripts of and performed the dramas about earthquake preparedness. Because schools are considered to be a forum for transmitting knowledge about DRR, DRR became part of the school's curricula. Another good approach was conceiving of DRR-led ECAs and drills as processes, not one-time events. Most importantly, the school, with the help of humanitarian agencies, was able to manage a first aid box, a stretcher, a fire extinguisher, and basic search-and-rescue materials in a tin trunk for use during emergencies. An orientation on when and how to use materials and equipment was also imparted. The confidence of the SMC and the PTA increased when the school, with the support of humanitarian agencies, invested a large proportion of its resources in making its school building earthquake-resilient. The school also paid attention to hazards other than earthquakes, including windstorms, fires, lightning, and epidemics. Children formulated DRR plans and programmes based on their analysis of the existing problems, a process which enhanced both their own capacity and that of the community to cope and cemented their understanding of DRR. Students and community leaders now better understand how their coping and adaptation strategies can be tailored to different hazards in order to address the root causes of those hazards. Despite the input of many these resources, school was unable to install a fire alarm, an earthquake alarm, and lightning rods to reduce the risk of fires, earthquakes, and lightning respectively. Informants claimed installing blinking lights in classrooms and toilets would increase the safety of deaf children.

The earthquake had a major impact on children, youths, and the education system as a whole. It resulted children's missing school days, the absence of affected teachers, disruption of the school calendar, and the closure of schools, whether because of the destruction of or damage to school infrastructure or to the use of schools as emergency shelters by people from affected areas. School days were lost not just because of the closure of schools during the immediate aftermath of the earthquake but also because of the adoption of irregular schedules once schools did re-open. The wounds caused by the earthquake will take several years to fully heal.

Green Schools are earthquake resilient

A school block with two rooms in Kalinag Secondary School of Kalinchock-3 of Dolakha is different from other RCC school buildings. This is green school which was constructed by ActionAid Nepal a decade back. This school block has successfully tolerated the impacts of 2015 earthquake while other school buildings in the same school were collapsed. It justifies its importance and demonstrated that it is an earthquake resilient school. Experiences have shown that green schools are particularly beneficial to all ecological regions of Nepal. The technology is used in such a way that it maintains the warm during the cold season and cold during the hot season. The cases of green school have demonstrated that they are beneficial to reduce the risks induced from different risks viz. earthquake, and extreme cold and hot and provide an environment of “education without fear” to the school family. Despite of its many benefits, local and district based stakeholders are not much familiar with the green school concept and technology used. There is a need of scaling up of this technology and using during the reconstruction of schools. One of the difficulties for the scaling up of this technology is unavailability of materials at local level.



Several school buildings that are still standing are unsafe. The temporary learning centres and safe spaces that were established did promote the continuation of education during the emergency, but could not undo the psychological impacts of the earthquake. Schools, if they are rebuilt quickly, can provide children with the space they need to access psychological, regain a sense of normality, and heal from distress and trauma. Most schools in earthquake affected districts were not able to hold full-day classes for at least 2-3 months after schools re-opened, rendering it difficult to provide a good quality education.

The displacement of families also had a severely negative impact on learning environments at home. Child informants reported that they lost the motivation and confidence to study after their learning habits were disrupted. They are anxious that they will have forgotten what they learned and that they will therefore find it difficult to pass their exams. Classes were particularly irregular when teachers, too, had lost their homes, and were unable to return to teaching. The earthquake reduced school enrolment rates because the earthquake disrupted the livelihoods of many families. The prolonged interruption of education has adversely impacted the future prospects and development of many children progress in the reconstruction of the education sector has been slow. The extensiveness of the damage to the education infrastructure, together with the already existing challenges to school enrolment in Nepal, has left millions of children in desperate need of educational support to help ensure their long-term development.

Safe School Policies and Practices

To reduce the impacts of disasters on education sector, many initiatives are being undertaken. Safety in schools is starting point for disaster risk reduction (DRR) and mainstreaming DRR in education is a key agenda. To translate this agenda into practice, many policies and practices viz. Education Act (1971) and its eighth amendment (2004), National Framework for Child-Friendly Schools (2010), School Sector Reform Plan (2009-15), and National Policy on Children (2012) have been formulated to safeguard schools by mitigating their vulnerability, ensuring educational continuity even during emergencies, and empowering communities and students to build resilience to disasters through capacity-building and knowledge-management initiatives.

DRRM Act (2017) provisioned the “inclusion of disaster management in the school level educational curriculum” as spelled out in section 8 (roles, duties and rights of executive committee). In section 33, it said that Nepal government may close down educational institution for certain time period, deploy personnel of educational institute for the disaster rescue activities and use of movable and immovable properties of educational institute whenever need. The government may make use and take in control the transport vehicles of educational institute for this purpose. Safe School Policy has been drafted in 2017 (it is yet to enact from the government) on the basis of (i) National Building Code Guideline (2060 BS), (ii) School Design Guideline (2073 BS), (iii) School Sector Development Plan (2072-2079 BS), (iv) Post Disaster Need Assessment (2015 AD), and (v) Post Disaster Reconstruction Framework (2016 AD).

Though current policies are very progressive in terms of addressing structural, non-structural and policy advocacy elements, not all policy elements really encompass the real spirit of comprehensive safe school framework (CSSF). Still there is not much clarity on the roles and responsibilities of federal, provincial and local government on education sector in general and safe school in particular.

The gaps in policies and practices

Policies and practices are broadly categorized into three components viz. (i) structural (physical infrastructure), (ii) non-structural (awareness, capacity building, knowledge management), and (iii) policy (advocacy and campaigning) and analysed the major gaps and implications.

4.1 Structural (construction of new buildings, retrofitting, and renovation)

It is crucial that sites for school construction be selected carefully as the deep-rooted mind-set that schools should be in remote locations works against safety, as does the fact that the public land freely allocated is usually cheap and therefore located in a hazardous area. There are policy gaps regarding safe-school. The Building Regulations do not require that small buildings secure local-level approval for their construction even though the Building Act calls for it. Many schools have renovated without assessing their physical vulnerability or meeting the National Building Code. While it is easy to carry out hazard, vulnerability and capacity analysis for constructing new and maintaining or retrofitting old schools, it is rarely done, a gap that proves critical as, without it, it is difficult to predict the strength of the site and the building and their ability to withstand the likely impacts of a disaster. Even when considerable money is invested to construct a new school, the National Building Code is not adequately considered in its design, cost estimate, material choice, or construction.

4.2 Non-structural (awareness, capacity building, and knowledge management)

Most of the curriculum developed so far focuses on educating people about subject matters but not on developing life skills, it discusses 'symptoms' but not their 'consequences', and is problem-rather than solution-centric. Policy allows teachers to select reference materials to suit their lessons but most do not or use materials ill-suited the Nepali context. While the curriculum does address the types and nature of natural hazards and the problems and challenges each poses, too little learning is directed at disaster prevention and preparedness. In addition, there are no adequate guidelines to integrating DRR into the curriculum. Teachers have no adequate training, so they are unenthusiastic about delivering lessons in DRR. Even when co-curricular activities are organized, the DRR and safe school messages they deliver are not reinforced in formal education. In fact, the non-structural component is not really an agenda of safe schools. Student retention and educational performance are key issues in the education sector; school safety is not. Knowledge is fragmented even though many DRR institutions espouse knowledge through safe school initiatives.



4.3 Policy (advocacy and campaigning)

The lack of political will, resource constraints, and the inappropriate development approach have worked against the safe school approach, which is largely ignored. School safety policies should reflect physical and socio-cultural realities as well as the priorities of federal, provincial and local governments but they do not. There is still not clarity on the role of local government for mainstreaming DRR and safe school approaches in education sector. The plethora of policies and provisions has created some confusion and made it difficult to monitor their performance.

The way forward

The earthquake made the need for safe schools, now and in the future, abundantly clear. But building safe schools faces three key hurdles: the scale of the physical destruction wrought, the lack of educational continuity, and the slowness of reconstruction. Following recommendations are offered to translate safer school policies/provisions into practice. These recommendations are broadly categorized into four level: (i) federal and provincial government, (ii) local government (rural and urban municipalities), (iii) non-government organizations, and (iv) educational networks/private sectors.

Federal and Provincial government

- Building Codes and Standards should be simplified for the construction of disaster-resistant and child-friendly schools following review and reflection by education stakeholders. The simpler the codes, the more likely it is that they will be employed.
- Curriculum should focus on solutions, not problems. It should be context-specific, and tailor-made. Only solution-centric curricula foster the life skills of learners as they promote learning by believing. Teaching about the consequences of hazards is more important than identifying what they are. The Curriculum Development Centre of Nepal should also provide reference material on disaster prevention and preparedness and the principles of disaster-resilient construction and environmental protection.
- The National Centre for Education Development (NCED) has incorporated elements of school safety into its training for head teachers. A one-day module was developed, and trainers from education training centres were trained. In the organization of such training, care must be taken that each school-safety element is clearly elaborated in a step-wise process so that head teachers truly internalize the need for those elements. DRR and safe-school elements must be made mandatory in all training curricula targeted at schools. All the DRR modules developed should be mainstreamed in head-teacher and teacher-training modules to expand the DRR knowledge through different capacity building initiatives.
- Since there are no focal teachers responsible for implementing DRR and other safe school activities at the school level, DRR is not adequately integrated into curricular and extracurricular activities. Each school should assign a DRR focal teacher and both the school sector reform plan (SSRP) and school improvement plans (SIPs) should lay out provisions about implementing DRR activities on a regular basis.



- The safe-school approach should include earthquake-resilience measures, emergency support mechanisms, safe school plans, a protection-from-multiple-hazards perspective, and personal safety and rights. Improved access to schools and climate-smart interventions has great value for safe schools. Children's access to schools should be improved through the reduction of physical risks (sidewalks, road and river crossings, ramps for disabled children, etc.). Climate-smart interventions like rainwater harvesting and solar panels should be promoted to promote health and hygiene. To reduce death and injury, schools should have lightning rods and policies to promote safety during thunderstorms.
- Since neither the SSRP nor the individual SIPs adequately incorporate DRR, they must be amended to incorporate and even mainstream safe-school elements. The Government of Nepal (GoN) should allocate additional resources to accomplish this change. Education management information system should be strengthened to incorporate a module on school safety and DRR.
- The GoN has already incorporated DRR in education-related policies, strategies, initiatives and plans in accordance with international DRR initiatives like the Sendai Framework for DRR and sustainable development goals, but its implementation of these initiatives is still weak because of resource constraints and weak commitment on its own part as well as on that of non-government agencies. The GoN should leverage additional resources for translating policy provisions into practice. While the Ministry of Education and the DoE, together with child centred DRR consortium, did draft a Safe School Policy, it needs to be enacted by the government.

Local government (rural and urban municipalities)

- Understanding of the safe school concept varies at the local, regional, and national levels. Some still believe that safe schools entail only hardware components. This is a misconception. In order to prepare schools for emergency response and disaster management, considerable emphasis must be placed on software components, such as the empowerment of school families and neighbourhood residents, school safety planning, and capacity-building. The capacity and understanding of children, their families and school staff to grasp the safe-school concept and to understand the principles of DRR must be fostered.
- To ensure school safety and thereby to uphold children's rights to education, safe-school activities must consider far more than physical improvements but also about psychosocial well-being, protection, and physical safety. In the future, all school facilities should be made disaster-resilient in order to mitigate the likely risks of a variety of hazards. Only disaster-resilient schools can ensure children are able to continue their education even when a disaster strikes.
- School management committees (SMCs) and parent teacher association (PTAs) should be involved in all steps of school construction, including the selection of safe school sites; hazard, vulnerability and capacity analysis (HVCA); design and cost estimation; management of good-quality construction materials; and construction itself. In addition, close follow-up and frequent monitoring will help to ensure that the quality of construction meets or surpasses minimal standards.
- Decisions to replace seismically vulnerable school buildings or retrofitting require thorough information on the risk levels of each building. The assessment should capture schools' exposure to other hazards (floods, landslides, fires, wind-storms, avalanches, rock falls) as well as availability of drinking water source and accessibility to communities.

Non-government organizations

- Curriculum and textbook reforms with DRR and resilience perspective and teacher training on the new curriculum and textbooks should be in place through existing teacher training institutions. Curricula should be learner-centred and generate life skills. Involving children in the assessment of local risk and vulnerabilities and available resources and capacities will help them understand the situation better than will traditional classroom teaching.
- Disaster preparedness and response initiatives at the school and community level should be strengthened through school-based disaster risk management and community-based DRM training and planning by enhancing the capacity and preparedness of SMCs/PTAs, child clubs, and communities in DRM.
- Relevant refresher training session should be conducted for school communities so that they truly understand school safety awareness programs including the need for and nature of preparedness and hazard evacuation plans. Contingency and school preparedness plans should be the outcomes of HVCA.
- Capacity-building activities should have both a life-skills component (with drills and simulations of practice like building evacuation drill, evacuation to safe havens, safe family reunification, and curricula development) as well as a child-friendly schools component (safe construction and school preparedness).
- Teachers and students should be trained in safe-school elements that will help minimize disruptions when disasters occur. Education is a platform for building a culture of prevention and resilience as educating children fulfils two important goals: it lasts a lifetime, and children pass their knowledge on to their parents and other community members. Children who are involved in disaster preparedness programs demonstrate a more realistic perception of risk, are less afraid, have more knowledge, and are more aware of the importance of knowing how to react than those who are not involved. Children who are educated about natural disasters are less likely to get hurt or fatally injured. The emphasis should be on DRR through schools rather than on DRR in schools.
- Cultural shows and art, song, poetry, dance, and theatre activities with DRR messages should be organized as they appeal children. These activities should not be optional and the members of SMCs and PTAs and Resource Centre heads should ensure they are offered to students. They should also ensure that schools are open the minimal number of school days. To ensure that DRR-related co-curricular activities are effective, multiple strategies, including child-to-child peer education, songs, electronic and print media, and action learning, should be used.





Educational networks/private sectors

- Integrating DRR and safe-school concept into existing teacher training and school curricula is a must. For this, policymakers, planners, curriculum developers, practitioners working on education in emergencies, and writers of DRR and safety plans at school level should be included in knowledge-sharing and review-and-reflection processes.
- The government has acknowledged the importance of integrating a CSSF into its School Sector Development Plan (SSDP). In fact, the technical group of Association of International NGOs in Nepal was successful in adding a DRR chapter to the SSDP which includes all three pillars of the CSSF. The continuous lobbying of the GoN, particularly the Ministry of Education, the DoE, and the NCED at the national level and rural/urban municipality at the local government level, has made it mandatory to integrate DRR into education-related policies, plans, teacher-training modules, and the curricula.

ActionAid Nepal

ActionAid started working in Nepal in 1982, just after ten years of its establishment as a charity organisation in the United Kingdom. Today, ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to further human rights and defeat poverty for all. With an aim to become more 'locally rooted and globally connected', ActionAid Nepal has registered its entity in the concerned Nepal Government authority. ActionAid is a global federation and ActionAid Nepal is one of the members of that federation.

Based on the learning from its engagement in various sectors at various levels from grassroots to international, AAN has evolved through various changes on approaches and working modalities in its 36 years journey of the fight against poverty and injustice. Starting from charity-based work in the 1980s to improve the basic living conditions of the poorest people, AAN has now adopted a human rights-based approach with an aim to enhance the capacity of the poor and excluded people to claim and exercise their rights to live a dignified life. Our approach reaffirms the role of popular struggles, social justice movements, popular actions, community-based organisations and people's organisations for rights conscientisation and transformation of unequal power relations.

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