



Next Generation Nepal

Perceptions of Post-Earthquake Volunteering By Foreigners in Nepal



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Introduction

In January and February of 2016, Next Generation Nepal (NGN) undertook a piece of qualitative research to try to understand the role of foreign volunteers in Nepal in the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes of April and May 2015. A simple survey was developed to gauge people's perceptions of what was helpful and what was *not* helpful in two phases of post-earthquake response. The first phase was the "emergency phase" (months one to three), and the second phase was the "early recovery phase" (months four to six). This report summarizes the results of this research to help us better understand what can be considered ethical or beneficial volunteering in an emergency context.

Context: The Nepal Earthquakes, Child Trafficking and Institutionalization

At 11:56am on 25 April 2015 the first of two major earthquakes struck Nepal. This first earthquake measured 7.8 on the Richter scale. This was followed by a second large earthquake on 12 May 2015 measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale. As a result nearly 9,000 people died, thousands were injured, thousands of homes were destroyed or damaged, and millions of people's lives were affected. The situation was dire. In the 14 worst affected districts, there was concern that people did not have adequate access to food, water, and other essential resources. For those people who did have these resources at the time of the earthquakes, the concern was that it would not be long until they ran out. Some of the worst affected areas were isolated communities that were impossible to reach by road. Landslides, debris and earthquake-created land erosion wiped out access roads for large numbers of the population. Large scale relief efforts faced many obstacles in their ability to provide and supply essential goods and services to desperate communities.

The earthquakes had both short-term and long-term implications for the welfare of the Nepali people. The earthquakes occurred at a critical time during the beginning of the planting season in Nepal and there was concern that this would limit food supplies in the coming year. It was clear that communities were in grave need of both immediate emergency relief as well as recovery support in the longer term for rebuilding their homes and livelihoods.

Furthermore, from a child protection perspective, concerns were raised that the disaster could cause an increase in child trafficking and the institutionalization of children¹, and that this in turn could create a market for an increase in "orphanage voluntourism". This concern was raised by NGN in statement issued in May 2015²:

¹ See: <http://www.bettercarenetwork.org/news-updates/news/better-volunteering-better-care-initiative-response-to-earthquake-in-nepal> (Accessed: 15th April 2016); and <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/07/nepal-children-image-orphanages-donate> (Accessed: 15th April 2016).

² See: <http://friends-international.org/blog/index.php/nepal-earthquake-further-crisis-for-children/> (Accessed: 15th April 2016)

Since the civil war in Nepal, traffickers have preyed on vulnerable families in rural areas, offering their children safety and an education in boarding schools or children's homes in Kathmandu. In practice the children have been used as poverty commodities to raise money from well-meaning but naïve donors and volunteers who support these 'orphanages' in the misplaced belief they are helping genuine orphans, or at least children who have no other choice than to be there. We are now deeply concerned that the earthquake will accelerate this trend beyond our worst nightmares. Aid money is flooding in to the country, children's homes are offering hundreds of more places for children, and not enough is being done in the rural areas to stop the flow of children away from their families into profit making orphanages. Next Generation Nepal is doing what it can to try and establish our own "gate-keeping project" in the worst affected district of Sindhupalchowk – this will warn families about the dangers of trafficking, and reunify displaced children. But the odds are stacked against us. We would ask people to consider carefully before volunteering or donating funds to a post-earthquake Nepali children's homes in Kathmandu. Without realizing it, such support may be indirectly harming children. If people want to help the Nepal relief effort, they should donate funds to reputable relief and development agencies which rebuild damaged rural communities and economies, and keep children and families together.

This concern was also raised by UNICEF Nepal in June 2015³:

UNICEF is also concerned about 'Orphanage Voluntourism' as families around the world have expressed a wish to help children in Nepal through adoption or orphanages visits.

"In some cases children are deliberately separated from their families and placed in orphanages so they can be used to attract adoptive families, fee-paying volunteers and donors," said Mr Hozumi. "While many orphanage volunteers are well-intentioned they often are not aware that they could inadvertently cause harm to children. In addition, background checks are often not conducted on volunteers, which can increase the risk of child exploitation and sexual abuse."

... "To re-build damaged rural communities and keep families together is the best way to help children in Nepal recover from the earthquake," Mr Hozumi concluded.

³ See: http://www.unicef.org/media/media_82328.html (Accessed: 16th April 2016).

Rationale for Research

Without understanding which approaches to volunteering are beneficial to communities, it is difficult to effectively counter harmful volunteering practices. In other words, advocacy campaigns against harmful volunteering practices need to be accompanied by practical advice on how to undertake ethical volunteering (which does not risk harming communities), otherwise it is less likely that the prohibitive advice will be followed. More specifically – and so as to prevent child trafficking and unnecessary institutionalization of children in Nepal – NGN has a particular interest in understanding and promoting ethical volunteering as a way to counter harmful orphanage volunteering⁴. This research is therefore a first step in understanding which forms of volunteering may and may not be beneficial in a post-disaster context. Getting a sense of people’s perceptions of how foreign volunteers helped or hindered response efforts in post-earthquake Nepal may be helpful in understanding which approaches to volunteering are beneficial in other post-disaster scenarios.

In the months following the earthquakes there was a surge of people interested in volunteering and helping in the recovery of Nepal. This is evidenced by a number of Facebook pages that were created to help organize volunteer efforts and advertise positions (examples include Kathmandu Valley Earthquake Response, Quake Volunteers, Kathmandu Earthquake Volunteers, Earthbag Rebuild Nepal, Nepal Tourism Recovery | Strategy, Nepal Earthquake – time to help). Additionally, a simple Google search reveals multiple organizations advertising post-earthquake volunteer placements in Nepal.

Despite it being common knowledge that there was high interest in volunteering by foreigners in Nepal after the earthquake, there is no accurate data to show how many foreigners actually did partake in volunteering after the earthquake due to the legal issue of volunteering on a tourist visa⁵, and the fact that many foreign volunteers may have been in Nepal already on other types of visas. This makes it difficult to fully gauge the extent and impact – positive or negative – of foreign volunteering in post-earthquake activities. Our hope is that this short report, albeit based on limited qualitative data, will shed some light on these issues.

⁴ See: 2014. Punaks, M & Feit, K. *The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering: Combating Child Trafficking Through Ethical Voluntourism*. Nepal: Next Generation Nepal. In this report NGN demonstrates how “orphanage” volunteering fuels child trafficking and child displacement to exploitative child care homes in Nepal.

⁵ It is technically illegal to volunteer in Nepal on a tourist visa under Clause 19 of the Immigration Act 1994. Despite this, the reality is that thousands of tourists do volunteer in Nepal unhindered each year, and no official records are kept to show whether tourists are volunteering in Nepal or simply engaging in tourism activities.

Research Methodology

To gather data for this research, a simple survey was created. Participants were first asked to answer the following question: “In a few words, please tell us what your connection is to Nepal and/or volunteering.”

This was followed by four questions relating to volunteering activities in two time periods: the emergency phase (months one to three after the earthquake) and the early recovery phase (months three to six after the earthquake). (See Annex 1 for a copy of the complete survey.)

The four questions were as follows:

To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were helpful/beneficial in the three months directly following the earthquake (emergency phase)?

To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were not so helpful or hindered efforts in the three months directly following the earthquake (emergency phase)?

To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were helpful/beneficial in months four to six after the earthquake (early recovery phase)?

To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were not so helpful or hindered efforts in months four to six after the earthquake (early recovery phase)?

On 15 January 2016 the survey was distributed to the Preventing Orphanage Volunteering Working Group (POVWG) – a group of 12 organizations, agencies, and individuals committed to understanding and stopping orphanage volunteering in Nepal. The survey was also created in Google Forms (it went live online on 22 January 2016, and responses were accepted through 15 February 2016).

A link to the survey was then posted to nine Facebook pages: Nepal Expats, Quake Volunteers, Kathmandu Expats, Kathmandu Earthquake Volunteers, Nepal Tourism Recovery | Strategies and Actions, EarthbagRebuild Nepal, Nepal Expat Club, Kathmandu Valley Earthquake Response and Management, Nepal Earthquake – time to help.

When inviting people to participate in the survey it was made clear that NGN was interested in people’s *perceptions* and *insights* with regard to the four questions and not necessarily hard facts. This methodology allowed for respondents to freely reflect on their own experiences.

Research Findings

Twenty people provided responses to the survey. From the basic demographic information provided by the respondents we know that 13 of them were already in Nepal at the time of the earthquake, three of them came after the earthquake, and for four of the respondents it is unknown whether or not they were in country on 25 April 2015, when the first earthquake struck.

It is worth noting that 12 respondents were themselves volunteers after the earthquake and an additional 4 respondents either ran or worked for an organization that managed volunteers after the earthquake. Because of this the respondents were likely to view volunteering, in general, as having had a positive impact due to their personal connection to volunteering.

In considering what was regarded as helpful/beneficial and what was regarded as being harmful or a hindrance during the emergency and early recovery phases, there were some overall themes that could be identified. These themes are identified in the following paragraphs.

Foreign Volunteers as Helpful/Beneficial

During the Emergency Phase

On the positive side, 16 people identified that foreign volunteers were able to organize and/or provide emergency supplies, sanitation, and temporary shelters in hard to reach communities. In the immediate aftermath of any disaster, quick action and response is essential. People need to be rapidly mobilized and this was an area where informal volunteers were able to have a strong impact in post-earthquake Nepal. A number of respondents believed that in the emergency phase, independent/informal volunteers had an advantage over large organizations and government agencies. Such volunteers were able to bypass the bureaucracy of mainstream channels that prevented quick action and were instead able to act fast to get emergency relief and supplies to desperate communities. That said, one respondent did list a number of large international aid organizations as being helpful/beneficial during this first phase.

An additional five respondents said that people who could apply their medical training in the emergency response phase were very helpful. This speaks to ways in which people with specific skills were beneficial in the post-earthquake emergency phase. Conversely, unskilled volunteers were perceived as negative (see below).

Three people cited that foreign volunteers were helpful in channeling funds to necessary places. This also touches on the advantage of volunteers over some government and nongovernmental actors who were unable to dispense resources fast enough.

“I think there was impressive volunteer movements in the first month after the earthquake of people already being in country, who managed to provide resources (and access funding) ... Volunteers were impressively professional in the planning of their interventions.” Quote by a respondent.

One participant who worked directly with foreign volunteers wrote that in the aftermath of the earthquake there was an overflow of work, and that volunteers were able to help with capacity support in the office handling the additional admin work required. Three others wrote that manual labor and debris clearing were also helpful ways in which volunteers contributed to post-earthquake relief efforts.

One respondent who believed that foreign volunteers were very helpful in the emergency phase because of their “skills, support & funding activities” did make the caveat that “[f]oreign volunteers also need to have support – food & accommodation, etc. – so as not to be a burden.” This speaks to some of the concern that was raised in response to later questions that volunteers were a drain on resources (mentioned below).

During the Early Recovery Phase

In regard to the early recovery phase (months four to six after the earthquake), the majority of the people responding to what was helpful/beneficial during this time mentioned some aspect of reconstruction. Nine out of the 15 people who answered this question directly supplied responses that fit into this category, including the building of shelters, the clearing of debris, demolition, and one person cited that “engineers helped write proposals and design for reconstruction efforts.”

Other responses included the ongoing private efforts to continue to bring supplies to villages that were hard to access, additional capacity support within an organization, and the work of large organizations and foreign aid groups such as the Peace Corps.

It was less clear to respondents the extent of the helpfulness of these longer term projects. While in the emergency phase, one can almost immediately see the impact of activities such as delivering supplies or organizing relief missions to remote areas, the impact of early recovery activities such as rebuilding projects can take longer to become apparent. As one person wrote it would not be clear for a while how beneficial their rebuilding and training efforts were:

“I believe that [the efforts of those the organization respondent was working with] were helpful, though not widely impactful during this early recovery phase. While always increasing, the positive impact of this project will not fully arrive until the buildings have been completed and filled with students. In this phase, [a friend of the respondent] began training a small local crew how to build with earthbag.”

Foreign Volunteers as Harmful/Hindrance

During the Emergency Phase

When it came to the ways in which foreign volunteers were perceived as harmful or hindered relief efforts in the emergency phase, one problem cited by the respondents was the problem of unskilled or ill-equipped volunteers. They not only posed a danger to themselves and others, but they were a resource drain on the organizations that took them on. For this reason, two

respondents who worked with volunteers during this period said that they did not take on any unskilled volunteers:

“We turned down offers of ‘help’ from people that simply wouldn’t be effective in Nepal – too many people wanting to be involved but not really knowing how and would have taken too much time and effort to look after.”

Supporting this argument, another respondent wrote that:

“We met several ‘Foreign Medical Teams’ in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake who were not well enough set up, lacked translators and local understanding and were therefore not really effective and putting people at risk (for example, by not being able to communicate properly and knowing about referral pathways).”

As one person observed with young adults coming to volunteer with a large US-based international NGO:

“While the youths did contribute to building some earth-bag houses, it seemed that they got much more out of the experience (akin to an educational experience abroad) than they contributed to actual relief efforts.”

This sense that some volunteers were misguided in their motivations and got more than they gave was mentioned by another respondent who saw the actions of some as “disaster tourism.”

As an example of bad practice during the emergency phase, one respondent expressed concern over a group of foreigners who went out on their own with no guidance or support to clear rubble and search for bodies at the site of collapsed temples:

“They were unsupervised, totally un-skilled and they were a danger to themselves as well as to injured people they may have found.”

One respondent noted that foreigner volunteers who went to villages alone, not as part of a larger Nepali team, came across as having the wrong attitude, that of being a “savior.” This respondent saw this as a problem in both the emergency phase and the early recovery phase. The same respondent said that there was a problem that, “[p]eople saw foreigners only like running dollars...” in the emergency phase, and in the early recovery phase fake organizations were taking advantage of people wanting to donate and then diverting that money.

Another respondent referred to the money making schemes of organizations and agencies receiving volunteers as well, saying that organizations and agencies that charged people to volunteer were counterproductive:

“Funding is to be sought elsewhere – volunteers are generally international travelers on a budget. Too many volunteers were found saying that they could not

afford to volunteer. Ridiculous. Volunteers are a free way to get the necessary supplies to the remote areas that need them. Use them, do not exploit them.”

One respondent found fault in people having too narrow of a focus at the exclusion of others who needed help. Another raised concern about the earthquake opening the door to faith based institutions into Nepal:

“Their hidden agendas are to be evaluated critically, while the impact of their work (e.g. providing and constructing few shelters) might be more problematic.”

During the Early Recovery Phase

In regard to how foreign volunteers were harmful or hindered in the early recovery phase, the respondents found problems with volunteers who came after the earthquake and saw them more as tourists than strictly volunteers:

“I do not think that any forms of work camps etc. are helpful, with the exception for income for the tourist sector.”

More critically, one respondent wrote:

“[One organization] accepted a number of ‘tourist’ volunteers during the recovery phase... most of the volunteers had a negative impact. They were young tourists out travelling who thought it would be great to volunteer to rebuild Nepal. They were not truly invested in the project, however, and were focused on their own ‘experiences’ rather than the good of the project.”

Conclusion

One of the biggest learning points from the survey responses relates to the importance of skilled versus unskilled volunteers. When volunteers had a specific skill set they were seen as being extremely beneficial in the aftermath of the earthquakes. Those who could jump in and provide immediate medical aid or assess buildings were viewed as invaluable at a time when national resources were being strained. On the other hand, unskilled volunteers and those who were not adequately prepared to be in the post-disaster milieu were a drain on resources, and had the potential to cause harm to themselves and others.

A distinction can also be drawn between people who were already in country and those who came to volunteer after the earthquake. Those who were in country are seen, on the whole, as being more helpful in the direct aftermath of a disaster. This makes sense on several levels: such people do not need to acclimate to a new situation; they already are set up and are therefore less of a drain on resources; many have been through the disaster themselves so have a deep understanding of the situation; they are able to go directly to work; and they may feel

more invested in the outcomes of their work because of the ties they have already created in the country.

Only three people responded to the question of what was harmful/hindered efforts in the early recovery phase making it difficult to draw any clear conclusions from their responses, nevertheless it is worth noting that the groups of volunteers that they all focused on were those who came *after* the earthquake. The general sense was that these volunteers basically swooped in with no regard to the context or situation they were entering. Unlike the volunteers already in Nepal, these people were perceived to be motivated more by what they could get out of the experience than on how they could give back to communities.

Overall, in both the emergency phase and the early recovery phase post-earthquake, respondents overwhelmingly saw foreign volunteers as being an asset in Nepal. The ways that they helped were supportive of, not replacements, for local efforts. Foreigners were able to use their resources and networks to maximize output and were not encumbered by the barriers facing large governmental and nongovernmental organizations and agencies.

Although participants responded in regard to a specific disaster (the earthquakes) in a specific location (Nepal), many of issues they raised could be applied to other disasters in different locations. The notion that foreign volunteers are most helpful when supporting local efforts is something that would likely be true in many post disaster contexts. Additionally, the harm caused by unskilled volunteers is applicable to many situations. As a first step, this research has helped clarify some of the roles of foreign volunteers in post-disaster scenarios, and outlines some of the positive and negative impacts that these volunteers can have.

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Annex 1: Survey: Post-Earthquake Volunteering by Foreigners

The following is an extract of the text and questions used for the survey:

The following is a short survey by Next Generation Nepal to help us better understand how foreign volunteers were able to help after the earthquake in Nepal. It should only take you between 1 to 5 minutes to complete.

We are interested in types of volunteering by foreigners that were genuinely helpful, and types that were perhaps not so helpful. We have distinguished between the emergency phase (0-3 months) and the early recovery phase (3-6 months).

Please note that we recognize the important role that Nepali volunteers played after the earthquake (this was very clear), but for the purpose of this survey, we are interested in the role that foreign volunteers played.

We would be grateful if you could answer the following questions. Please explain your answers.

We look forward to your feedback. Thank you!

1. In a few words, please tell us what your connection is to Nepal and/or volunteering.
2. To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were helpful/beneficial in the three months directly following the earthquake (emergency phase)?
3. To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were not so helpful or hindered efforts in the three months directly following the earthquake (emergency phase)?
4. To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were helpful/beneficial in months four to six after the earthquake (early recovery phase)?
5. To your knowledge, which types of volunteering (involving foreigners) with earthquake affected communities and the organizations supporting them were not so helpful or hindered efforts in months four to six after the earthquake (early recovery phase)?