
The Great Earthquake — One Year Later

April 25th, 2016 – Martin Punaks remembers the great earthquake of 2015 and what it meant for the children of Nepal. He explains how NGN responded and reviews NGN achievements in the aftermath. This letter was published on NGN’s website, Facebook, and sent to our database of supporters on the anniversary of the earthquake.

It was one of those warm sunny Saturdays that make Kathmandu so pleasant in April. I was with my own family, talking to my five year old son, when I noticed something was not right. There was a strange noise, the birds were flying frantically... I looked up... the buildings! “Earthquake”, my wife said calmly over the deafening rumble and fuzzy air. “Get down!”

We sat on the ground and bent our heads forwards. My five-year-old son sat between my legs as I tried to cover as much of his body as I could with my own. The ground violently shook back and forth like a ship on stormy waters. The air was filled with the roar of destruction. The shaking just kept going, and going, and going at incredible intensity. Then gradually the ground calmed and the noise reduced. We stood up and looked around. We were all alive. It took us a few hours to fully appreciate the magnitude of what had happened. I wandered the streets along with thousands of other shell-shocked people, gaping bewildered at the fallen buildings.



Thankfully, at NGN, we had prepared for this day. We had a comprehensive “earthquake plan”, and one-by-one I received text messages from our staff confirming that they – and the children in our care – were safe and well. Nevertheless I had to check for myself, so I drove to the NGN transit home where I was overjoyed to find 17 children playing games in a make-shift tent of tarpaulins, and being cared for by our staff and – believe it or not –the Little Princes! Yes, the now young adults who NGN’s founder, Conor Grennan, had made famous as children in his book, *Little Princes*, had kept their promise that in the event of an earthquake they would protect the younger children. In addition to this we had four weeks’ supply of food, water and medicines, so even if the roads and airport were shut off, we could all still survive.

Within the heavily-cracked walls of a room at the Central Child Welfare Board, I joined the Government and other NGOs to plan what our response would be for affected children. We knew that the situation in Kathmandu was not as bad as the rural areas. But we also knew that the traffickers were already prowling the villages looking for children to remove them from their frightened parents and place them in profit-making children’s homes. To make matters worse, several children’s homes were already announcing hundreds of new places for children to come to Kathmandu. It was like the previous decade’s civil war all over again – families would be torn apart by hollow promises of safety and education, only to be used as fundraising tools by organizations wishing to profit from the millions of dollars of disaster aid money flowing into the country. All these unscrupulous organizations needed to succeed in their plans were children to be falsely presented as “earthquake orphans.” We had to act fast.



The Government announced new rules banning the movement of children over district borders, and banning the intake of new children into children’s homes. This bought us time – but now we had to get out to the villages. Our Program Director, Samjyor Lama, led the first mission to Sindhupalchowk; the worst affected district of Nepal. We loaded a truck with food, clothes and medicines, and – together with some of the Little Princes, Bikash, Dawa, Subha and Anish, who had volunteered to help – the team set off into the areas of massive destruction. They risked their lives from looters, aftershocks and landslides, but they were determined to serve their country and its’ people in its time of need. A few days later, Anna Howe, our 70 year old Executive Director, arrived from the United States; and before any of us could stop her, she had also jumped onto a bus and was headed out to Sindhupalchowk!

What Samjyor, Anna and the team found in Sindhupalchowk was shocking. Almost every home had been destroyed, thousands had died or been injured, and the people were desperate for help. They quickly realized that trying to “spread awareness” of trafficking in this dire situation would be insensitive – the people needed tangible support. So we established our first ever “Child Friendly Space” in a town called Barabise.

A child friendly space is a basically a large tent that acts as a safe space for children after a disaster. In the NGN child friendly spaces the children were offered structured play and learning activities, psycho-social counselling and locally-prepared nutritious meals. This gave them the opportunity to regain a sense of normality in their lives, and allowed their parents some much needed respite.

But our child friendly spaces were more than this – they also built trust with the local community, which in time, allowed NGN to start raising awareness within the community of the dangers of child trafficking and the importance of family preservation.



By July we had established 11 child friendly spaces in hard-hit villages where we had assessed there was a high-risk of trafficking. We had also supported the Nepal Police to establish two transport check posts where we could intercept buses to search for children who might be being trafficked to Kathmandu. When we found unaccompanied children on the buses, we rescued them, and the local government returned them to their families.

By now we were also able to roll out our awareness raising campaigns. These included a travelling acting troupe who performed a street drama about child traffickers pretending to be representatives of NGOs to lure vulnerable children to the city; several passionate street rallies led by school children demanding an “end to child trafficking”; leaflets and posters; competitions and speeches; and a radio jingle to reach the remotest families whom we could not access by road or foot.

Throughout all of this we worked closely with the local Government, who were incredibly helpful, despite the problems they themselves were facing in their personal lives. We also hired Nepali staff who understood the local culture, and who appreciated being employed after the earthquake so they could earn some money to rebuild their houses and livelihoods. Some of these local staff became heroes themselves – one of them went all the way to Kathmandu to rescue a boy who had gone missing, and he did it before we even knew about it!

Government statistics show that there were in fact only 156 children who lost both parents in the earthquake, and for all these children, efforts were made to place them in adequate care with other relatives, community members or reputable organizations. So in fact the claims by some organisations that thousands of children would be left to fend for themselves – insinuating that they should be placed in children’s homes – were simply not true. However, the risks of children being separated from their families by traffickers so they could be presented as “earthquake orphans” was very real. To counter these false perceptions, NGN’s team in Kathmandu worked closely with the international media.



We worked through newspapers and television companies to spread awareness of how orphanage trafficking works in Nepal and the importance of keeping children with their families. We warned people of the risks of paying to volunteer in illicit children's homes, and thus inadvertently fuelling the corrupt orphanage business. We also argued strongly in favour of more ethical ways of volunteering and "giving back" to Nepal.

As we reach the one year anniversary of the Great Nepal Earthquake, NGN feels honored to have had the opportunity to help Nepal in its darkest hour. One year later and we have achieved the following:

- We have directly supported over **1,400 children** in child friendly spaces.
- We have searched over **27,000 vehicles** for children being trafficked.
- We have intercepted **77 "at risk" children** being transported in vehicles without their parents.
- We have reached **46,000 local families** through awareness raising to warn them of the dangers of trafficking.
- We have supported **31 media articles** and features about child trafficking and the risks of orphanage voluntourism in post-earthquake Nepal.

All of this has only been possible because of the incredible generosity by kind individuals and organizations around the world who chose to support NGN. To them – to you – all of us at NGN say a heartfelt "thank you". We say thank you for thinking about the children of Nepal. We say thank you for believing in NGN. We say thank you for caring about your fellow human beings in their time of need. We could not have done any of this without you.

Martin Punaks
NGN Country Director