

Students lead the way

Country: Nepal

Organisation: National NGO

Hazards: Earthquakes



“When the local first-grade classroom needed strengthening, a fifth-grade student was the first to lend support.” Photo: Risk RED

Country and hazard overview

In 1999, a national NGO in Nepal dispatched an engineer to begin its first community-based safe school strengthening project on the outskirts of Kathmandu. The engineer went to the school site every day and got his hands dirty. While drilling, laying and pouring with the rest of the labourers, over time, the community began to trust him. In just four months the project seemed to be a success.

On one of the last days, the engineer noticed another small building on the school grounds. He learned it was the classroom for the first and second graders. Worried about this building being overlooked in the strengthening project, he called the community to a town meeting the following day.

Fifth graders create a turning-point

As the NGO’s funding had been exhausted, he asked the community to donate some of their own savings to help strengthen the small school building. In his mind, the parents, teachers and friends of the first and second graders could not deny the children the safety given to the main schoolhouse. He asked the community to raise hands for a pledge.

Slowly, arms were raised – but it was the hands of the fifth graders that were in the air. They were the first to pledge their meagre savings to their younger schoolmates. A cascade of funding followed. Inspired by their children, parents pledged cash and hours of labour, while teachers and the principal each gave one month’s salary. With no outside funding, the first and second grade building was reconstructed.

The schoolchildren, after learning of their own vulnerability, were the impetus for safe school construction, and became leaders in creating a culture of safety.

Post-earthquake

In the weeks after the devastating 2015 Kathmandu earthquake, the engineer anxiously called the community. A local resident reported that both the strengthened school building and the reconstructed first and second grade classroom had survived unscathed. Many houses around the school collapsed or were heavily damaged – but not all. Some residents had applied seismic-resistant techniques to their own homes after seeing them used in the safer school construction project. With relief, the engineer learned that those homes had withstood the earthquake.