

## Article

# Disaster relief aid as soft diplomacy: Case of Canadian disaster diplomacy in Nepal 2015 earthquakes

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## Abstract

This article explores Nepal Earthquakes 2015 as a case of Canadian disaster diplomacy, tracing the diplomatic ties between Canada and Nepal. We argue that the warming up of diplomatic relations between these countries in the 50<sup>th</sup> diplomatic year sprinted Canada's support following the 2015 Nepal earthquakes. The earthquakes increased Nepali Canadians' involvement in the relief efforts, reinforced their diasporic identities, and increased their visibility as a visible minority community within the broader Asian diaspora in Canada while surfacing the political divisiveness amongst them. Against this backdrop, we ask: what lessons can be learned for Canadian disaster diplomacy efforts in the South Asian region? Based on field evidence, we argue that non-state actors, western disaster aid, and local government efforts fail to supply disaster relief in socially optimal quantities. We urge Canadian disaster aid actors to critically reflect on their aid strategies for effective help, not merely rhetoric and band-aid solutions.

## Résumé

Cet article explore les tremblements de terre au Népal de 2015 comme un cas de diplomatie canadienne en cas de catastrophe, retraçant les relations diplomatiques entre le Canada et le Népal. Nous soutenons que le réchauffement des relations diplomatiques entre ces pays au cours de la 50<sup>e</sup> année diplomatique a fait bondir le soutien du Canada à la suite des tremblements de terre de 2015 au Népal. Les tremblements de terre ont accru la participation des Canadiens népalais aux efforts de secours, renforcé leur identité diasporique et accru leur visibilité en tant que communauté de minorité visible au sein de la diaspora asiatique au Canada tout en faisant ressortir les divisions politiques entre eux. Dans ce contexte, nous nous demandons : quelles leçons peut-on tirer des efforts canadiens de diplomatie en cas de catastrophe dans la région de l'Asie du Sud ? Sur la base de preuves sur le terrain, nous soutenons que les acteurs non étatiques, l'aide occidentale en cas de catastrophe, et les efforts des gouvernements locaux ne parviennent pas à fournir des secours en cas de catastrophe en quantités socialement optimales. Nous exhortons les agences canadiennes de l'aide aux sinistrés à réfléchir de manière critique à leurs stratégies d'aide pour être mieux capable d'offrir une aide efficace, et non seulement de la rhétorique et des solutions de fortune.

**Keywords:** disaster diplomacy, Canada, Nepal, Nepal earthquake 2015

**Mots-clés :** diplomatie en cas de catastrophe, Canada, Népal, séisme au Népal 2015

## Introduction: the diplomatic ties between Canada and Nepal

Nepal and Canada established diplomatic relations in 1965 (Government of Nepal, Embassy of Nepal, Ottawa, Canada, n.d.; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Canada, 2021) and have enjoyed longstanding friendly relations ever since. According to the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Nepal, the earliest cooperation with Nepal from Canada was in 1952 when Nepal joined the Colombo Plan. The official bilateral

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assistance commenced only in 1970 through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Nepal opened its Embassy in Ottawa on 1 October 2009. Canada has its Consulate in Kathmandu and has welcomed the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal of 2015.

From 1968 to 2013, Canada contributed approximately \$470 million in support of international assistance projects in Nepal. During the last five decades, Canadian cooperation strengthened Nepal's aviation sector and other areas such as energy, rural development, health, education, geographical survey, agriculture, poverty alleviation, health care, and food security. Canadian development agencies like the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Grand Challenges Canada (GCC), and Trade Facilitation Office played essential roles in implementing Canadian development assistance in Nepal.

In recent years, Canada has organized visits to Nepal to encourage Canadian companies to interact with the Nepalese business community to promote Canadian capabilities and cooperation in mutual interest areas, such as hydropower, infrastructure, and clean technology. In 2018, Canadian exports to Nepal totalled \$105.8 million –an increase of over 600% from 2018's total of \$14.8 million, seven times increase—attributable to significant increases in exports of soybeans, rapeseeds, lentils, peas, vegetable oils, and turbo propellers. In contrast, Canadian imports from Nepal in the same year totalled only \$13.7 million (Government of Canada, n.d.)

Canada actively supported Nepal in the aftermath of the 2015 Earthquake, as discussed in the upcoming section. Canada continues to fund modest international assistance projects in Nepal through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI). Canada has also contributed to reconstruction and relief efforts following natural disasters in Nepal, most recently in 2017, in response to flooding and landslides.

### **Disaster diplomacy: concepts and approaches**

Using Agency and Strategies as a conceptual framework, we explore Canada's disaster diplomacy efforts with States in the Indo-Pacific region, using Nepal as a case study. Based on the field evidence, we argue that non-state actors, western disaster aid, and government efforts alone predictably fail to supply disaster relief in socially optimal quantities, and the quality of services is questionable. The failure of Western powers like Canada to address crises was also exemplified in their response to the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, resulting in the deaths of over 1100 workers. It is argued that Canada's domestic stakeholders (Joe Fresh Brand) were prioritized over international stakeholders (Bangladeshi garment workers) (Hanlon & Brydges, 2023). Hanlon and Brydges further contend that missing out on such opportunities to interrogate power asymmetries could present challenges in the relations between Canada and the Indo-Pacific. In the case of the Nepal Earthquake 2015, we specifically explore disaster politics and the foreign policy implications of Canadian disaster diplomacy actors and strategies.

Our research aims to contribute to significant discourses on disaster diplomacy between the global North and the global South. We aim to unravel the disaster politics and explore how these politics are engaged and contested by the communities from the donor and receiving countries. By doing so, we deconstruct the standard humanitarian assumption that an immediate reaction to a disaster or a future disaster is a desire to help and to work together. We further analyse the notion of responsibility to protect (R2P) by wealthier

nations. The reality is that global power considerations, when aligned with their diplomatic interests, only prioritized providing disaster assistance in various forms to those countries in need of disaster relief.

Not all disaster diplomacy is only about disasters. Disasters can significantly encourage a diplomatic process with a pre-existing basis, but a disaster alone is unlikely to generate new diplomacy. Disaster diplomacy studies critically examine how and why disaster aid activities (disaster response and risk reduction) do and do not lead to diplomatic endeavours. Published literature on disaster diplomacy is classified into four categories: (1) Case studies (Cuba -USA; India- Pakistan); (2) Spin-off results by analysing how disaster diplomacy lessons are applied in other forms (for example, environmental and climate change diplomacy) and (3) Para diplomacy studies; this refers to non-state actors (for example, development aid agencies) influencing foreign and Aid policies and actively involved in building international relations (for example, CIDA, USAID, JICA) that are non-sovereign jurisdiction relations with States and international institutions. (4) The fourth area consists of the characterization and categorization of disaster diplomacy. They are (a) Active vs. passive disaster diplomacy, (b) the Proximity of the disaster diplomacy states, (c) the Aid relationship of the disaster diplomacy states, (d) the Level at which the disaster diplomacy operates, and (e) the purpose of the disaster diplomacy. This article contributes to the third category.

Disaster studies also have shown how misgovernance facilitates corruption, creates incentives for populating disaster-prone areas, hordes out self-help and other local ways of coping with disasters, and how formal government assistance to disaster victims makes matters worse. Published research also highlights the lesser role of weak states of the global South in managing disasters. Self-interested politicians are no different when confronted by an emergency than in ordinary times. For several reasons, disaster relief is a tricky public good. If not implemented well, scholars have argued that disaster relief and aid breed public corruption. Evidence shows that, at times disaster aid is used as a soft diplomacy tool by powerful western governments co-opting weaker countries to seek their vote in exchange for relief aid to back the more significant agendas of donor countries globally.

Both rich and poor states utilize a wide array of options in delivering their disaster diplomacy, from active engagement with global intergovernmental organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (created in December 1999), to bilateral aid calibrated to support existing foreign investments and diplomatic gains expected from the recipient countries and the regions.

Scholarly studies have also documented citizen diplomacy (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011). Ordinary people from all walks of life who represent what it means to be a Nepali, Indian, Canadian, or American share their national values and cultures as they meet and build relationships with people around the world. Citizen diplomacy takes various forms, from responding to an overseas humanitarian crisis to hosting foreign exchange students to learning a foreign language or studying another culture. For example, the United States Department of State works with citizen diplomat networks and nonprofits to expand the reach of American diplomacy and foster people-to-people exchanges.

This article argues that Canada has been (re) active in its disaster diplomacy with Indo-Pacific countries. This is also evident in Canada's efforts to maintain a diplomatic presence in the region by obtaining a Dialogue Partner status in the ASEAN, provided to only a select group of countries outside of ASEAN (Williams & Haynes, 2023). However, there is a further

need for Canadian disaster actors to critically reflect on their strategies that result in positive, legitimate action rather than mere rhetoric and band-aid solutions. Canadian humanitarian aid agencies are critical in creating disaster diplomacy opportunities by releasing media-related updates and lobbying with receiving governments through their partners in the receiving country. We could see ample coverage of Canadian support for Nepal in Canadian media sources and Nepali media outlets in Nepal and beyond. The purpose is to ensure that international relations and diplomatic efforts improve through disaster-related cooperation between the global North and South.

We use Kelman's explanation of disaster diplomacy as a process occurring alongside and interacting with other processes, such as the dominance of regional politics, natural resource extraction, and sustainable development. Even when some actors oppose disaster diplomacy, others might be passively opposed, neutral, passively supportive, or actively supportive. We further build on Kelman's hypothesis, which states:

Disaster diplomacy inevitably provides an opportunity to build disaster governance, but it is rarely evident because non-disaster reasons dominate diplomatic interactions. Disasters can improve, worsen, or have minimal effect on diplomacy, depending on how the situation is played and what the players choose. Disaster diplomacy usually has the potential to yield positive outcomes, but the active decision is often to ensure it does not work. (2005: 10)

### **The 2015 Nepal earthquakes and the Canadian response**

Immediately after the 25 April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, the Canadian Government decided to provide \$5 million in initial aid and deploy the Disaster Assistance Response Team (The Canadian Press (a), 2015). On 27 April 2015, the Federal Government of Canada declared that it would match all eligible contributions to the Nepal Earthquake Relief fund until 25 May (Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada, 2015; Global Affairs Canada, 2016). Canadians had started contributing even before this announcement, donating \$51.7 million to eligible organizations between 25 April and 25 May 2015 (Global Affairs Canada, 2016).

As a disaster response team, the Canadian Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) is made up of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members and civilian employees of Global Affairs Canada (GAC). The team has experts and specialists from across Canada. The DART is not a formed unit in a single place. However, members are identified, trained, and ready to go on missions promptly. DART equipment, stores, and supplies are maintained and are always ready to use. They are stored at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Trenton, Ontario (Government of Canada (a), n.d.).

The Canadian Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) was deployed in the Sindhupalchowk district of Nepal to aid relief efforts led by the Government of Nepal between 2 May and 29 May (Government of Canada, 2017). During this period, the team removed more than 3,000 cubic metres of rubble and cleared roads benefitting 204,000 Nepalese isolated by the disaster. The team also distributed more than 355 crank radios to facilitate the connection between remote communities and relief efforts, treated more than 700 Nepalese, and distributed 75 water filtration units providing safe water for 3,400 people (Government of Canada, 2017).

The Government of Canada stated that it had collaborated with relevant stakeholders from the day of the disaster "to provide timely, effective and needs-based assistance"

(Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, 2015). However, Canadians in Nepal expressed dissatisfaction over the functioning of their government. They believed that Ottawa was not doing enough to help expatriates and travellers from Canada stuck in Nepal following the disaster. Some shared feelings of neglect and panic; Canadians also voiced that the Consulate in Kathmandu was neither visible nor helpful (The Canadian Press (b), 2015).

Retrospectively, Canada provided \$27 million in humanitarian assistance immediately after the earthquake, delivering emergency shelters, food and medical assistance, relief supplies, protection, education services, and access to clean water, as well as sanitation and hygiene facilities (Global Affairs Canada, 2016). Canadian humanitarian assistance reached 14 of the most affected districts, where more than 700,000 families received emergency shelter and relief supplies. In addition, 1.4 million people received emergency food assistance; more than 850,000 people accessed sanitation and hygiene, including safe drinking water. Canadian government sources show that Over 50,000 people received medical assistance, and more than 170,000 children benefitted from temporary learning centres and community-based psychosocial support.

In addition, 165,240 children received emergency school kits, and 379 children identified as separated or unaccompanied were either reunited with their families or placed in alternative care systems (Government of Canada, 2017). Charity Intelligence Canada, a group that informs donors about charities through evaluation of the effectiveness of Canadian charities, estimates that Canadians (individuals, companies, and governments) contributed more than \$113 million to disaster response in Nepal Earthquake 2015 (Charity Intelligence Canada, 2018).

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movements were among the most visible organizations in the aftermath of the disaster. Their emergency operation reached out to more than 3 million people with lifesaving assistance (Canadian Red Cross, 2019). More specifically, the emergency operation helped about 2.5 million people with food, 360,000 people with relief kits containing blankets, tarpaulins, kitchen equipment, and shelter toolkits, 247,839 people with safe water, about 200,000 people with cash assistance for immediate needs, 56,250 people with essential healthcare (Canadian Red Cross, October 2019). The Canadian Red Cross also set an example of immediate intervention by establishing an Emergency Field Hospital in Dhunche, Rasuwa District. The hospital management handed over to the community after training Nepalese health workers. The hospital also reached out to those unable to travel by establishing mobile clinics. This four-month-long operation treated 5,406 patients and delivered 31 babies through the efforts of 110 aid workers (Canadian Red Cross, 2019).

### **Drivers of policy: The role of *agency* shaping Canada's policy preferences**

Canada's diplomatic stances have also been changing, which might not necessarily favour developing or least developed countries like Nepal. Williams and Haynes (2023) contend that Canada's pursuit of foreign interests critically depends on its ability to exercise soft power, for example, collaboration with nations on similar interests, quiet diplomacy, and norm setting. Furthermore, Canada is an active player in the global disaster diplomacy arena. This section unpacks how different agencies and agents continue to influence Canada's disaster assistance policy preferences and vice versa.

Simpson (2018) contends that "Foreign aid is one of the instruments of Canada's foreign policy" (p. 140), and Canada's disaster assistance aid is often associated with the purchase of goods and services from Canada. Studies show that such practice reduces the benefits of recipient countries by a significant 30-40 per cent. Simpson (2018) further notes that previously

Canada's priorities for economic and social development overseas emphasized the importance of helping the poorest of the poor. That approach changed, and now diplomats must ensure Canadian priorities abroad favour Canadian economic interests, first and foremost. Critics of the new policy have already assailed the Canadian Government for dangerously lowering Canada's traditional diplomatic priorities, such as Aid, diplomacy, human rights, and peacekeeping, to promote Canadian industry overseas, especially in China. They say the battle for democracy in development areas will become a dangerously low priority compared to Canadian business interests, especially the mining sector. (141-142)

We believe that the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> year of diplomatic relations between Canada and Nepal earlier in the year sped up Canada's response to Nepal Earthquake in 2015. The swift disaster response further cemented the longstanding diplomatic relationship. The official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal mentions that Mr. Deepak Obhrai, the Canadian Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Human Rights, visited Nepal between 13 and 16 January 2015. Following this, the Canadian Minister of Labour and Minister of Status of Women, Dr. Kellie Leitch, visited Nepal in May 2015 regarding the potential of recruiting Nepali workers under a 'seasonal agricultural program' (Government of Nepal, n.d.).

We additionally argue that the warming up of diplomatic relations between Canada and Nepal on the 50<sup>th</sup> diplomatic year continued even after Canada's active support to the Nepalese Government in the aftermath of the earthquakes in 2015. This argument is in line with Kelman (2012)'s view that disaster-related activities can influence and spur diplomatic activities in the case of pre-existing, non-disaster-based diplomacy. Kelman (2012) further argues that disaster-related activities can affect diplomacy in the short run, but it is unusual; non-disaster factors impact diplomacy in the long run rather than disaster-related activities. Disaster-related activities can pose challenges for diplomacy, thus making disaster-related activities a low political priority. The Government of Canada swiftly responded to the earthquake disasters in Nepal by offering initial Aid and mobilizing the Disaster Assistance Response Team.

In 2016, the Chief Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Mr. Bob Paulson, visited Nepal and met with the leadership of the Nepal Police. Nepal has been a member of Canada's Military Training and Cooperation Program since 1991, and the Canadian Armed Forces have trained more than 250 Nepalese Army personnel.

The warm diplomatic relations between Nepal and Canada were also evident in the meeting between the Prime Ministers of these two nations on 24 September 2018 in New York on the sidelines of the 73<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly. While an official visit from Speaker of the Senate of Canada George J. Furey in February 10-11, 2020, at the invitation of the Chairperson of the National Assembly, illuminates the continued spry relations between Nepal and Canada.

The Government of Canada (2021) reports that Canada has supported Nepal in other ways. For example, it contributed \$13.9 million to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific to promote a gender-responsive entrepreneurial ecosystem in six countries, including Nepal. In addition, Canada has committed \$20 million to the UNFPA-UNICEF Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage in twelve countries, including Nepal.

An essential part of disaster management is disaster reporting and media presence. Charity Intelligence Canada (2018) highlights that disaster reporting is poor and that there is meagre information on the amounts raised and spent, as well as how the money spent met the needs of Nepal. They contend that a local charity, the *Dhurmus Suntali Foundation* performed better on the ground in addressing the needs of people than many well-known International Charities (Charity Intelligence Canada, 2018).

### **Canadian and Nepali Non-profits as Agents of Disaster Diplomacy**

A report states that there are more than 170,000 charities and non-profit organizations in Canada, accounting for 8 per cent of the nation's GDP, by some estimates, taking on critical work not pursued by for-profit businesses or public agencies. Charities have a long history of working with governments wanting to outsource initiatives (Guly, 2020).

To learn about the role of Canadian non-profits in the 2015 earthquake disasters in Nepal, the third author of this paper interviewed various individuals and organizations in Rasuwa District in the second half of 2021, including the Nepal Red Cross Society, and the staff of District Health Office of Rasuwa and local non-profits which worked in collaboration with other international non-profits.

All respondents clearly remembered the help provided especially by the Canadian Red Cross through the Nepal Red Cross Society within the first weeks of the earthquake. Their collective memory shows appreciation and gratitude towards the many donors that include Doctors Without Borders, Plan International, Oxfam, Save the Children, Salvation Army, Care Canada, and World Vision. The respondents also mentioned that the aid and help came from neighbouring countries: China, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Rasuwa community members appreciated the support of fellow citizens from many countries who came as volunteers. As described to the authors by one local resident:

The tents came from Canada, and the local Red Cross distributed them to us. These tents provided shelter to maybe 50 to 100 households and facilitated temporary classes at schools. The semi-permanent structures (prefab building materials) set up after the earthquake did offer a few critical health services to the quake victims.

(Personal communication with Surya Bikram Gole, January 2022)

The respondents also fondly recalled the mobile health camps provided by Canadian and Nepalese volunteers in the rural areas of Rasuwa District. The respondents highlighted the awareness programs on health and sanitation and the counselling services to children, school students, and teachers severely impacted by the earthquake.

The work of the Canadian Red Cross in Sindhupalchowk District was also highly appreciated and deeply etched in the memories of individuals working in the area in the aftermath of the earthquake.

The representatives of the Nepal Red Cross Society, including the program convener, a local volunteer, and the Chairperson person of the Society, remembered the Canadian Red Cross setting up a Health Desk near the Tatopani Customs Checkpoint as an emergency response immediately after the earthquake. They recalled the health desk's crucial role in providing services to the injured, pregnant, elderly, and those with chronic health conditions. This initiative is of particular importance as the road to the Dhunche, the district headquarters, and the capital city of Kathmandu was blocked in several places; people had limited or no access to health services. The respondents also mentioned a four-year health project operated by the Canadian Red Cross to reinforce the rural emergency trauma response system. This support additionally ensured effective health services in the district, including providing training to enhance health personnel's abilities and ambulances to three health institutions.

A follow-up on the help provided by Canadian Red Cross to Rasuwa and Sindhupalchowk –six years after the earthquake –shows that people have not forgotten the help that came during distress. The locals reiterated the importance of large organizations like the Red Cross disaster support. For example, one resident explained to the authors, "we saw that the role of helping organization during calamities is huge and important. But at the same time, we need to be careful about their agendas as some organisations involved in religious promotion" (Personal communication with K. Tamang (January 25, 2022)).

A vital contribution of the Canadian Red Cross is strengthening the rural health infrastructure, as seen through building prefab structures in Rasuwa District and reinforcing the rural emergency response system in Sindhupalchowk District. These contributions have evidenced that disaster responses need not merely be immediate short-term responses. However, they can also be opportunities for long-lived help and thus significant opportunities for diplomatic engagements.

The Emergency Disaster Assistance Fund (EDAF) is a draw-down fund administered by the Canadian Red Cross Society that allows for immediate Canadian support to International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) emergency operations in response to sudden-onset small- and medium-scale humanitarian situations, including natural disasters, non-recurrent health epidemics, and conflicts. The EDAF increases the effectiveness and timeliness of assistance to crisis-affected people (Government of Canada (b), n.d.).

Based on the analysis, we consider the critical roles played by non-profits as agents of forging disaster cooperation leading to strong disaster diplomacy. At the same time based on the published evidence, we also bring the reader's attention to the human rights violations by the staff of humanitarian organisations working in the Global South where weak States are abundant, and resources are scarce. For example, in 2017, Save the Children Fund fired 16 staff members over reports of sexual harassment and UK-based Oxfam reported it dismissed 22 of its staff after an investigation about using prostitutes in Haiti following a devastating 2010 earthquake (Gayle, 2018). Similarly, France-based Doctors Without Borders revealed it had fired 19 staff members for harassment or abuse in 2017.

Unfortunately, the respective governments did not ban or cut the funds to these organisations, suggesting that the Western States continue to co-opt and use these organisations as arms of their aid diplomacy, at times reproducing colonial structures, violating human rights of the people and communities in the recipient countries. Shaista Aziz who has worked more than 15 years as an aid worker specialising in communications for a



number of organisations, including Oxfam, where she worked for five years as communications specialist and media coordinator reports:

A culture of bullying, harassment and racism is rife among (humanitarian) agencies around the world. This is an industry in need of reform.... When I read the revelations that Oxfam workers had paid for sex in Haiti, perhaps from underage girls, while the country was trying to recover from an earthquake, I wasn't surprised. (Aziz, 2018).

### **Competitive Religious Philanthropy**

To what extent can religious traditions and institutions be part of disaster risk and recovery (DRR) efforts? Extending help to other human beings in distress is not only a Whiteman's burden. In all faiths, from *Dana Dharmam*, one of the Hinduism's and Buddhism's crucial practices, to Islam's *Zakat*, and Christian charity. Hence It is no coincidence that local religious organizations are at the forefront of providing relief (Oxfam, 2012). Chester et al. (2008) have argued that the disaster response is not independent of cultures or religions at all. Nepal is not isolated from this phenomenon.

How Nepali communities have responded to external disaster aid and relief? Is Communitarianism as a system of social organization based on small self-governing communities an answer to address trust deficit in disaster relief contexts? As an ideology Communitarianism emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to the community and the social importance of the family unit. The liberal communitarianism as theoretical model proposed by Etzioni (2021) indicates that in modern administrative structures, governments cannot function well unless the normative assumptions guiding their work are validated by communities that exist in the same territories that the administrative structures govern. In other words, States function best when national communities overlap with the areas encompassed by the states. Nikku (2020) argued that community resilience reflects resilient and resourceful community members who embody and practice communitarian values. Community disaster resilience cannot attain quickly and cannot be achieved through top-down policies and programs implemented via external disaster aid.

In the wake of Nepal's earthquakes, competitive religious philanthropy was evident through the power of existing religious tensions and ties that are shaping religiously inspired humanitarian giving in the wake of a disaster. Gajaweera (2015) documents and argues that religious 'forces influence not only charitable institutions, but also bilateral aid between governments. Take, for instance, the swift response of the Sri Lankan government to pledge medical aid assistance, military personnel, and engineers to Nepal. Although Sri Lanka is most often on the receiving end of international humanitarian assistance, it stepped up to be one of the first three countries to send relief to Nepal, deploying military troops outside of its sovereign territory for the first time in Sri Lanka's history.

Disaster aid to and through religious organizations from the global west is a critical element in the disaster diplomacy. After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck in the fall of 2005, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), USA widened the net of nongovernmental organizations, including religious organizations, through which it funnelled aid. Catholic Charities, United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), Islamic Relief, Buddhist Tzu Chi, ICNA Relief, Church World Service and Jewish Coalition for Relief (JCR) are some examples of faith-based organisations that are actively involved in disaster relief work in many countries of global south.

In the case of Nepal, The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) joined forces to provide shelter for 12,000 of the most vulnerable and marginalized families in the fourteen worst-affected areas following the earthquakes in Nepal in April 2015. The staff members from this joint relief project reported that about 12,000 people in five remote villages in the Rasuwa district, northeast of Kathmandu, received temporary homes before the onset of the monsoon and the following cold winter seasons in 2015.

Sharing Nepal's Catholic Bishop's graphic account of the country's catastrophic earthquake is another evidence of how religion and faith played out in accessing the relief aid. Describing how he was lucky to survive, through the website of Aid to the Church in Need (CAN) Canada (Griffin, 2015), could be seen how competitive religious philanthropy is connected and promoted through religious organisations from the global west. The Catholic Church is engaged in a major reconstruction project in the local area, with the rebuilding of 5,000 homes for those affected, the supply of clean drinking water, and other neighbourhood development programs for local people (Lozano, n.d.).

### **Does scale and destruction of disaster matter?**

On the early morning of 9 November 2022, an earthquake of 6.6 magnitude struck Doti district in the far western part of Nepal. According to reports, the epicentre was in Khaptadchhanna Rural Municipality of Doti District. Doti is about 430 km (270 miles) west of the capital, Kathmandu. According to Government of Nepal data, only six people were killed and eight were injured.

In the evening of 12 November, another strong earthquake was felt in Bajhang district. As of 14 November, affected people are living in the open and in urgent need of emergency shelter, as well as improved access to water, sanitation, and hygiene, psychosocial support, and protection services. Following the earthquake, Nepal Red Cross volunteers at Doti District Chapter were engaged in providing response and relief to the affected (Reliefweb, 2022). This disaster did not attract a lot of national and any international donors and media attention. It is perhaps due to the small-scale deaths and destruction caused by the disaster. No high-profile political representatives, donor representatives, faith-based organisations visited the disaster affected communities. Communities tend to pull together on their own and helped victims' families.

Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba tweeted and offered condolences to the families of the victims. He wrote that he had instructed the relevant agencies to arrange immediate and proper treatment of the injured and the victims (Radio Nepal, 2022). But did not even visit the disaster site. There were no reports of western countries offering help and aid. This evidence suggests that if a receiving country can manage the scale of destruction, the foreign diplomatic channels do not react, and their agencies and actors do not appear on the ground.

### **Citizen diplomacy: role of the Canadian Nepali Diaspora**

'Nepal is not OK. That's why we are planning to do a lot of fundraising and candlelight vigils,' Anil Pradhan, the President of the Nepal Cultural Society of B.C., told CBC Radio's Rick Cluff. Pradhan said he was wakened by a phone call in the early hours of Saturday morning. 'It was a terrible, terrible feeling. When I saw it, I was almost crying. Generally, I don't cry, but it happened to me.' (CBC News, 2015)

The funds raised by Canadians, including the Nepali Canadians, and those contributed by the Canadian Government were two significant sources mobilized in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake. Events like the earthquake in countries of origin reinforce the identities of diasporic populations; this increases their involvement in countries of origin as evidenced by the Nepali diaspora in British Columbia during the 2015 Nepal earthquake (Parajulee et al., 2020). Additionally, the earthquake allowed the Canadian Nepali community to gain domestic visibility as an individual minority within the broader South Asian community. This arrangement was to clarify earlier misconceptions that the Nepali Canadian community was a sub-group of the Indian community (Parajulee et al., 2020). However, this active engagement in visibility and earthquake relief was not the only dynamics seen among the Nepali diaspora in Canada.

Parajulee et al. (2020) noted differences in opinions regarding the disbursement of funds, rifts between Nepalese organizations, particularly those who wanted to channel the funds through the government mechanism, and those who were skeptical about the Nepal government effectively using these funds if they were even made available for their intended beneficiaries. "To some extent, these differences stemmed from ideological differences between the two groups: those who supported the prime minister's ruling party and those who opposed it" (Parajulee et al., 2020: 27).

### **Trajectory: Possible *strategies* for Canada**

Disaster scholars recognize the depth with which disasters are entrenched into societal histories of survivors and communities prone to disasters (Tierney, 2014; Sun and Faas, 2018; Nikku, 2018; Nikku et al, 2021). Following the evidence, disasters should not be framed as singular instances of 'crisis' that can be dealt with the international aid and support but instead identified as embedded in the culture, politics, compounding and interconnected with societal histories, an issue that is increasingly important to consider in delivering disaster aid by the western countries (Rivera, 2022).

From the Case of Nepal and Canadian disaster aid and diplomacy, we conclude based on the disaster diplomacy theory and frameworks that inform both developed and developing countries in dealing with disasters. The question needs further investigation: *Is Canadian disaster diplomacy with Asian countries legitimate and proactive?*

To make disaster diplomacy a legitimate action, the donor and recipient country's involved state actors must seek rapprochement rather than using the events as a public relations exercise or awaiting an opportunity to avoid proceeding further with diplomacy. We argue that the case of Nepal and Canada's disaster aid does not show enough evidence to argue that Canadian Disaster diplomacy is legitimate and initiative-taking. It is reactive and business as usual.

The overall evidence shows that heads of state from Canada and Nepal met during pre- and post-2015 earthquake disasters in Nepal, discussing issues and releasing joint statements. We would argue that these diplomatic activities are general but not entirely focused on disasters and building resilient communities. Whereas Canadians who donated their money, time, and skills aspired to see positive and sustainable changes on the ground and for disaster victims and families. There is a gap between political agendas and peoples' aspirations about the purpose of disaster aid. People-to-people diplomacy undertaken by several Canadian individuals and agencies, including the Nepali diaspora living in Canada, received more visibility and appreciation from disaster-affected communities of Nepal.

Along the same lines, Harrison and Huang (2023) assert that twinning or long-term partnership between non-central governments (for example municipalities), which has been widely used in Canadian international engagement, can be an effective strategy to enhance Canada-Indo-Pacific relations. Such formalized and localized engagement could be efficient and effective channels of disaster diplomacy. Ramraj (2023) similarly highlights that non-state actors in Canada and beyond can play an important role in global governance through plurilateral engagements and underscores the unparalleled diversity of the Indo-Pacific region for the same.

Disaster-related aid activities can catalyze, but do not create sustained cooperation (Kelman, 2006). Disaster diplomacy could succeed to some extent when those in power decide that they want it to succeed and then use their power for that goal. This situation is not likely to arise because of only disaster-related activities. Instead, pre-existing interests supporting disaster diplomacy are also needed. Therefore, realistic expectations are necessary to understand what disaster diplomacy in the form of Aid can and cannot do, and most critically what it should and should not do. We argue that making disaster diplomacy a legitimate and game-changing strategy for Canada while collaborating with Asian counterparts requires multi-track diplomacy operating on several tracks simultaneously, including official and unofficial conflict resolution efforts, citizen and scientific exchanges and skill development, international business negotiations, international cultural and athletic activities, and other cooperative efforts.

We conclude that it is critical for policymakers and disaster bureaucracy in Nepal (Asia) to understand that disaster diplomacy from a wealthy western nation like Canada has a significant impact on the development of disaster resilience in resource-rich but technology-poor Asian countries like Nepal. Therefore, realistic expectations are necessary to understand what disaster diplomacy in the form of Aid can and cannot do and, most critically, what it should and should not do.

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