

FROM DISPLACEMENT AND DESPONDENCY TO A NEW DAWN

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Even with the government's promise to properly resettle them and having been waited for three long years, 41 families displaced by a massive flood were compelled to take refuge in dingy makeshift camp on a football ground. The 2014-flood washed away the entire Rampur Tapu village of Bardiya district in Nepal where the families belonged.

Most of the shelters at Ward No. 4, Tulsipur, where they live, were broken and dented over the years further increasing their vulnerability to rains, heat and cold. Water and sanitation facility was limited and deteriorating with time. Many families shared a single community tap and toilet. Water supply was irregular and inadequate. Toilets made of bamboo or tarpaulin sheets were tearing out. Women, children, elderly and disabled were suffering disproportionately.

After years of ghastly tedium of waiting in their wretched shelters each of the displaced families received NPR 50,000 as the first installment of the NPR 350,000- government resettlement package to purchase land. The remaining NPR 300,000 was to be made available for building house. All the 41 families jointly invested NPR. 2.05 million, which they received in total in a single plot of 0.16 hectare (1 *bigha*) of land as NPR 50,000 was not enough to purchase land separately for each of them. Ironically,

however, around the same time the government issued a stay order prohibiting land fragmentation. This served a blow to the displaced families as they now would not be able to obtain separate land ownership certificates, which was a must for receiving the remaining installment for building houses on the collectively purchased land.

The flood survivors really got themselves into a fix. Coincidentally, on 1 November 2017, Prakriti Resources Center (PRC) research team met the displaced families during a study conducted in collaboration with ActionAid Nepal (AAN). About a dozen residents participated in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on issues of flood, landlessness and displacement.



Photo 1: Temporary shelters of Tulsipur football ground

The participants provided the study team clear insight into the difficulty they were facing in the temporary shelters.



Photo 2: Bimala B.K sharing her story with the research

Bimala B.K, one of the displaced family members, echoed the pains of the families: "We have spent more than three years in these temporary shelters. Our children suffer from diseases like pneumonia, dysentery, fever, typhoid etc. In rainy season, the area gets inundated and our roofs leak. We are unable to cook food and eat in time. We have made our children sleep with empty stomachs several times. In winter, it is extremely cold. While summer heat is extreme, and we cannot sleep inside so we go outside in the field to spend the night."

As the FGD proceeded, the team came to know about the land parceling and land ownership certificate issue that was going on for months. Even after receiving the first tranche of the government resettlement grant and collectively purchasing a plot of land, these families were denied further installments as they did not have separate land certificates. The District Land Revenue Office rejected the survivors' formal request to provide them separate land ownership certificates. It cited the government's decisions to put land fragmentation on hold.

PRC took it as an opportunity to help the displaced families find a solution. PRC organized a programme on 29 December 2017 bringing together concerned stakeholders from government and non-government sectors to share the findings of the study, where it

brought the issue to the attention of the Ministry of Land Reforms and Management (MoLRM).

The representative from the Ministry made it clear that the objective of the government's decision to stop land fragmentation was to regulate land plotting for business purposes and not to prevent the displaced families from securing land certificates. PRC coordinated with Community Self Reliance Center (CSRC) and National Land Rights Forum (NLRF), which advocate for land rights for the landless, displaced and land poor people. These organizations took up the issue with several authorities concerned at the district and central levels including the ministry, department, municipality, survey office and land revenue office in Bardiya to address the issue in question.



Photo 3: Land ownership certificates brought smiles to the faces of the 2014 flood victims in Bardiya (Photo source: CSRC Nepal)

After several consultations the displaced families once again lodged a formal request at the Ward No. 4 office at Gulariya, Bardiya. The Ward office forwarded the request to the

District Land Revenue Office of Bardiya, which then sent it to the Department of Land Reform and Management in Kathmandu seeking its decision. Finally, in about 3 months of

continued joint efforts the Department accepted the request to allow land parceling.

On 22nd March 2018, 33 out of the 41 displaced families received their separate land ownership certificates, while others are in the process.

Seven of the 33 households have made joint land certificate. The 33 households have already finished their land parceling. They have now heaved a big sigh of relief. New hopes and a sense of belonging and security have dawned in their lives.

“While my family was living in temporary shelter on the football ground, I always lived in constant fear of being evicted as it was a public land. Now that I have my own piece of land to build a house, I am really happy. I have peace of mind and no fear for my family’s security; nobody can chase us away. Our new place is spacious and we don’t have to live in congested shelter anymore. Land parceling has just been finished and right now, we are engaged in making road and drainage in our area. Upon our request, the municipality has provided us eight drinking water supply taps-a tap for five households,” said an elated **Om Prasad Shahi**, one of the recipients of the land ownership certificate.

Mr. Shahi, who used to work in Malaysia, now plans to not return there. *“I have a plan to start a poultry farm near my home. I don’t want to go abroad for employment now,”* he said.

It has been an equally inspiring experience for PRC and the collaborating agencies, AAN, CSRC and NLR, as their small initiatives contributed to lifting the displaced families out of despondency and thereby helping them starting life over.

It may not be generalized, but what one can deduce that all government orders or decrees may not be just "restrictive" as generally perceived. This case story clearly shows how not having clear understanding of the

government orders can lead to suffering of many years. Therefore, those affected by any such government orders need to seek clarity from responsible authorities on their own or through competent agencies instead of accepting such orders in their face value and keeping their problems unresolved. And there are government officers, who have a sense of service, and willing to responsibly act upon evidenced information about people's problems.