

Reinventing Nepal's last village

Kutiyakawar is a beautiful community of Dodhara-Chadani municipality situated in Kanchanpur district, Sudur Paschim province of Nepal. One must cross two narrow suspension bridge built over the Mahakali River and Jogbuda River to get to the village, so access is only possible on foot or a two-wheeler. Access via four-wheelers is only possible through the Indian side which makes it more challenging to conduct disaster preparedness and response missions. Having the Indian land just a few steps away from its compound, the village is also known as "The last village".

Kutiyakawar community is a small landmark and a riverine island surrounded by the two major river systems viz Mahakali and Jogbuda which had been hit by frequent floods of smaller magnitudes in the past causing floods and inundations regular phenomenon along with numerous threats experienced by villagers posed by the same. However, in October of 2021, due to continuous rainfall, the village was inundated by a huge, unprecedented flood since as far as 1965.



Picture 1: Last Village Kutiyakawar, Dodhara Chadani, Kanchanpur, productive agricultural area inundated during flood.

By the time the villagers discovered about the flood, water had already entered the houses closer to the river. The villagers saved their young ones by tying their shawls, saris, and dhoti (traditional Nepali cloth) high inside their homes where the flood water couldn't reach and placing them on it. They were also able to save some important documents and belongings through the same process. However, most of their crops including rice (paddy) were destroyed as the flood rose about four feet which overflowed their fields. The

food stocks at home were completely ruined as well. Most of their cloths were displaced which left them with just the drenched clothes they were wearing. They came down to borrowing clothes from their relatives and neighbors to survive.

“I was alerted about the flood at around 12:00 noon. It had already reached knee level when I got out of my bed. My heart shivered in fear. One of my relatives came to help and carried my father-in-law to safety. I had to drag my mother-in-law to a safe place while carrying my daughter on my shoulder. I felt that we were all going to die” Basanti Sunar, member of Community Disaster Management Committee (CDMC) shared in a sad voice.



Picture 2: Basanti Sunar shares how she overcame the challenges posed by the flood while conducting regular household chores.

The Rescue

Dodhara-Chadani municipality tried sending them boats for rescue operation, but due to high volume of flood, boats could not enter the village and operate in relief mission. Luckily, one of the residents of the village had a private wooden boat. Search and rescue task force, members of CDMC who were trained by the Asia Community Disaster Preparedness and Transformation (ACT) Program, implemented by local partner of OXFAM in Nepal, NEEDS-Nepal, rescued the victims with the help of this boat. Since they only had one boat for relief operation, they had to do a lot of back and forth in terms of rescuing multiple residents to a safe place. “I know how to swim, so I wasn't as worried about myself as I was of my grandchildren because they were very small and couldn't protect themselves” said Shyam Bahadur, Resident.

They primarily focused on rescuing lactating mothers, pregnant women, children, persons with Disabilities (PWDs), senior citizens, and those whose houses were nearer to the river. Later, the municipality's boat was also accessible, and they were able to evacuate everyone from the village. The rescue team had to break

the walls (mostly made up of mud, straw, and woods/bamboo) of the houses to evacuate people as in many instances they could not help the people come out of doors because of the flood. “When I was trying to escape, I drowned for a moment. Trained youths from CDMC saved me, they carried and put me in the boat. I cried when I was rescued and taken to a safe place.” Setu Devi a local resident shared in a soft voice. Thankfully, none of them lost their lives, but most of their cattle like cows, buffalo, and goats were all swept away.

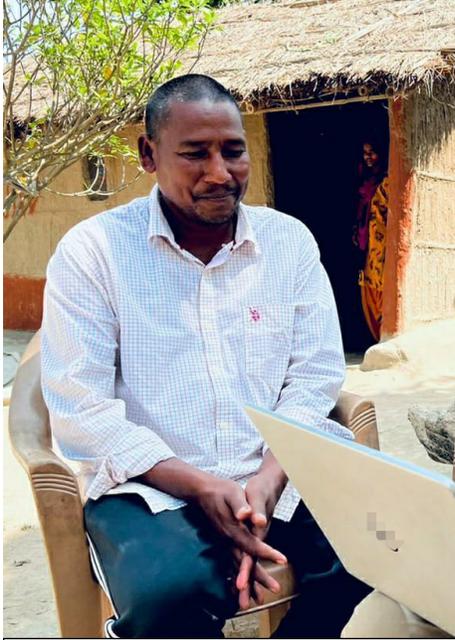


Picture 3: “We have very fragile houses. If any disaster occurs in the village, it will easily destroy. This will increase risk to our children. We will be safe if organizations and local government build us a community shelter house” Setu Devi.

“At 4:00 AM in the morning, when the water level was as par with my chest, I went alone till the last house of the village to check whether someone was trapped or needed rescue. There were few families there along with their children, so I told them to move with me as the place was not secured” stressed Tek Bahadur, president of CDMC.

Struggle after the evacuation.

Initially, the affected people were rescued and placed on the suspension bridge near the village. The rain was still on, and everyone was drenched. They used shawls, plastic covers and whatever they had, to make a shed, but it didn’t work as the rain was pouring. People were hungry, tired, and shivering of cold.



Picture 4: Tek Bahadur Sunar explained trained youths utilized their trainings as task force during rescue and evacuation.

After everyone was evacuated from the village, the villagers were taken to Ambika Higher Secondary School which is approximately 4 Km from the village. They stayed there for about a week, whereas the senior citizens of the village stayed for about 15 days. Since they didn't have any clothes and clean water to drink, they had to depend on neighboring village for these. People were desperately facing hunger as most of their food was destroyed.

It was impossible to return to the village even after the level of the water reduced because everything was destroyed and the wastes along with woods brought by the flood covered most areas. On top of that, snake bite was a major risk.

CDMC and their role during the flood

The Community Disaster Management Committee (CDMC) members who were trained by ACT/ NEEDS- Nepal(Oxfam's partner organization) partnership project alerted the residents through emergency evacuation sirens. Phone calls and as basic as warning shouts were made to inform those nearby about the floods.

Community Disaster Management Committee (CDMC) is a local volunteer group established under ACT/Strengthening Community Preparedness, Rapid Response and Recovery (SCOPR3) project by Oxfam/NEEDS-Nepal. There are thirteen members in this group consisting of both male and female. They are trained to respond to any crisis and actively participate in search and rescue mission in the village during disasters.

They ring sirens in case of disasters like floods and conduct rescue operations. They also alert the entire village as a part of early warning system and liaise with the government and non-government organizations for humanitarian response.

Prior to the formation of CDMC, the Nepal government had not trained the villagers to take any proactive measures during disaster. So, before their emergence, they didn't have any knowledge to save others. During such calamity, they just saved themselves and their families as they had no idea on relief and rescue procedure. After the formation of CDMC, task forces were trained on search and rescue, first aid and early warning system to rescue the residents of the village and more importantly whom to prioritize.

During the training, as a part of the practical assignment they were taught by simulation and drill exercise. The CDMC members practice this drill every three months. The training also helped them to familiarize with the relief materials like head torch, life jackets and the ways of using it. They are also aware the village residents about the siren which indicates emergency like fire, storm, flood and so on. "If these trainings have not been received, people might have lost their lives and accidents might not have been avoided" Basanti shared.

Before the project, they used to demand their needs and requirements to the government individually which was undervalued. The village didn't have electricity and solar electricity before. The roads were not as what it is currently, so they were forced to walk from the road which falls under Indian area. "Before the project we were like a Frog inside a well (a local expression where one spends all his/her life inside a well unable

to come out and unaware of what's happening outside)" said Tek Bahadur. After the formulation of CDMC, they started working in groups and making demands in the same voice to the ward and municipality office.

Assistance after the flood

After the flood, Oxfam made an immediate support by enabling important items like warm blankets, bed sheets, mats, tents, water purifier, mosquito nets, hygiene kits, menstrual hygiene products to the flood affected. It also helped them by enabling commodity voucher of approximately Nepalese Rupees (NPR) 7000-8000. The victims were able to use this voucher to purchase food products, medicines, clothes, seed, fertilizers, and any important items which they require.

Most of the houses of the Kutiyakawar were completely damaged by the flood. Oxfam supported these families with NPR 15000 worth of Cash Voucher Assistance (CVA). They identified these people through the recommendation of CDMC. They sent the details and recommendation to the ward office for approval. NEEDS-Nepal deposited the amount in their bank accounts after the approval from ward office.

Kutiyakawar village had regular water pumps during the time of the flood. These water pumps were covered with filth and wood brought by the flood. They didn't have access to pure drinking water for more than a week because the water from the pumps was very dirty. Oxfam supported them by building four raised hand pumps (Uchho Dhara) in their community. Since these water pumps are built in a certain height above the ground, the dirty water is unable to reach that height and people will be able to access it if similar disaster occurs in the future. Another major loss of the village was most of their cattle could not survive the flood. This affected the people financially because they didn't have insurance of their cattle prior to the flood. Currently, with the support of Oxfam, they are aware of the insurance policy. At present, most of the community members have their cattle insured so, claims can be made if similar case occurs in the future.

"The flood also destroyed the toilets in the village. Due to its unavailability, we used to go to fields and riverbanks which was very risky particularly during nights. Primarily, it caused pollution and lack of sanitation. Besides that, we were at risk of animal attacks, and we were also exposed to a potential risk of gender-based violence. After the flood, Oxfam helped us by reconstructing the toilets which helped to make our lives easy" Basanti shared while cleaning her compound.



Picture 5: While cleaning the passageway in front of the toilet, Basanti expressed the risk of threats they faced prior to the reconstruction of the toilet.

The villagers are dependent on agriculture as their main occupation. All their crops were destroyed by the flood which made them vulnerable in terms of accessing food. Hence, in terms of livelihood support, Oxfam helped them farm sugarcane in one 0.1337-hectare land. They sell the output generated from the land to the mill factories.

ACT/SCOPR3 Project

Established by Oxfam, the main objective of the project is supporting/ helping community, wards offices, municipality and district offices for Preparedness, Response and Recovery. It also works to improve the livelihoods of vulnerable families. It liaises with the municipality and identify the communities which are vulnerable to disaster. The project also identifies the vulnerable communities with the help of districts as they have DPRP (Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan) and they update it every year with the help of development organizations. Then the government approves and lets the project intervene in the areas which have been identified as vulnerable. SCOPR3 then forms or reforms (which was created by Red Cross in the past) CDMC by making a standard guideline. Currently, they mostly work in Mahakali basin of Nepal. The project enables capacity building training to the CDMC members, and they lobby with ward offices and municipality regarding the community issues and needs. Another important work of SCOPR3 is to inform the community regarding flood as a part of an Early Warning System (EWS). There are River Gauge (an instrument to measure the level of the river water) in two communities Darchula Dattu and Dareldhura Parigaun where the project works. Through the measurement of River Gauge, the project pre notify the villages which are at risk of flood. They also link village to the community who uses river gauge for quick information flow. This enables people to evacuate from risk zones on time which will help them to save their lives and protect the belongings which are very important to them.

The main agenda of SCOPR3 is to equip CDMC in such a way that in the future even if the project phases out, CDMC could play the role of a co-lead (lead agency being the government) during disasters and emergencies.



Picture 6: The last village of Nepal Kutiyakawar in support with SCOPR3 project are ready to take charge during disaster and emergencies in near future.