



CASE STUDY

Transforming School Safety in Nepal

A case study on the achievements of close to 25 years of collective efforts in school safety, leading to the implementation of the Comprehensive School Safety (CSS) Framework, in Nepal.

The Context for School Safety in Nepal

Nepal, a landlocked Himalayan country, faces various natural and human-induced hazards along with climate change impacts. These have included floods, earthquakes, and civil war from 1996 to 2006 that have severely impacted education infrastructure, children's safety in school, and children's learning.

Over the past 25 years, Nepal has dedicated itself to enhancing school safety. This journey encompasses diverse initiatives and learning continuity efforts. By 2023, in collaboration with UN and INGO partners, the Comprehensive School Safety (CSS) Framework has been implemented in over 23% of the country's schools, approximately 8,000 schools. The government's education sector plan now aims to rapidly expand CSS coverage, addressing local hazards, including those linked to climate change.

This case study outlines Nepal's evolving approach to Comprehensive School Safety, with a significant turning point being the 2015 earthquake and its aftershocks. Today, Nepal stands as a leader in this field, contributing significantly to regional and global disaster risk reduction policies within the education sector.



Illustrations are taken from Nepal's Comprehensive School Safety Implementation Guidelines 2075, courtesy of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

School safety in Nepal before 2015

In 1988, Nepal was struck by one of the deadliest earthquakes of the twentieth century - and the biggest the country had endured in more than half a century. An estimated 14,000 classrooms were destroyed as a result, and education was disrupted for more than 300,000 Nepalese children in the following years.

In 1996, a civil war commenced in Nepal, lasting more than a decade. The conflict had significant and complex impacts on educational infrastructure and learning, with the destruction of schools and classrooms, abductions of children and teachers, and substantial internal displacement. Political unrest continued beyond the end of the war in 2006, with documented reports of attacks on schools as late as 2011.

As a result of these enormous challenges, several programmes were initiated to identify and manage risk in the education sector, ranging from the School Earthquake Safety Program (1997), the School Sector Reform Program (2009), the Ministry of Education's Roadmap for DRR in the Education Sector (2012), and the Strategy for Increasing Disaster Resilience for Schools in Nepal (2014). Nepali school safety advocates from organisations including the National Society for Earthquake Technology, GeoHazards International, and the United Nations Centre for Regional Development, provided leadership to regional and global experience in school seismic safety and community-based school construction. They also gave impetus to the 2007 Ahmedabad Action Agenda for School Safety, which began to identify the various stakeholders important to school safety, and in 2010 proposed the first version of the intersecting pillars of what would become known as the CSSF in 2012.¹

Evolution of Comprehensive School Safety in Nepal

School safety – a national priority since 2015

The major earthquake of April 2015 and subsequent disasters compelled Nepal to prioritize comprehensive school safety. These events led to significant loss of life, destruction of schools, and disrupted education for millions of children. In response, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology initiated actions to establish a national framework for Comprehensive School Safety (CSS). This approach gained further prominence during subsequent disasters, such as floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding schools and ensuring educational resilience.

CSSF Foundation: Enabling Systems and Policies

In Nepal's [School Sector Reform Program \(SSRP\)](#) by 2009, disaster risk reduction played a significant role. This encompassed mainstreaming through school safety action planning, strengthening infrastructure, capacity development, climate resilience, and the establishment of a joint Thematic Working Group on DRR, supported by both IGOs and INGOs working in this domain. It's noteworthy that the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2006-2014) integrated DRR as a 20% component, emphasizing 'local content.' The introduction of the [Child Friendly School Framework \(2010\)](#) further emphasized the

¹ [Disaster and Emergency Preparedness: Guidance for Schools](#) (2010). World Bank IFC

importance of health, security, and protection, including specific requirements for first aid and fire control within schools.

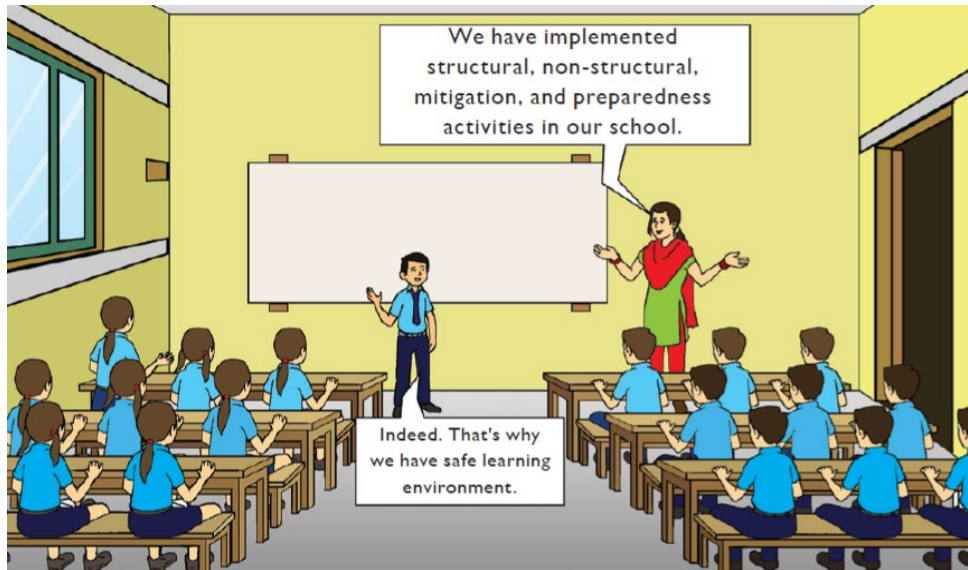
Recognizing the impact of political unrest and documented attacks on schools in 2011, the Government of Nepal issued [the Schools as Zones of Peace \(SZOP\) National Framework and Implementation Guideline](#). This aimed to elevate high-level political commitment to safeguard education during conflicts, ensuring uninterrupted teaching and learning.

In 2012, with support from UNICEF, UNESCO, and Save the Children, Nepal undertook a comprehensive national [mapping of actors and initiatives relevant to Disaster Risk Reduction \(DRR\) in Education in Nepal](#). An evidence-based context analysis known as the [Nepal Education Sector Snapshot for Comprehensive School Safety and Education in Emergencies](#) (2014), laid the further groundwork. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education, with technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank, developed a visionary [Strategy for Increasing Disaster Resilience for Schools in Nepal](#).

The new [School Sector Development Plan 2016/17-2022/23 \(SSDP\)](#) prioritises CSS and includes a commitment to develop and implement a plan “to make school education resilient” and, with UNICEF’s facilitation in drafting the SESP 2022-2030, helped establish Thematic Committees and working groups to ensure partner support to implement the sector plan, which as included setting up a joint working group for Comprehensive School, Safety and Climate Change and green schools. These mechanisms are not the key basis for scaling up CSSF nationwide.

The Ministry of Education formulated a [Comprehensive School Safety Master Plan](#) (2017), and in 2018, a roadmap for DRR within the education sector, known as the [Comprehensive School Safety Minimum Package](#) (2018). This initiative explicitly prioritized mainstreaming DRR into education policy and planning, safe school management, and DRR in teaching and learning. Importantly, this predates the inclusion of DRR in Nepal's National Development Plans. This was followed by a *Communication and Dissemination Strategy* and [Comprehensive School Safety Implementation Guidelines](#) (2019) for nationwide scaling up.

Many of these developments were critical, foundational precursors to Nepal's current approach and programs for disaster risk reduction and resilience within the education sector.



CSSF Pillar 1: Safer learning facilities

The [School Earthquake Safety Program \(SESP\)](#),² initiated in 1997 by the National Society for Earthquake Technology-Nepal, succeeded in retrofitting 95 government schools in its first ten years. Between 2009 and 2013, almost 300 schools in Kathmandu Valley were retrofitted, 80% funded by AuSAID/ADB and 20% by the government. The retrofitting was carried out directly by the Department of Education. These investments paid off, as schools that had been retrofitted against seismic shocks performed much better during the 2015 earthquake than those that were not.³

The [Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium](#) (2011-2016) prioritised school (and hospital) safety as the first of its 5 Flagship Programmes and included a component on improving the physical infrastructure of schools.

Immediately after the 2015 earthquake, UNICEF supported the Government as the co-lead for undertaking the [Post Disaster Needs Assessment \(PDNA\)](#) and the government's structural assessment of 5,146 schools in 11 (out of 14 earthquake-affected) districts. Education Cluster co-leads and partners (including WASH and Protection) advocated strongly to ensure that children did not return to damaged or vulnerable classrooms, and worked with government to make sure that resumption of learning took place in alternative safe spaces.

Between 2015 and 2019, the [Nepal Safer Schools Program \(NSSP\)](#) of the World Bank – Global Facility for Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR)'s [Global Program for Safer Schools](#) conducted a detailed survey on school damage, *Structural Integrity and Damage Assessment (SIDA)*, through which field inspections of more than 18,000 school buildings in the 14 districts most affected by the earthquakes were completed. A prioritised investment plan for school reconstruction was then developed, together with an online management information system to integrate SIDA with other MoEST databases, which involved the training of 70 local engineers.

² See also <https://www.nset.org.np/nset2012/index.php/successstory/successstoryview/successstoryid-4>

³ PreventionWeb (2022). <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/schools-saved-and-lessons-learned-nepal-earthquake>

With this evidence, and the [SSDP](#) in place at the time, education sector partners and donors stepped in to support the goal of reconstructing or retrofitting at least 7,553 schools by 2022.⁴ These efforts laid the groundwork for additional [support provided by the Asia Development Bank](#), and bi-lateral donors (including the US, Japanese, Indian, British through the [NSSP](#), and Chinese governments) to safely reconstruct 800 schools.

The National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) led the development of [School Retrofit Construction Guidelines](#) under the NSSP, to provide construction teams with advice on quality assurance, health and safety, material specification, engineering construction drawings, step-by-step construction processes, and checklists to ensure the highest quality of construction.

[A Child-Centred Research-into-Action Brief on Best Practices in Community-Based School Construction \(2018\)](#), includes a brief case study on Nepal, noting that these efforts, building on more than 20 years of experience, have led to significant improvements in school infrastructure, enhancing the physical safety of students and staff and reducing the vulnerability of schools to disasters.

Importantly, concern for safer school facilities is *not* simply a matter of engineering and construction. [Safer Schools, Resilient Communities – A Comparative Assessment of School Safety after the 2015 Nepal Earthquakes](#) (Risk RED, 2018) includes findings about community-based school construction. Community engagement in school safety management is important in building trust, responsible use of resources, better risk awareness and application of knowledge to community safety. Training and engagement of local masons was more effective than engagement of outside masons. Where highly trained masons moved on, school staff and community members have become advocates for safer construction. In the absence of signage, displays, or visual documentation to educate new students and families about the earthquake-resistant retrofit or construction features, impacts of the safer school projects may be fading over time.

CSSF Pillar 2: School Safety and Educational Continuity Management

The CSSF in Nepal has facilitated mainstreaming and institutionalising risk management and school safety at the federal level and has been designed for implementation at provincial and school levels as well.

Early work in this area was initiated with support from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and other donors, and broad consortia of UN, IGOs, INGOs and Nepali NGOs. Examples such as the [DRR Management Toolkit \(2010\)](#) provided early foundations for contextualised risk management approaches in Nepal.

The Support for the Improvement of Primary School Management (SISM) project funded by JICA supported the Department of Education (the body that effectively implements and monitors the policies, plans and programmes run by MoEST) to develop and roll out the School Improvement Plan (SIP) guidelines and template. In 2016, the SISM project, with support from the Child-Centred Disaster Risk Reduction (CCDRR) Consortium supported the incorporation of school safety within the SIP guidelines and implementation across Nepal.

⁴ Govt. Nepal (2020), [More than 90 percent progress achieved in post-earthquake reconstruction: CEO](#)

The CCDRR Consortium worked with education authorities to co-design the Minimum Package (see above), adopted to support school safety and educational continuity management. Many of the takeaways in relation to Pillar 2, discovered in [Safer Schools, Resilient Communities – A Comparative Assessment of School Safety after the 2015 Nepal Earthquakes](#) were incorporated into the Minimum Package.

During the post-2015 earthquake reconstruction effort, more than 8,000 School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) were trained in disaster risk reduction and management, and more than 2,000 schools created School Disaster Management Plans which were integrated into SIPs.

The [Contingency Plan for Education Cluster of Nepal](#) (2018) covered disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and response, and successfully created safe learning spaces, trained educators, and developed context-specific DRR curricula. This plan bolstered school safety and resilience, reducing vulnerability to disasters and minimising educational disruptions.

*"The impact of the training provided to SMCs and PTAs on disaster risk reduction is quite visible in schools. The trained members have started implementing safety measures in their schools and have even managed to mobilise resources for the purpose."
Tomoo Hozumi, UNICEF Nepal Representative (2014-2019)⁵*

It is important to note that decentralisation in Nepal was only initiated in the 2010s, formalised following ratification of the new Nepalese constitution in 2015, and only in recent years has begun in earnest in the education sector. It is expected that provincial and local education levels will continue to need support for leadership and capacity development, and the sustainability of these past reconstruction efforts will depend heavily on measures pursued under the SESP 2022-2032.

CSSF Pillar 3: Risk Reduction and Resilience Education

Various initiatives have guided the integration of DRR and resilience education into curricula and teaching-learning practices and, over two decades, teachers, students, SMCs, and PTAs have received guidance and resources to promote a culture of preparedness and resilience at school and in communities.

From 2006-2011, ActionAid's 5-year project [Disaster Risk Reduction Through Schools](#) advocated for the integration of DRR into school curricula especially via textbook reform, as textbooks were central to all curricula at the time.

In 2010, integration of DRR into the curriculum by the Nepal National Commission for UNESCO and the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) of the MoEST was initiated.

Community-based construction efforts in Nepal helped to inform global guidance for [Towards Safer School Construction: A community-based approach](#) (2015). Videos from Nepal (and [in Nepali](#)) round out

⁵ UNICEF (2015) UNICEF, partners launch "Safer Schools' initiative to support Nepal earthquake recovery.

the guidance. Risk RED demonstrated the successes of community-based construction rather than externally provided construction.^{6,7}

Later efforts were based on UNESCO/UNICEF's [Towards a Learning Culture of Safety and Resilience: A Technical Guidance for Integrating DRR in the School Curriculum](#) (2014) (translated into Nepali). Immediately after the 2015 earthquakes, UNESCO designed a series of disaster management resources for the education sector, available in Nepali.⁸

The Education recovery programme after the 2015 earthquake provided a greater opportunity to promote and reinforce CSS. Many organisations incorporated DRR/CSSF components in SMC Orientations, teacher training, and capacity building of local governments.

CSS materials were disseminated to all 131 local governments of 14 earthquake-affected districts and schools. Where funding has been available, UNICEF and other development partners, INGOs, and CSOs supported local governments to scale up implementation and currently features as a key element of system strengthening for local governments across Nepal.

In 2016, the CCDRR Consortium worked with the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD), formerly the National Centre for Education Development (NCED), to develop a head teachers and teacher training package on CSS.

The national curriculum, revised since 2019, currently incorporates DRR and climate change adaptation (CCA) content across various subjects. However, community education and student-centred proactive campaigns to communicate this content remain to be implemented.

“The irony of climate change is the greatest victims are often the least to blame. Therefore, we require a global approach to help victims of climate disasters... It is our greatest hope that Nepal will have the resources to educate our children to participate in a green society and green economy that allows us to reach our goals for prosperous livelihoods without furthering environmental degradation.”

MOE of Nepal Representative

⁶ Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMC) are community-based groups with a strong local presence in Nepal. They serve as the point of entry for local government and other stakeholders to collaborate with communities on issues related to disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management, as well as to increase the community's resilience. Their main goal is to work on disaster preparedness, response, and recovery as well as disaster risk reduction (prevention, mitigation). This is done in part by several task groups, concentrated on first aid, early warning, search and rescue, and the assistance of community members who have particular vulnerabilities. They have also created systems for community fundraising for disaster risk management.

⁷ Paci-Green, R. (2016) [School Construction as Catalysts for Community Change: Evidence from Safer School Construction Projects in Nepal](#), International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters 34 (3): 32-54.

⁸ See: [Disaster risk reduction and management handbook; Disaster risk reduction and management: resource materials for policymakers and stakeholders; Disaster risk reduction and management: resource materials for students of class 1-5; Disaster risk reduction and management: resource materials for students of class 6-10; Disaster risk reduction and management: resource materials for teachers](#)

Challenges Ahead

Nepal's current transformation to a federal system of government means that leadership and support previously provided at national level will need to come from provincial and district levels as well as through local governments. This will create additional need for well-distributed capacity development. It is not yet well-understood how these needs are being met.



Lessons Learned

✓ Sustained effort

Over two decades, Nepal has developed a clear approach to Comprehensive School Safety (CSS). The 2015 earthquakes were a turning point, moving from pilots to institutionalizing change at scale. Continued effort is crucial amid global climate change discussions.

✓ Collaboration and coordination

Effective CSS requires constant communication and a facilitating organization. Clear lines of communication and responsibilities among stakeholders, including schools, local governments, and communities, are vital. Coordination must align with local realities.

✓ Leadership from National to Local Levels:

In a federated system, national education authorities are vital. Nepal established a common agenda, shared targets, and guidance for school safety. Maintaining communication as responsibilities shift is key, with support from Education Cluster partners.

✓ **Priority Agenda under SSRP/SESP:**

Collaboration among financing partners promotes school safety within the education sector. The CSS Technical Working Group oversees CSS interventions under SESP, emphasizing federal arrangements.

✓ **Collaboration and Partnership:**

Partnerships enhance CSS success. Local organizations like NCE, DP Net-Nepal, and international organizations (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, GPE) provide financial and technical support.

✓ **Community Involvement and Local Engagement:**

Engaging communities and local governments fosters ownership and support for CSS. Collaboration between schools, communities, and local governments strengthens CSS initiatives.

✓ **Engaging Students and Parents:**

Engaging students and parents promotes a culture of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and resilience.

✓ **Mobilization of Established Forums:**

Education Cluster partners promote CSS, disseminating tools and materials, strengthening local capacity, and raising awareness, especially regarding climate change.

✓ **Fulfilling the Technical Gap:**

Technical capacity for CSS needs strengthening, particularly in risk assessments, mitigation, and climate change adaptation. To date, the CSS minimum package has focused on disaster management and infrastructure requiring revision of current approaches to align to the updated CSSF 2022-2030 and a renewed focus on climate change adaptation.

✓ **Regular Assessments and Monitoring:**

Monitoring and evaluation inform CSS planning and decision-making at all levels.

✓ **Context Sensitivity and Inclusion:**

Advocacy for vulnerable groups led to the inclusion of Community Learning Centres in post-disaster assessments. CSS must adapt to Nepal's unique needs and vulnerabilities. The implementation of CSS in Nepal has resulted in the development of minimum standards for Safer Learning Facilities, School Safety and Educational Continuity Management, and Risk Reduction and Resilience Education, as per the three Pillars of the CSSF. Elements of success are identified below.

These concise lessons capture key insights from Nepal's implementation of Comprehensive School Safety.

Conclusions

Collective efforts to enhance school safety in Nepal span close to 25 years. Leadership from Nepal has consistently inspired others in South and Southeast Asia. Broad stakeholder agreement on the fundamentals of the *all-hazards* approach and the CSSF pre-date the first articulation of the framework in 2012. Stakeholder commitments to national school safety coordination mechanisms have often depended on project funding and as a result, have at times impacted a shared mission and mutually reinforcing activities in the context of sometimes competing global agendas or development priorities. Nevertheless,

greater momentum was achieved in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquakes, with collaborative efforts leading to the national adoption of policies and guidance materials for school infrastructure; significant advancements in creating safe learning environments and enhancing the resilience of the education sector, at scale; and the establishment of a minimum package of school-based activities for safety and educational continuity management.

Holding on to, and extending, these efforts remain an important challenge for Nepal, as the new federalism and a multiplicity of actors attempting to carve out spaces in the context of addressing climate change and related risks could undermine policy gains in Nepal. The lessons learned and insights from this case study can serve as a valuable guide for other practitioners seeking to replicate these efforts in their contexts.

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