

Richard Stilgoe, WaterAid & CRN Blog

As we remember the 7.8-magnitude earthquake that rocked Nepal three years ago, bringing houses crumbling to the ground and claiming the lives of nearly 9,000 people. I want to share my recent experience in Nepal with WaterAid and Child Rescue Nepal.



The first thing that strikes you is the wholeheartedness of the welcome. There seems to me to be a perfect – but depressing - straight line graph showing the relationship between material wealth and generosity. In the developing world, however poor the people, they share what they have. In the rich west, the more material possessions we have the more we clutch them to us and protect them with electric gates and locks and alarms. The people of Nepal can teach us a lot.

For a start, they can teach us how to drive better. A European driver, faced with an oncoming car and a gap the width of two cars, flashes the headlights and waits. A Nepalese driver blows the horn and charges forward, and almost always makes it with a centimetre to spare, scattering chickens, cows, dogs and a despairing teenage policeman making futile hand signals. Also involved will be a man on a bicycle delivering half a ton of steel reinforcing rods and an eighty-year old woman with a month's supply of spinach on her back. And a goat.

On our first day, we escaped Kathmandu's permanent rush-hour and drove into the Nagarkhot hills to see a 35,000-litre tank 1800 meters up. It serves 84 homes by gravity feed, providing one to three hours of water every day. This supply was seriously compromised by the earthquake, disrupting underground springs so the borehole no longer reached them. In fact, water systems across 14 districts were destroyed, leaving nearly 1.1 million people without access to clean water and good sanitation. The connection in this village has now been re-established, and training has been provided on how to fix the facilities should things go wrong again. We met dedicated volunteers

who make sure that the regular thump of the solar-powered Chlorine pump never misses a beat.



Annabel and I have now been with WaterAid to Ethiopia, Zambia, Uganda and India (twice) as well as Nepal. On every trip we have seen the same simple technologies that help people achieve safe water and practical toilets for themselves, the same effective (and enjoyable) hygiene education and the same partnerships with local organisations which ensure the sustainability of the work.

The next day we returned to the capital and went to Bhaktapur Square – a world heritage site that lost many buildings in the earthquake that are patiently being reconstructed. In one corner is Shree Padma Higher secondary school, with 800 children, and here is a perfect example of how charities can support each other.



People think of WaterAid providing safe drinking water in places where the current water supply is a distant and filthy stream, and

they do this tirelessly thought the developing world. But much of WaterAid's work is in education about hygiene, and education around menstrual hygiene, highlighting the need for private toilets for girls in schools and providing places for girls to wash or dispose of their sanitary pads. Without separate facilities, girls are often too embarrassed to go to school when their periods happen, and sometimes drop out altogether. Eighty percent of Child Rescue Nepal's trafficked children are vulnerable because they are not attending school.



The earthquake of 2015 indiscriminately destroyed temples, palaces and schools, and the Nepalis are patiently rebuilding these. Where mighty underground forces moved springs and aquifers, new sources are being found and utilised. Alongside these physical challenges, the county is dealing with the tectonic shift in a family caused by the sudden disappearance of a child taken into slavery. Again, say that out loud – “A child taken into slavery”. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?

The idea of losing a child or grandchild to slavery is unconscionable at any time, let alone in 2017. The world is in denial about it; no government wants to admit it is going on in their country, but there

is almost certainly no country in the world that is free from it. In Nepal some desperate families – sometimes through an uncle or brother-in-law or other relative at one remove from direct parenthood – will sell a child to a trafficker. Boy children can end up working in a metal factory, unpaid and unprotected from machinery, heat and exhaustion. One rescued boy used regularly to burn himself to stay awake, so severe were the punishments for falling asleep on the job. Girls, tragically and predictably, are often exploited as sex workers. Some children end up working in restaurant kitchens, or even in travelling circuses. All are lost to their mothers and fathers, until in a few triumphant cases CRN find them, rescue them and return them to their families while the police prosecute the traffickers.



If families can't be found, or were complicit in the child's disappearance, CRN house the rescued children in small family-sized care homes. We visited two of these, and in each one the delighted children showed us their rooms and their possessions and chatted enthusiastically about their new ambitious futures.

In the care homes and schools we visit, from Kathmandu to Hetauda, eight hours of mountain hairpins to the west of the country, we receive a glorious welcome with a marigold garland from every child, and enthusiasm from the teachers and children about the safety training they have had from CRN.



When I travel, I am often beguiled by a virtuoso playing a local instrument – a Kora, a pair of Tablas or in the case of Nepal, a Sarangi, a sort of ethnic violin. I usually buy one of these, convinced that my carefully honed western musical skills will enable me to master it when I get home. After hopeless efforts the family complains, and the instrument spends the rest of its life hanging on a wall. The Sarangi is no exception. It hangs there now as a warning against western arrogance.

In the room next to the one where the Sarangi hangs there is a loo, a basin and a tap that provides pure drinking water twenty-four hours a day. I take this for granted, as most of us do. But every now and then, I thank my lucky stars for it.



Within the great beauty of Nepal there are unthinkable things happening, but we were inspired by the people doing life-saving work, undeterred by little things like evil and earthquakes.

Richard Gilgoe