

## **Build Up Nepal case study**

<https://www.buildupnepal.com/>

The Build Up Nepal (BUN) case demonstrates a context-specific social innovation model for affordable and sustainable post-disaster rebuilding. After the 2015 Nepal earthquake left over 800,000 homes damaged, BUN pioneered an integrated “Homes and Livelihoods” approach focused on skills training and income generation to enable families to finance constructing disaster-resilient homes. Their insight was that rebuilding livelihoods was as crucial as rebuilding houses for holistic recovery. BUN’s model provides families a livelihood recovery grant plus technical assistance to build a locally-sourced earthquake-resistant core housing unit, which families then expand using income from small businesses. This participatory approach develops local construction skills aligned with building codes, includes women, and drives investment to affected communities. By 2023, BUN has rebuilt over 500 homes and trained 700 people in construction techniques and income generation, working with partners to scale the model. BUN demonstrates how grassroots organizations can innovate to find context-specific solutions to post-disaster rebuilding challenges.

### **Build Up Nepal: Rebuilding Lives and Livelihoods After Disaster**

In April 2015, a devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal, killing over 9,000 people and damaging or destroying over 800,000 homes. As the country struggled to recover, a small non-profit called Build Up Nepal emerged as an innovative model for post-disaster rebuilding by focusing on livelihood recovery along with home reconstruction.

Build Up Nepal (BUN) was founded in 2012 by Sudan Maharjan and Susanta Singh to improve housing conditions for marginalized families in the Kathmandu Valley. When the 2015 earthquake hit, BUN pivoted to respond to the immense need for rebuilding created overnight. However, its founders realized that simply constructing new houses would not be sustainable. With so many livelihoods lost in the quake, people could not afford materials or skilled labor to build back safer homes. BUN pioneered an innovative model that tied livelihood recovery to home reconstruction, enabling families to rebuild their own earthquake-resilient homes.

BUN’s integrated rebuilding approach targets affected families who lost their home or business and provides them a grant plus training in an income-generating activity like raising livestock or running a small shop. Participants use their new earning source to save up and purchase construction materials, while BUN provides technical assistance and access to specialized masons to build a disaster-resilient home. This integrated model helps families recover their livelihoods so they can afford to rebuild, while the new skills help them become more financially resilient.

By 2023, BUN has facilitated the construction of over 500 permanent homes and trained over 700 community members in construction techniques and business skills. Their model has been recognized by UNDP and scales through partnerships with other NGOs. From an

initial staff of 5 volunteers in 2015, BUN has grown to employ over 60 staff across Nepal. The integrated livelihood-centered approach pioneered by BUN offers an innovative model for affordable and sustainable post-disaster rebuilding.

### **Origins of Build Up Nepal**

Build Up Nepal (BUN) was co-founded in 2012 by Sudan Maharjan and Susanta Singh, two Nepali development professionals working in housing issues. Maharjan was an architect and urban planner, while Singh had experience with disaster recovery programs. They observed that many families in the Kathmandu Valley lived in unsafe, dilapidated housing due to poverty, rapid urbanization, and lack of formal land rights. With initial seed funding from Global Give Back Circle, BUN began work to construct disaster-resilient homes for marginalized families while also advocating for land rights and tenure security.

BUN's pilot projects demonstrated that simply building houses would not solve the issue sustainably. The cost of construction materials and hiring skilled masons still remained out of reach for families struggling with unemployment and income loss after resettling in the city. BUN began experimenting with adding income generation activities to their housing projects, but the model was still nascent when the devastating 2015 earthquake struck Nepal.

### **Response to the 2015 Earthquake**

On April 25, 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal, killing over 9,000 people and damaging or destroying over 800,000 homes. With over a quarter of the population affected, Nepal faced a colossal rebuilding challenge. Having worked on housing issues for several years, BUN was well-positioned to pivot their model to respond to the immense need for post-disaster reconstruction.

BUN's experience told them that building houses alone would not enable families to recover. The earthquake had taken away homes but also livelihoods and incomes. Without a strategy to rebuild livelihoods, families could not afford construction costs or might sell critical assets like livestock to build a house, undermining their long-term resilience. BUN co-founder Sudan Maharjan reflected:

“We realized that providing housing alone is not going to help these families in the long run if their livelihoods are not restored. We had to connect livelihoods to housing.”

This insight drove BUN to pioneer a ‘Homes and Livelihoods’ integrated model that tied income generation to housing reconstruction. BUN raises philanthropic funds to provide an affected family with two key things:

- 1) A livelihood recovery grant to invest in livestock, a small shop, or other income activity
- 2) Technical assistance and access to an earthquake-resistant core housing unit built with locally trained masons.

The family uses the income from their small business to save up and purchase construction materials like stone, bricks, wood, and roofing to build up the housing frame. BUN field staff provide ongoing advising on construction techniques aligned with Nepal's new building codes. Each household essentially 'builds back better' by constructing their own disaster-resilient home financed through livelihood recovery.

This innovative model was tailored to Nepal's context, with features like:

- Community-driven approach: BUN field staff are locals who speak the language and understand community needs
- Local construction: Masons and materials are sourced locally to boost recovery
- Resilient construction: Homes are built with earthquake-resistant techniques
- Affordable, accessible design: The core housing unit uses available materials and expandable design
- Gender inclusive: Women are actively involved in design and income generation activities

BUN received global recognition for this context-specific innovation, including an award from UNDP for "promoting locally-led solutions for sustainable post-disaster recovery" and funding from the EU and USAID.

### **Growth and Evolution of Model**

BUN started reconstruction in 5 villages and expanded steadily as philanthropic funding increased. By the end of 2015, BUN had built 145 homes and mobilized \$730,000. In their second year of operations in 2016, they increased home construction to 345 along with 640 people trained in masonry, carpentry, and other construction skills. BUN also grew strategically by partnering with Habitat for Humanity to rebuild over 260 homes in Sindhupalchowk, one of the districts most affected by the earthquake.

A key evolution was development of the 'One Home, One Skill' program which focused on equipping each family with an income generating skill suited to their interests and environment. Skills training was offered in livestock raising, small shops and retail, agriculture, sewing, and more. BUN field staff provided coaching on saving and financial management to enable families to purchase construction materials. Initiatives like 'moving libraries' were also started to offer youth education and psychosocial support.

By 2023, BUN has facilitated construction of over 500 permanent homes and trained over 700 community members in construction techniques and business skills. Their model has been adopted by partners like Habitat for Humanity and the Mountain Spirit Foundation to rebuild thousands more homes across earthquake-affected districts. From 5 volunteers in 2015, the organization has grown to over 60 employees based across 10 districts of Nepal. BUN co-founder Susanta Singh highlights how the livelihoods focus enables sustainable rebuilding:

“When we started, we thought housing was the critical need. But we saw how skills training and income generation activities were so important for families to have the financial capacity to rebuild. That is why our integrated approach has proven so effective.”

BUN continues to innovate on its model, recently incorporating climate resilience features like solar power, bio-gas, and rainwater harvesting to build back safer and ‘build back better’. They advocate globally on effective community-driven approaches to post-disaster rebuilding. BUN offers an inspirational model of how grassroots organizations can pioneer innovative solutions tailored to local contexts in the wake of disaster.

## **Social Innovations**

Several social innovations lie at the heart of BUN’s model:

**Integrated Livelihoods Approach:** BUN’s insight to tie livelihood recovery to housing reconstruction was critical. The integrated model provides families a pathway to rebuild their homes affordably and sustainably.

**Localization:** BUN builds local capacity by training community members in construction techniques aligned with Nepal’s building codes. Locally sourced materials and laborers retain investment in affected areas. The approach is community-driven, with field staff proficient in local languages.

**Appropriate Design:** The core housing unit uses local materials in an incremental modular design that can be expanded over time. This makes construction affordable while satisfying cultural preferences.

**Women’s Inclusion:** BUN actively engages women in the design process and offers income generation skills training to increase financial inclusion. Building women’s agency improves family resilience.

**Partnerships:** Strategic partnerships with organizations like Habitat for Humanity enabled replicating and scaling BUN’s model cost-effectively across more communities.

These social innovations create a context-specific model for affordable, resilient, and sustainable post-disaster rebuilding. The holistic livelihoods-centered approach pioneered by BUN provides inspiration for reconstruction programs globally.

## **Challenges Faced**

Implementing an innovative model in a post-disaster setting posed many challenges for BUN, including:

- Mobilizing funds: BUN had to rapidly scale up fundraising efforts to acquire resources for rebuilding thousands of homes. Competition for aid funding was also high after the earthquake.

- Construction delays: Political instability, rains, and remote locations hampered rebuilding timelines. BUN adapted by providing interim shelters till permanent homes could be completed.
- Coordinating aid: With hundreds of NGOs responding to the quake, BUN had to navigate complex dynamics of information exchange and resource allocation.
- Avoiding dependency: BUN focused on participatory processes so communities had agency in decision-making rather than relying on external assistance.
- Reaching remote areas: Difficult terrain and lack of infrastructure made accessing and transporting materials to some villages time-consuming and expensive.
- Retaining staff: BUN's rapid growth also meant managing challenges of organizational culture and staff motivation when scaling up operations.
- Evolving needs: As the recovery transitioned from relief to rebuilding, BUN had to adapt their model to address changing priorities.
- Monitoring impact: Collecting data on indicators like income growth and disaster resilience required dedicated measurement systems.

BUN's lean structure and entrepreneurial leadership enabled agile adaptation in response to these challenges. Their localized community-based approach and focus on participation increased buy-in and ownership. BUN's evolution over 8 years exemplifies resilient strategies for managing uncertainty and change in post-disaster contexts.

### **Vision for the Future**

As homes near completion in their original target villages, BUN aims to expand its unique model across earthquake-hit districts in partnership with other NGOs. There is also potential to apply the 'Homes and Livelihoods' approach to other infrastructure development projects in Nepal. BUN co-founder Sudan Maharjan shares:

"We want to make this approach standard practice in Nepal – that whenever housing is built, livelihood generation is automatically tied to it. This creates real sustainability."

BUN also envisions adapting their model to respond to future disasters, climate stresses like floods, and urban housing issues. They are exploring innovative building techniques using compressed stabilized earth blocks and bio-based insulation materials. Nepal's rebuilding needs offer rich opportunities for BUN to continue pioneering context-specific solutions and influencing policy.

Eight years after the earthquake, BUN has emerged as an inspiring example of resilient, grassroots innovation. Their integrated model continues to empower communities to build back better. As Maharjan reflects:

“We started BUN to help provide homes to a few families. Today we have been able to impact thousands. It shows how even small contributions can make a really big difference when you involve people as participants rather than just beneficiaries.”

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What unique post-disaster rebuilding challenges did Nepal face after the 2015 earthquake? How did BUN’s model address these?
2. What are some key social innovations embedded in BUN’s integrated “Homes and Livelihoods” approach?
3. How did features like localization and community participation enable the success and scaling of BUN’s model?
4. What challenges did BUN face in implementing their innovative reconstruction model? How did they adapt and evolve?
5. Beyond rebuilding after the Nepal earthquake, what other development challenges could BUN’s model be applied to?