

Nepal

A country destroyed by an earthquake

This is the story of how Kusala Carpets was born, a project to help the future of those who lost everything they had in less than a minute.

On the 25th of April 2015 Nepal was struck by the most powerful earthquake to hit the region in the last 80 years. The first earthquake measured 7.8 on the Richter scale and was followed just days after by another with a magnitude of 7.3. The combined effect of the earthquakes was catastrophic, resulting in almost 9000 deaths and demolishing more than 700,000 houses and 8,000 schools. Villages and entire neighbourhoods were devastated, and markets, factories and people's lives were reduced to ruins. As one of the poorest countries in the world Nepal is yet to fully recover from the destruction caused and substantial destruction and damage across the country remains almost two years later.



The earthquake and the humanitarian crisis that it created led to a huge amount of media coverage worldwide. In the immediate aftermath, international organizations moved to Nepal to help those in the most affected areas and millions of dollars flowed into the country from both established charities and through appeals on social media. This immediate aid was vital to help the victims of the earthquake who found themselves with no food to eat and nowhere to sleep at night, their homes turned to rubble and their crops sometimes buried amongst the ruins. Many survivors were forced to become refugees, seeking a safer place and forced to abandon everything they had.

Soon after the earthquake, the Nepalese government announced that families that had lost their homes in the earthquake would be given 200,000 npr (roughly €1,600) to help them rebuild their lives. In reality, the ongoing instability of the government and the lack of resources available meant that few families would ever see the money they were promised. In the months following the earthquake, the destruction and problems created overwhelmed the Nepalese government and local officials. A slow response to the rapidly evolving situation and further mistakes made by the government during the recovery period aggravated the precarious situation further still. Instead of facilitating the work of

charitable organisations aiming to help the country rebuild and provide immediate help to their citizens, the government changed their president and provoked a border blockade with India, drastically slowing the arrival of humanitarian aid and resources. As the blockade extended for months, the already crippled country was left without fuel, medicines and other essential goods. A lack of building materials vital for reconstruction and a subsequent rise in oil prices significantly hindered reconstruction efforts and endangered projects being led by volunteers. Heavy rain in the monsoon season and harsh conditions in the winter that followed left many of those affected in rural areas isolated



and unable to receive any of the help they so desperately needed. A year after the earthquake the situation had barely improved. Of the promised money to help people rebuild their lives, only an average of 50,000npr (€476) was received by families, a sum that paled into insignificance compared with the costs they faced as they attempted to rebuild their lives.

A year and a half later, the situation in many places remains unchanged. If you walk along the streets of Kathmandu, it is

common to see piles of rubble where houses used to stand, as if it was only yesterday when the earthquake struck. Stones and wood recovered from the ruins remain on the floor, waiting for construction and rebuilding that is yet to happen. Many of the temples, monuments and monasteries that form the cultural backbone of this unique country and have been declared World Heritage sites remain severely damaged or destroyed, a loss to the culture and history of Nepal that may be irreplaceable. landscape

The effect on rural communities Nepal is situated at the centre of the Himalayas, a landscape of deep valleys and towering mountains, home to eight of the fourteen highest peaks in the world. As a result of this unique landscape the majority of the population live in rural areas and remote places, with poor infrastructure resulting in extremely difficult access to rural communities. The mountain paths are narrow and unpaved, at high risk of landslides from the surrounding mountains and to reach some villages requires hours or even days of walking. The earthquakes of April 2015 and the numerous aftershocks that have been happening since destroyed many roads and paths and mountain villages and left many survivors stranded, almost completely cut off from the outside world.

With their homes and livelihoods destroyed people were left with two options as they tried to survive. Nearly 3 million refugees moved to the poorly-equipped refugee camps around Kathmandu where many still live today. They are surrounded by the unknown, sharing the small space of a tent and surviving only with the help of handouts, with little possibility of them going back to their previous lives. Other people tried to rebuild their lives where they had always lived, attempting to create new communities where they originally stood or in areas nearby. Sindupalchowk district was one of the most affected areas in Nepal, right at the epicentre of the second earthquake.

Following the quake, refugee camps providing temporary refuge for thousands of homeless people appeared. Unfortunately, this 'temporary' refuge has largely become permanent with the situation remaining much the same as it was in the initial months after the earthquake. People are forced to depend on handouts and charitable aid, an unsustainable way of living and leaving them hugely vulnerable if organizations start to depart from the country, as many have

started to. Many of the camps are built on public land which the government owns, creating an uncertain future for the residents who live there.

One of the many camps in the Sindupalchowk district, on the slopes of a mountain about 20km from the capital, Chautara, is the Selang refugee camp. Initially made up of around 130 families from areas across the district, they have slowly tried to adapt to the harsh conditions of the camp and its surrounding landscape.



Selang Camp,

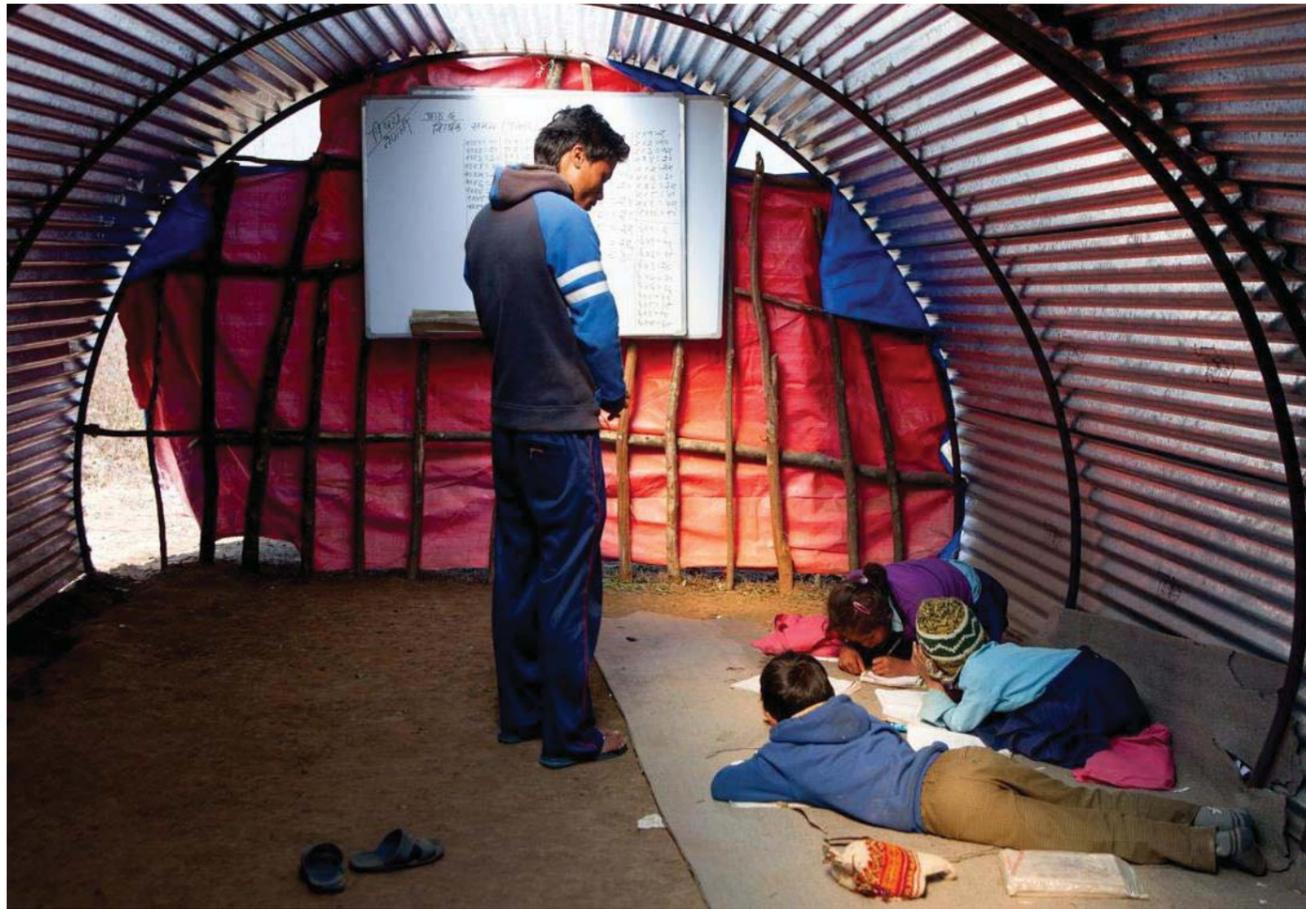
The Kusala Carpets Project

At the end of January, after driving for four hours through a rocky, dangerous path, we arrived in Selang Camp in a truck loaded with blankets. As soon as we saw the camp we were struck by the astonishing circumstances in which the people there were living. In freezing conditions, they were forced to live in plastic huts barely over a metre high, almost fully exposed to the brutal weather of the mountains. There was no electricity, no running water and the few toilets that had been set up were so precarious

that they weren't even used. In the middle of the camp was a structure made of sheet metal with open sides and a big half torn carpet on the ground. This was the camp school. The conditions in which these people had been living for over a year affected us deeply. We realised that although handouts such as the blankets we had brought were gratefully received, these people needed a more permanent solution to allow them to build a future for themselves that did not depend on external support. On talking to the residents of

the camp, we learnt that many of the people there used to work in the carpet industry, mainly situated in Kathmandu. With the destruction of the country's roads following the earthquakes they were now often unable to get to the city and terrified to leave their families to make such a risky journey. One of the residents asked if it was possible for us to bring a loom to the camp so that they could start weaving and making carpets, to sell for a living. At the time, we were struck by what a great idea this was, but could not even

begin to see how we could make it a reality. We were only four girls, Alisha, Sofie, Sophie and myself, who had collected a small amount of money to buy blankets for the camp, which cost far less than buying a loom. However, in the days that followed we could not get the idea out of our heads. Profoundly affected by the way these people were still forced to live, dependent on handouts from organizations that could leave at any moment, we felt we needed to try and find a way to improve their precarious situation. That is how Kusala Carpets was born.



The aim of Kusala Carpets

We decided that to be able to offer a long-term alternative, bringing three or four looms wouldn't be enough; we wanted to build a carpet factory to give a job to a hundred workers. A factory of this size in the camp would mean that people wouldn't have to leave the camp and their families to make a dangerous journey to Kathmandu just to be able to provide a living for themselves. Our ultimate goal was to create a self-sustaining economy for the community, where all benefits from the sales of carpets would be reinvested in improving the different aspects of their community life.

When we returned to Selang Camp with our proposal it was warmly embraced by all of the people there. In the few months after our first visit we focused on making the dream a reality. We

visited factories to understand how they worked and what materials would be needed, we looked for investment and opened a self-funding project - gofundme (gofundme.com/kusalacarpets).

In order to build on the government land we had to contact many different people so that building of the factory could start before the monsoons came. On May 1st we were able to finally start building our project, the Social Factory of Kusala Carpets.

Only nine months after arriving in Selang Camp for the first time the initial phase of the factory is finished and has five functioning looms. Until now, 26 people have been working in the factory and 22 carpets have been sold to export companies. A local organisation is building

a nursery next to the factory for the workers' children.

It is difficult to express in words the feeling of satisfaction we had in realising what we had achieved. It was an incredible feeling to be able to share the smiles of those people who were previously fully dependent on external help but had now gained more control of their own futures. We are indebted to all those who trusted us when this project was only an idea, and in particular, must thank Ahmed and Pauline, engineer and architect respectively, without whom the factory could not have been built. However, although having built the factory made us extremely proud, it also brought a realisation that this was only the first step on a longer journey for the camp.

What we need to do now

The factory has provided a permanent job for some people, but there remain huge challenges facing the people of the Selang Camp. We aim to expand the factory by adding five more looms and envisage that in the future, at least a hundred families will be able to work there weaving carpets. In January 2017 the Kusala Carpets team returned to Nepal to keep up to date with the project. In addition to expanding the factory, we aim to improve the other facilities of Selang camp, and make it a permanent, safe and healthy place for the people who live there to create their own future. The village still does not have electricity or a reliable water supply, with residents sometimes having to walk 20 minutes to fill water containers. As well as providing a solution for water and electricity, we want

to build compostable toilets, create a project of permaculture to expand the variability of foods available (currently very limited) and build a permanent building that can function as a school for both adults and children. While the factory has given employment to many of the adults in the camp, it is the children who have been most harmed in the destruction of the country, and providing them with an education is crucial to helping them shape their future and that of Nepal itself.

To achieve our aims and continue to create a foundation from which the people of Selang camp can build a brighter future requires further financial support and donations. Currently our incomes are from donations and fund raising events that we have run such as a volleyball tournament, selling Nepalese

jewellery, bags and T-shirts with our logo, and running workshops. We will continue to work to improve the conditions of Selang camp and would greatly value any support or interest in our work. If you are interested in knowing more about us or you have any questions then please don't hesitate to send us an email to kusalacarpets@gmail.com. Further information is also available on our website at www.kusalacarpets.com or our facebook page: www.facebook.com/kusalacarpets

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