A VIRTUAL TEAM COLLABORATOR EXPERIENCE: 
ASSISTING THE 2015 EERI NEPAL RECONNAISSANCE TEAM

Martha Cuenca
Graduate Student
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

It was an honor to participate as a Virtual Team Collaborator (VTC) for the EERI Nepal Reconnaissance Team. I believe that reconnaissance work plays a key role in advancing research and engineering practice, building improved civil infrastructure, and ultimately avoiding repeat disasters in a region. After the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake in Nepal, a fellow EERI member directed my attention to EERI’s response. Having lived and worked in Nepal from 2013-2014 as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant, I was familiar with the culture, had a few connections in Gorkha’s main town, and even had experience trekking through the villages surrounding the epicenter. I wanted to help out in any capacity, but I held onto the preconceived notion that it would be difficult to get involved with post-earthquake reconnaissance activities with no prior reconnaissance experience. However, with EERI having established the new reconnaissance role of VTC, it gave a Masters student like myself the opportunity to participate in reconnaissance efforts.

I believe that EERI was successful in using the VTC role as a vehicle to expose younger EERI members to reconnaissance efforts and help them expand their EERI network. A total of 13 graduate students and early career professionals performed the role of VTC. We were each matched with a field team member based on overlapping interests, which positively influenced my commitment to being a VTC. I was privileged to work with a prominent structural engineer, Chris Poland. As part of the reconnaissance team, he was helping investigate recovery efforts, community resilience, and the earthquake’s impact on lifelines and communication systems. My shared interest in his investigation areas motivated me to communicate and work thoroughly and in a timely manner.

As VTC’s, we had two main responsibilities: (1) synthesize pre-departure information and (2) provide dissemination support upon return of our field team member. With regards to synthesizing relevant pre-departure information, after an email exchange or two with my field team member, I was confident in what tasks I was expected to carry out. I compiled a document listing active groups and people who were currently involved in community response and recovery efforts in rural districts in Nepal.

To gather this information, I scoured world-wide news outlets and the curated posts from the EERI Nepal Earthquake Virtual Clearinghouse. However, the majority of my sources came from my contacts in Nepal who I kept in touch with via social media. They directed me to groups and local organizations they knew were actively pursuing response and recovery efforts in the communities. After synthesizing all of the information I had collected, I reached out to share it with a few EERI Virtual Clearinghouse Curators whose topics were related to my findings. Their positive response makes me think that it would be beneficial for there to be a formal established connection between Curators and VTC’s so that information can be easily shared between the two groups.

Upon the return of the EERI Nepal Reconnaissance Team, the VTC’s were expected to provide dissemination support. This involved processing and uploading field images to the EERI online database and visualization map. EERI provided us with clear instructions to prepare us for this task and even held a webinar that walked us through the process and introduced us to the software we would be interfacing with. Being able to work with the field images gave me a closer look at the path my field team member traveled while in Nepal. Moreover, the photos helped me visualize the type of damage that had occurred to various structures and the community rebuilding that was taking place. Through handling the field photos, I felt more connected to the reconnaissance trip.
Being a VTC definitely increased my engagement in and enthusiasm for reconnaissance activities. Through the role, I gained networking exposure with EERI members and professionals and conducted intellectually engaging research on topics related to my field team member’s investigation focus areas. Speaking with my contacts, conducting research, organizing information, and communicating with my field team member exposed me in depth to the effects of the earthquake. These effects amplified for me the importance of safe and resilient structures and civil infrastructure. I am grateful to have served as a VTC. Not only has it increased my interest in being involved in future reconnaissance efforts, but if given the opportunity, I would serve as a VTC again.

(It is important to note that it is my personal VTC experience that has been discussed above. However, a survey has been sent out to fellow VTC’s to gather feedback on their experiences and suggestions for improvement. The survey results will be compiled and then shared at the poster session.)