People's Republic of China: Recovering from the Wenchuan Earthquake

February 2013

The Wenchuan earthquake of 2008 damaged important rural roads in 10 provinces of PRC, and rendered them impassable. Photo: Guangrui Xiao/ADB

By the numbers

- Over 3,400 km earthquake-damaged roads in Sichuan Province to be repaired
- 317 km earthquake-damaged roads in Shaanxi Province to be repaired
- 12 earthquake-damaged schools to be repaired

Source: Report and Recommendation to the President (2009).
Yanting County, Sichuan Province - He Fachun is one of millions of rural people whose lives were turned upside down by a devastating earthquake in 2008. For 20 years he had transported goods for a living - construction materials and agricultural products - but after the earthquake struck, his job became tougher and brought in less income.

"The earthquake-damaged roads were uneven, potholed, and cracked," says He, adding that it sometimes took him the entire day to drive just 8-9 kilometers (km). Today the journey takes just 15 minutes, and allows He to provide his family with a comfortable income (averaging CNY400-CNY500 [about $64-$80] per day when he has business), and send his two children to high school.

Kou Zirong, chief of the Yanting County Transport Bureau, knows from experience how important such infrastructure improvements are.

"I grew up in a village ... I know how difficult it is living in a rural area without good transportation," he says. "Building good roads that significantly improve people's livelihoods is my duty, and I'm proud of it."

The big one

On 12 May 2008, a magnitude 8.0 earthquake with its epicenter in Wenchuan County, 92 km northwest of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province, shook the People's Republic of China (PRC). The earthquake was so powerful, people in Beijing, 1,500 km away, could feel it. It affected 10 provinces, but Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu - together home to 51 of the hardest-hit counties - felt the brunt of the devastation. By late September that year, 69,227 were dead; 374,643 injured; and 17,923 missing. In all, 46.25 million people were affected. More than 1.5 million people had to be evacuated, and direct economic losses were estimated at more than CNY850 billion ($136.44 billion).

The damage was such that for the first time since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the government requested support from both the national and international communities.

ADB immediately provided a $1 million grant to support the government's initial rehabilitation efforts in the earthquake-affected areas. It helped the government carry out an assessment of the damage, and assisted the government in reviewing its national disaster management system framework.

Getting devastated villages back on track

In February 2009, ADB approved a loan of $400 million: $300 million for rehabilitating and reconstructing earthquake-damaged roads in 19 counties of Sichuan Province, and $100 million for rehabilitating and reconstructing roads, and bridges, as well as primary and middle schools in four counties in Shaanxi Province.

"The Emergency Assistance for the Wenchuan Earthquake Reconstruction Project allowed for roads and schools to be rehabilitated and reconstructed in a short period of time," says Xiao Guangrui, ADB senior project officer. "This reversed the devastating impact of the earthquake, revived economic activity, improved livelihoods, and helped people return to normal life."

The ADB loan financed 347 subprojects in Sichuan for reconstructing and upgrading rural roads from as short as 3 km to as long as 32 km. Rural areas now all have paved and all-season roads, connecting villages and towns to the outside world.

Maintenance work

Local road maintenance teams have also been formed to keep roads in good condition and make sure they stay that way for the long term too.

Chen Xigao, 61, is from Wusheng Village, Fuyi County, about 180 km east of the epicenter of the earthquake. He and other villagers voluntarily monitor the laying of the new roads. They check the materials used and measure the thickness and width of the road meter by meter.

"We monitored the construction work based on the design documents the construction company shared with us. Monitoring is our responsibility, because the road is in front of our house and is for our benefit," says Chen.

On a road in nearby Cangxi County (about 220 km east of the earthquake's epicenter), 35-year-old Zhang Zhiping is carrying out
road maintenance. He and five other colleagues maintain 33 km of road. They keep a record of their work in a daily log so that problems can be solved quickly.

With improved roads, new bus lines can run to villages in remote mountainous areas. Tang Shifeng, of Dashiqiao Village, can now take the bus with her baby to the nearest town 3 km away. Before, she had to walk for an hour. She says she can't imagine how she would have made the trip on foot had she had the baby with her then.

Since the roads have been paved, clinics, post offices, and mobile phone services have opened for business in the villages. The paved roads also make it easier for children to go to school.

Goods to market

Lianhuachi Village, Jinfeng Township, has a population of 1,500. More than 200 people have left, and now live and work in other cities as migrant workers. They send money back home through the post office to support the elderly and their children. However, the nearest post office is 8 km away.

Since the upgraded roads make it easier to reach the village, the local government has decided to build a post office in Lianhuachi, helping residents receive this important mail.

"This project is an example of how the government, the local population, and international organizations worked together to successfully rehabilitate and reconstruct infrastructure to improve the quality of life and livelihood for the affected people."
- Hamid L. Sharif, country director, ADB Resident Mission in the PRC

Good roads also provide farmers easy access to markets. As a result, agriculture has burgeoned in the project areas. Rabbit farms, high-value fruit plantations, such as grapefruit and kiwi fruit, and greenhouse vegetable farming, are booming. This has increased the income of rural households.

Su Guowen, 44, from Shisun Village, grew wheat and corn before the county government began promoting kiwi plantations, providing training courses and field visits. Su now looks forward to harvesting from over 400 kiwi trees 2 years from now, and expects the kiwi crop to bring in CNY40,000 ($6,434) per year. "I don't need to worry about my kiwi fruit being spoiled before they are shipped. Wholesale companies come with trucks to buy them."

Within 3 years, 347 subprojects in Sichuan Province were completed. Over 3,400 km of rural roads in 19 counties were rehabilitated or reconstructed benefiting over 10 million people. In addition, approximately 10,000 local officials have received training for managing ADB-supported projects.

"This project is an example of how the government, the local population, and international organizations worked together to successfully rehabilitate and reconstruct infrastructure to improve the quality of life and livelihood for the affected people," says Hamid L. Sharif, country director of ADB Resident Mission in the PRC.

Related

- Emergency Assistance for Wenchuan Earthquake Reconstruction Project
- People’s Republic of China and ADB
- Disaster Risk Management

Sourced from https://www.adb.org/results/peoples-republic-china-recovering-wenchuan-earthquake