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Community Based Disaster Management

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CBDM processes build local resilience, strengthening existing coping strategies and enhance security of lives and livelihoods

HE ASIAN sub continent has been affected by all kinds of disasters during recent years. Various studies, research and statistics reveal that Asia has been affected severely by disasters over last 15 years. The average number of people reported affected, per million inhabitants between year 1991 – 2005 was 57342 . The disasters which have impacted the most are hydro meteorological, geological, and biological. The disasters have left behind economic loss to the tune of 577.44 US$ billion. Countries that are impacted the most are the developing or under developed ones. The vulnerabilities and risks in such countries are higher. The basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing are hardly met in some of these countries. The vulnerabilities are accentuated also by geo political risks that these countries face.

Most of the countries like India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and others have laid down the framework for Disaster Management. However challenge still remains how we make each individual living in a high risk area, more resilient to disasters. The efforts therefore, in many countries have been shifted from top-down command and control, to more decentralized and community based. The central idea is to recognize communities as first responders in a disaster situation.

Community Based Disaster Management (CBDM) is now an accepted and widely practiced strategy in disaster vulnerable regions. Essentially, it puts community at the lead of local disaster management effort. External agencies then become the facilitators to the process. Through CBDM, the people's capacity to respond to emergencies is increased by providing them with more access and control over resources and basic social services. Using a community-based approach to managing disasters certainly has its advantages.

The CBDM approach provides opportunities for the local community to evaluate their own situation based on their own experiences. Under this approach, the local community not only becomes part of creating plans and decisions, but also becomes a major player in its implementation. Although the community is given greater roles in the decision-making and implementation processes, CBDM does not ignore the importance of scientific and objective risk assessment and planning.

The importance of community-based approaches has been recognized since long in promoting a culture of safety through reducing local vulnerabilities and building capacities. These approaches have been practiced by various community groups, national and international organizations and government departments, in some cases, for over two decades now.

Knowing Risks

As a starting point for any CBDM exercise, it is important to know where the risks and vulnerabilities are. The risks can be environmental, social, physical or economic. It is important to highlight that while, hazards are inevitable and cannot be prevented; vulnerabilities can be reduced and capacities increased to reduce overall risk. Vulnerabilities are inherent weaknesses in the functional environment of the society. For eg: Education cannot be provided to the students – because there are no schools, or no stronger schools; Health condition of the society is poor because there are no doctors available or medicines and when there is disaster, these vulnerabilities further aggravate the situation. Also, Community cannot be displaced to other region which is not a risk prone zone. Displacing the communities has a social and psychological bearing and hence the only element which one can address to is to reduce vulnerability.

Although, there are techniques and systems available to measure the vulnerability and also provide mitigating solutions to reduce risks, it is more important that communities are made aware of their own risks. The pertinent question is, since risks can be assessed by outside agencies and the risks can be mitigated through proper mechanisms, why involvement of community is required? The response to such school of thought is that any strategies worked on the theory of the theory of imposition always fails, as the community fails to acknowledge the facts leading to a unsustainable knowledge.

SEEDS, in implementing its Community Based Disaster Management programmes, involves local communities at risk to do initial risk assessment. The tools and methodologies include participatory risk assessments through focus group discussions, interviews with multiple groups and stake holders, community workshops, Hazard hunt through town watching. Such process has helped the communities themselves to understand and know their risks. Initial Risk assessment by the community also facilitates them to think about the required solutions which can be help mitigate these risks through community efforts. For example, during one of the SEEDS recent intervention in Mashobra in the mountainous terrain of Himachal Pradesh , the community staying in scattered hamlets , had problems in crossing a local stream to evacuate safely, during the time of landslides or heavy rains. The risk identified, was the problem of accessibility.

Subsequently, based on the risk identified by the community, bridge was constructed with the local Gram Panchayat taking the lead. The entire exercise of knowing risks through community led processes actually helped in better assessments and therefore realistic solutions.

Schools as entry point for CBDM

Schools are the symbol of faith for the community. Moreover, during disasters, schools are often converted into relief centers providing shelter, health facilities and food to the most affected communities. Schools are therefore rightly called "Safe Havens". The community around these safe havens, shares strong linkages with the institutions. The schools provide a formal environment for risk education as also others. The students, as future citizens, are the best medium of spreading knowledge in the communities. They become a catalyst in transferring knowledge to practice. The education on disaster prevention ultimately reaches parents and further to the entire society.

The concept of "Safe School Safe Community" is actively promoted by SEEDS in its CBDM programmes. This has been recently implemented in Himachal Pradesh, with the support of international agencies – Christian Aid and European Commission and in partnership with the State Government. The aim is to educate the school children, teachers and other occupants of the school on disaster risk reduction as well as the communities surrounding such schools. The disaster management committee of the village has parents of children studying in the local school, the local school authorities, village leaders and local government officers. It so works that while the schools students and teachers are trained to respond during the disaster, the communities outside the schools are also prepared for the disaster. The school children if needed may be evacuated to a identified safe location outside the school premises, the community task forces facilitates the process. On the other hand, if schools are designated as safe locations for evacuees, the schools are prepared to provide the rescue and relief facilities. Schools and local communities around them mutually reinforce their strength for coping against natural disasters.

Institutionalization for Sustainable Development

Community Based Disaster Management is sustainable only if it is institutionalized. The development efforts should acknowledge and treat the risks to which communities are exposed. Integrating risk reduction methods with regular development programmes

would significantly contribute to sustainable development. It is in this context that disaster management practitioners, academicians and researchers have strongly advocated for a disaster-free development. Paradoxically, it was also observed that sometimes development has led to disaster. For example: In State of Orissa, inorder to improve inter state transportation, a highway was constructed above the ground level. The result was that the villages on either side became a low lying area. Now during heavy rains, the water slopes down from highways to these villages, thereby flooding these villages. The development here has led to disasters. This situation is the outcome of the fact that development and disasters are treated in isolation. Institutionalization therefore looks at consolidating the isolated efforts as well as channelizing the resources appropriately to reduce risks.

In India, Community Based Disaster Management has been recognized though not yet institutionalized. The Disaster Management Act, 2005 does recognize in spirit the need for disaster management planning at national, state and local levels, however the process of implementing a framework whereby community efforts are recognized and incorporated in development and disaster management planning is yet to be put in place.

SEEDS has proposed a model for institutionalization in its recent efforts in Himachal Pradesh, whereby horizontal and vertical linkages have been created with CBDM approaches. (Figure1)

Wide scale replication of CBDM approaches in India

would require expansion in the roles and functions of the PRI institutions. Equipping them with resources and training would be needed. The models of Village Knowledge Centers, now popular in several parts of India can be strong vehicles for communicating and educating local communities on local risks and challenges of natural disasters.

Community Disaster Resilience Funds

Along with institutionalization, funding is another important requirement for CBDM. The National Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction (NADRR) in India has been promoting the idea for putting funds at the disposal of local communities to carry out CBDM activities. "Community Disaster Resilience Fund" is co-financed by communities by way of households contributing a small fixed amount from their livelihood earnings to be used for their protection. These funds can be potentially utilized for disaster mitigation or relief activities. The village development committee are responsible for managing such funds for the communities.

The core funds can be used to leverage funds from Government sponsored rural development scheme, cash for work programmes and others. In the longer run, creating Disaster Resilience Funds at community level would be a critical element to sustain CBDM efforts.

Emerging Challenges

The environmental changes due to global warming have posed a fresh threat to the communities.

management requires to be integrated with the environmental changes perpetrated by Climate Change.

A tool for poverty alleviation

Disaster reduction is often looked as a stand alone process. However, CBDM can potentially become the means to achieve the final goal of "Poverty Alleviation". The poor communities are worst hit during disasters. Poor in India, is deprived of basic necessities such as water, food, clothing, education and health. Disasters wipe out their hard earned assets in one go, pushing them once again in the vicious cycle of poverty.

CBDM processes build local resilience, strengthening existing coping strategies and enhance security of lives and livelihoods. Building such capacities can help local communities shielded from shocks and stresses that disasters bring with them.

In conclusion, while it is universally acknowledged that natural disasters can significantly offset decades of development gains, CBDM on the other hand can mitigate damaging impacts and contribute to sustainable development. As a signatory to the Hyogo Framework of Action (2005-2015), the presence of the Disaster Management Act, and necessary institutional framework, it is time that Community Based Disaster Management is taken up at a wide scale targeting those at highest risk to disasters. ❑

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Figure 1 : Developing vertical linkages for CBDM (Himachal Pradesh)

The change in weather patterns has caused major impacts on living and livelihoods of the people. Climate Change has induced disasters such as flash floods in the regions which have traditionally been drought prone. While certain areas, where there was no dearth of water due to heavy rains are now facing drought. A community based approach for disaster reduction such as CBDM will help address these challenges much more effectively.

The change of status from 'Rural Vulnerable' to 'Climate Change Victims' - has compelled disaster managers to approach disaster risk reduction differently.

Similarly, changes can also be seen with the communities depending on coastal eco systems. The sea erosion and ingress of sea has led to displacement of communities. At the same time, the mangroves which protected the communities from high tidal waves and disasters such as tsunamis have dried up. As a result of such environmental degradation, coastal communities residing on coastal belt of Tamil Nadu were worst impacted during Tsunamis. The communities are being trained now to revive the mangroves, which can protect them to shield against high waves.

Thus approach towards community based disaster