

Chapter 7

Communicating and Sharing Knowledge

With the decision of the government to become involved in the preparatory stages of all disaster management planning and the consequent revamping of the organisational structure of the Ministry of Relief, establishment of a new body like the DMB, and realignment of job specifications of all agencies under the ministry, a radical change has occurred in the whole gamut of disaster management.

National level

Efficient communication is the most essential key to successful implementation of national-level directives at the field level, more so in the case of emergencies. Here, the DMB is the main arm of the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management – the central authority. The DRR has officials deputed at district and at ‘upazilla’ levels who also support the activities of DMB at field level. Since disaster management, including preparedness, involves the active participation of various departments and agencies of the government, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) has been designated as the superior executive, or the kingpin in the district to oversee and coordinate disaster management activities, commencing with the formation of the Disaster Management Committee (DMC). All staff and personnel of various agencies, NGOs, and CBOs engaged in disaster management activities are responsible to and report to the DC.

While the DMB remains the communication platform at central level, the office of the DC (in most cases called the Control Room) remains the communication platform at district level. UNO and UP chairmen assume their respective roles down the line; thus, the communication network has been very convenient for all concerned and it has been aided by the expansion of the use of mobile telephones.

The DMC is to remind everybody about their duties and responsibilities, so that prompt action can be expected from all in the case of emergencies.

Sharing of communication and information is needed at four levels.

- a) Communication within the donor community is essential to avoid duplication and earn trust in others’ plans during funding decisions.

- b) Implementing agencies and large-scale projects (MoFDM, DMB, DRR, CARE, ActionAid, Oxfam, World Vision, CDMP, Char Livelihood Project, and others) need to be well informed about each other's activities.
- c) Sharing of information among disaster management stakeholders at the district level is necessary in order to improve understanding about who is doing what.
- d) 'Upazilla' and union-level communications among the GO-NGOs-CBOs and volunteers are necessary to coordinate and monitor the implementation of preparedness activities in the field.

A multi-stakeholder platform is essential to improve communications. The disaster management information centre can play a lead role on behalf of the ministry to increase the sharing of communications and knowledge among national stakeholders.

Regional level

Disasters do not respect political boundaries, as for example in the GBM region where one flood or earthquake hit India, Nepal, and Bangladesh simultaneously. Sixty years after the end of colonial rule, politicians in the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) acknowledged for the first time the multilateral aspect of disasters in the region by emphasising the sharing of information about disasters. The 13th Summit at Dhaka also approved the setting up of a SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) in New Delhi. Earlier, an Expert Group of SAARC had drafted a 'Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management' which was endorsed by the SAARC Environmental Ministers' Meeting in May 2006, urging member countries to each formulate a National Plan of Action by December 2006 and to formulate a Regional Plan of Action by 2007. The Comprehensive Framework is likely to be adopted at the 14th Summit scheduled to be held in New Delhi in April 2007.

Until the endorsement of the framework at the 13th meeting, flooding was the only type of disaster seen by politicians as a common disaster, but it was addressed at bilateral level. For example, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, the three countries most affected by floods in the GBM (Himalayan) system, face a common hazard, but are yet to acknowledge flooding to be a multilateral problem. The greatest weakness of the SAARC Declaration was that it did not acknowledge flooding to be a multilateral disaster, and therefore it was not mentioned at all. The SAARC Declaration has also accepted that India sign separate treaties with Nepal and Bangladesh.

There is an arrangement (through the Joint Rivers' Commission [JRC]) in place since 1972 between the governments of Bangladesh and India for transmission of limited water-level, discharge, and rainfall data from India to Bangladesh during the monsoon season (May 15-October 15). Subsequently, it was agreed in a JRC meeting that data about flashy rivers would be sent from April 1 to October 15. Although inadequate,

these data can be useful if received in time, but often they are received too late. Data transmission from India starts whenever the water level and rainfall are in the warning stage, i.e., water level one metre below danger level and rainfall exceeding 50 mm. Depending on the location of the meteorological stations and corresponding mode of transmission, data are transmitted either directly or through New Delhi to the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) in Kolkata. From there, data are transmitted to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD) using the Global Telecommunication System (GTS) of the WMO. These channels are often beset by impediments and glitches of various kinds and can hardly be considered efficient.

Despite the new institutional structures for disaster preparedness, and strong poverty alleviation programmes, the region lacks an adequate framework to integrate disaster risk reduction with poverty and livelihood issues⁵.

But where are we in actual practice in knowledge sharing? The dialogue during SAARC 13 noted that as yet there are no clear-cut regional policy or programme interventions that look at disaster risk reduction and management from a regional perspective, although there have been some initiatives by SAARC in areas of environmental management. SAARC introduced a 'Regional Study on the Causes and Consequences of Natural Disasters and the Protection and Preservation of Environment' which was completed in 1991. A study on 'Greenhouse Effect and Its Impact on the Region', finalised in 1992, recommended regional measures for sharing experience, scientific capabilities, information on climate change, rise in sea level, and transfer of technology. As a follow-up to these studies, a SAARC Plan of Action on the Environment was adopted in 1997. This plan provided for the establishment of regional centres of excellence. The SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC) was established in Dhaka in 1995 and the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC) was set up in Male in 2004. The 25th Session of the Council of Ministers held in Islamabad in July 2004 approved the establishment of the SAARC Forestry Centre in Bhutan. None of these initiatives focused on the multi-dimensional aspects of disaster risk reduction and management.

⁵ South Asia Policy Dialogue: Towards A Regional Roadmap for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management. The New Delhi Declaration, 22nd August 2006

