

Chapter 6

Disaster Preparedness Plans – Strengths and Weaknesses

Although disaster preparedness planning began with relief-oriented manuals and annual contingency plans to respond to disasters, over the last decade India has followed a system of comprehensive and holistic disaster management planning, with emphasis on all stages of the disaster management cycle. With respect to preparedness, the national initiatives have focused on putting an efficient response mechanism in place; identifying a response force and response equipment; medical preparedness; improving the capabilities of responders; improving the early warning system; and providing an institutional mechanism for implementation. All initiatives have followed an all-hazard, multisectoral approach. One important aspect of disaster management planning in India is its bottom-up approach involving the communities. Although this process is still in the early stages and far from being complete, this approach aims to inculcate a culture of prevention nation wide. It is believed that this approach can empower communities by building resilience within them.

Planning initiatives in India currently suffer from weaknesses related to (a) the process and (b) the practice. Disaster management planning has been under consideration at various levels since 1994-95. Jolted by the Latur Earthquake in 1993, Maharashtra pioneered the planning exercise by preparing state and district-level plans. After facing devastating disasters, Orissa and Gujarat also followed suit. At the national level, a National Disaster Response Plan (NDRP) was accepted by the Government of India in 2001. The NDRP primarily deals with national-level ministries and departments focusing on effective warning, communication, and coordination. Although certain concepts identified in the plan were implemented, the entire plan has not been put into operation. In addition, the Disaster Management Act of 2005 provides for a National Plan for Disaster Management to be prepared by the National Executive Committee and approved by the National Disaster Management Authority. The Act also provides for the plan to be holistic, aimed towards prevention, mitigation, and capacity building for effective response, preparedness, and in line with national policy. Similar guidelines have been provided for state and district plans. As of now, the draft policy has been

formulated but the national plan is yet to be formulated. At the moment, therefore, the planning process is in need of clear policy guidelines. It is not clear what the status of the NDRP will be in terms of subsequent policies and plans.

At the state, district, and sub-district levels, a planning process was introduced throughout the country. However, in the absence of clear institutional arrangements, planning for disasters suffered from differential levels of planning between states and districts. It was invariably those states that faced devastating disasters which were the most proactive in preparing plans. It was thought that, despite the availability of guiding principles and templates and the primary responsibility for disaster management being vested in the states, lack of instruments such as legal back-up, institutional mechanisms, and regulations were primary reasons for the differential introduction of the planning process. Not all states were equally proactive with respect to disaster management. The act has provided for standardisation of institutional mechanisms in terms of mandatory disaster management authorities and executive bodies at the state and district levels responsible for planning and implementation of disaster management initiatives. Currently initiatives to establish authorities are still in process and planning will resume only after all the instruments are in place.

The practice or implementation of plans at the field level has suffered from the fact that institutional back-up to implementation, in the form of legislation, regulations, and rules, was not available until recently. The coordination and control structure in disaster preparedness was not well defined and thus was heavily dependent on the personal commitment and concern of nodal officers. Lack of an organisation dedicated to disaster management at the district, state, or national level diluted the responsibility for implementation. This was especially true at the district level where disaster management, planning, and implementation had to be handled simultaneously with routine administrative duties by the district collector. Moreover, capacity building of personnel in disaster management planning is a crucial but long-term process. In 2006-06, NIDM had held training on district disaster management planning in 10 states for district-level officials. This training is being carried out in other states also, but it has not been possible to bring all the officials from the departments concerned together in a training programme. These programmes are held at the state headquarters; therefore bringing all the senior officials from all the districts together at the same time is not always possible. External factors such as elections and natural calamities also delay training of key personnel. Lack of skilled personnel for disaster management activities often compromises follow-up action such as updating information, monitoring of procedures and actions, rehearsals, and public awareness measures. Thus weaknesses in both the process and practice of planning have deterred the disaster management movement in the country. Although the Disaster Management Act of 2005 is a step in the right direction, putting its provisions and instruments into operation is a sine qua non for proper disaster preparedness and management. Only then can the country move towards disaster risk reduction in the communities.