

Introduction to the Workshops

Background

Through the project 'Living with Risk – Sharing Knowledge on Disaster Preparedness in the Himalayan Region', ICIMOD supported key practitioners with current knowledge in the field of disaster preparedness – mainly about floods, landslides, and earthquakes – and facilitated capacity-building in multi-hazard risk assessment, as well as providing a platform for interaction and exchange of experience. The prime target countries for the project are Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, with a focus on mountain regions within these countries.

The project was prepared according to the 'Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015', which says that "there is a need to enhance international and regional cooperation and assistance in the field of disaster risk reduction" through "use of knowledge, innovation, and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels". The project was supported financially by the European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (DG ECHO) and implemented between 1 April 2006 and 30 June 2007.

Two workshops were held as part of the project: In August 2006, 60 key practitioners in the field of disaster risk reduction from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan met to discuss the status of 'Disaster Preparedness Plans for Natural Hazards'. The current status of disaster preparedness plans in the four target countries was reviewed to identify gaps and shortcomings in the policies and their implementation. The discussion highlighted the urgent need for communication, cooperation, and coordination among key actors in order to overcome gaps and shortcomings.

In May 2007, 60 key practitioners met again to discuss the importance of 'Social Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction in the Himalayan Region'. This workshop built on the outcome of the first workshop with the aim of promoting interaction and sharing knowledge among key practitioners in disaster preparedness and management, especially between institutions working at the community and central levels. It examined how to improve coverage of gender, equity, and vulnerability issues in and how to incorporate these in the work of disaster management and explored opportunities to include local knowledge, innovations, and practices in the disaster management process.

The proceedings from the two workshops are presented in this report.

Social Exclusion, Vulnerability and Disaster

"Disasters work like the magnifying glass of a society. They magnify what is good and what needs sincere help. Disasters do not affect everyone equally. Who you are and what you do determine your fate. The strong and the weak stand out. This is true for gender issues as much as for other issues."
(Civil servant, India)

The tsunami on 26th December 2004, triggered by an earthquake, caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions were affected, and it caused massive destruction to livelihoods and infrastructure. Five times as many women as men are believed to have died, highlighting the important gender aspect of disasters. On October 8th 2005, the mountains in Kashmir were shaken by a high magnitude earthquake causing more than 73,000 deaths and affecting more than half a million people. The death toll among women and children was disproportionately high. In addition, numerous other disasters, with wind storms, floods and flash floods being the biggest killers, strike the region every year.

The frontline victims of and respondents to natural disasters are the local people and mostly marginalised and vulnerable groups. They have been experiencing and coping with natural hazards for hundreds of years. They possess experiential knowledge based on the local context, yet, in the context of disaster management, it is

only recently that implementing organisations have begun to acknowledge, theoretically, the existence of local knowledge and practices related to disaster preparedness. In practice, the biases and constraints at all levels result in local knowledge and practices being overlooked. More importantly, the lack of legitimacy attributed to local and indigenous knowledge is as much a problem within the communities themselves, and they need to be convinced that they have knowledge and that some of it can be useful. If people in a community perceive the 'external agents' as the ones who 'know-it-all' and they lose confidence in their own abilities and knowledge, it places communities in a compromising position when faced with natural hazards and increases the possibility of a disaster being more devastating than necessary.

The phrase 'natural disaster' has been the subject of debate. Strictly speaking, there are no 'natural disasters', only 'natural hazards', which, when they occur in un-inhabited areas, do not cause disasters for humans. When a society or community is affected by a natural hazard, a disaster may take place if the ability of the society to cope is exceeded. The impact of a disaster is influenced by the community's vulnerability to the hazard. The vulnerability aspect is important. Vulnerable and marginalised people – e.g., women, elders, the poor, the disabled, and Dalits ('low caste') – are more affected than others. Hence, disaster risk reduction is of great importance from the perspective of development and poverty alleviation.

The traditional idea of disasters was that they were temporary interruptions to a linear development process that was leading to ever-improved standards of living. The task of humanitarian aid was to patch things up so that the process of development could recommence. The past decade has witnessed a paradigm shift in thinking about and responding to disasters. There is a growing concern that the social and economic costs of disasters are not only holding back the processes of sustainable development, but are also major obstacles to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Contemporary thinking places hazard and vulnerability reduction within the broader context of the development process, focusing as much on long-term development needs as on obvious short-term, life-saving goals. The focus has thereby gradually shifted towards 'disaster risk reduction', meaning the broad development and application of policies, strategies, and practices to minimise vulnerability and risk of disaster throughout society by avoiding (prevention) or limiting (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards.

The Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015 (United Nations 2006) provides the main guiding instrument for national measures for risk reduction and post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation processes. The HFA also provides guidance for regional organisations and will be the obvious entry point for ICIMOD's work in disaster risk reduction.

Asia is the most disaster-prone continent in the world with more than 2,000 disasters of various kinds occurring from 1994-2003. They caused nearly half a million casualties and 2.3 million people were affected. Hydro-meteorological hazards, such as floods, flash floods, droughts, debris flows, and cyclones, account for the highest number of disasters by far in terms of casualties, people affected, and cost of damage. Although earthquakes are not very common, they do cause severe loss of lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure when they do happen. Looking at the ICIMOD regional member countries (RMC) (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan), more than 15,000 people lose their lives to disasters annually, with Bangladesh and India being the most disaster-prone countries. Looking at flood vulnerability we will find six of the RMCs in the absolute highest positions in terms of people exposed to and killed by floods.