

**Synthesis of the
Proceedings and Outcomes
of the Workshops**

Synthesis of the Workshop Proceedings

Introduction

The project 'Living with Risk – Sharing Knowledge on Disaster Preparedness in the Himalayan Region' brought together disaster management practitioners from the four South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Through these practitioners learning, knowledge sharing, and exchange of experiences took place. During the workshops, as well as during other activities, it was reiterated that no one knows everything, but everyone knows something, and, therefore, by sharing knowledge and experiences we have all become slightly wiser.

During the project, an inventory of disaster preparedness plans, policies, and institutions highlighted that there is paradigm shift going on within the field of disaster management from a predominantly relief and recovery approach to a focus on disaster preparedness. Recent mega-disasters with massive loss of lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure have contributed to this paradigm shift. The heavy social and economic costs of the prevailing post-disaster response and recovery approach have raised concerns. It is becoming clear that disasters are not only holding back the processes of sustainable development but are also major obstacles to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The focus, therefore, has gradually shifted towards 'disaster risk reduction' which includes minimising vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout society by emphasising prevention of, mitigation of, and preparedness for adverse impacts of hazards.

The HKH region has very new disaster preparedness and management (DP/M) plans. The triggering factor for the development of these DP plans was in many cases the occurrence of unprecedented disasters in terms of frequency, magnitude, impacts, and location. Among these were the 1986-1987 floods in Bangladesh, which initiated the Flood Action Plan for Bangladesh; the Latur and Bhuj earthquakes and the Orissa cyclone in India; the 1988 earthquake in Nepal; the 2004 South Asian tsunami; and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake. The UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), proclaimed for the 1990s, was also instrumental in triggering the shift in disaster management from relief to prevention. Most countries in the region are now well on the way to endorsing DP/M policies, strategies, plans, and acts at the national level, thereby reflecting the shift from a relief-driven approach to a preparedness-driven approach in line with the recommendations of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 (HFA).

Most of the greater Himalayan region shares similar natural hazards, although each country sets different priorities. So far, Bangladesh has primarily focused on floods, India on earthquakes and floods, Nepal on landslides and floods, and Pakistan on floods. That said, and following unprecedented disasters, Bangladesh and Pakistan are also gradually focusing on earthquakes following the 2004 South Asian tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake.

Disaster Preparedness Planning at National Level

In **Bangladesh**, the four main factors accounting for the vulnerability of the country and its population are its location downstream of two of the world's largest rivers and a cyclone-prone coast, increased threats from a changing climate, lack of efficient governance, and people's vulnerability. Currently, Bangladesh is in the process of improving its already fairly comprehensive arsenal of guiding documents for disaster preparedness. The main document, the Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD), outlines the roles and responsibilities of every relevant agency and responsible person. A Disaster Management Act, which will provide the legal basis for the SOD and communities to mitigate disaster risk, response and recovery, is in the process of being finalised. Another strategic provision, the National Disaster Management Plan, which will serve as the umbrella for plans at local level, is about to be approved by the Cabinet.

Although the institutional set-up required for effective disaster preparedness and response is currently receiving adequate attention at the national level, almost all the plans have been developed through techno-bureaucratic exercises. Therefore, linkages between poverty, gender, and the environment are often missing. Some critical gaps in existing plans and policies are attributed to lack of legal entitlements to the people affected following disasters and unclear accountability mechanisms. There is also a lack of provision for coordination mechanisms

between different stakeholders and the absolutely necessary focus on community empowerment is often inadequate. There is already a relatively good early warning system for cyclones and flooding. Investment in public health and safety nets has reduced disaster-related mortalities to a remarkable extent.

In **India**, the process of institutionalising disaster preparedness gained speed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, following the IDNDR, and has taken the shape of a National Disaster Management Framework. As part of this, the National Disaster Management Act was put into place in 2005, providing a legal framework for disaster preparedness in India. It also provides for the establishment of disaster management authorities at the state, district, and village committee levels. One such key institution is the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). The NDMA is responsible for formulating policies, plans, and guidelines to ensure timely and effective responses to disasters. A National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) has also been established to provide training and carry out research, assist in policy formulation, and support other institutions nationwide.

Disaster management planning in India is dynamic and is experiencing a rise in impetus at the moment. Although considerable initiatives have been taken, more effort is needed to take the entire country forward in order to realise the Indian mission 'to build disaster-resilient communities for a disaster-free nation'. Areas that need attention include concerted promotion of disaster preparedness nationwide; a closer look at urban areas and their needs; thorough integration of the implementation of DP/M plans; holding regular drills; completing DP/M plans within a specified time frame; and ensuring that their District Disaster Management Authorities are now fully notified and established. It is expected that disaster management planning in India will see many changes in the near future, particularly at the state, district, and sub-district levels.

Nepal is currently going through an intense phase of disaster management planning. As of this writing certain processes are ongoing: the development of a National Policy on Disaster Management in Nepal and the revision of the National Disaster Management Act. The Government of Nepal is also busy with the development of a national strategy for disaster risk management. The strategy, which is based on the HFA, will serve as a set of recommendations for an indicative framework of institutional and legal mechanisms for disaster risk management.

Nepal, similar to other countries in the region, is going through a phase of intensified preparedness for all disasters. However, it is yet to see how the instruments being put into place will result in a decrease of casualties from disasters. It implies that until there is clarity from the government about who is to do exactly what and when, relief and rescue will continue to receive more attention than preparedness. One of the main reasons for failure to improve DP/M hitherto, is the lack of political will in an unstable political climate and lack of proper coordination among key stakeholders. Policies have not addressed disaster management adequately; and responsible departments are buried inside unwieldy bureaucracies of ministries. Manpower is also extremely limited in key institutions. It will indeed be exciting to see how the current planning activities can, with time, improve the preparedness for natural disasters in Nepal.

In **Pakistan** disaster management prior to the 2005 Kashmir earthquake was focused on riverine floods. Pakistan has developed dedicated institutions which carry out flood mitigation through engineering structures and early warning systems. An efficient mechanism for rescue, relief, and short-term recovery has also been set up. The latter is mainly dependent on the Pakistan Army. The 2005 earthquake served as a severe jolt in terms of the need for preparedness for other natural disasters as well. Following the earthquake, Pakistan formulated an institution named the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) which is now pursuing a concerted programme of rehabilitation and reconstruction. In December 2006, the President promulgated the National Disaster Management Ordinance, paving the way for establishment of the National Disaster Management Commission (NDMC). NDMC is to encompass disaster management authorities at the federal, provincial, and district levels. The ordinance also provided for the establishment of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). The NDMA will provide technical guidance for formulation of disaster management plans, strategies, and programmes, as well as work towards capacity building of stakeholders at various levels.

So far, Pakistan lacks most preparedness plans outlining responsibilities, coordination, and standard operating procedures; however, the country is currently rapidly propelling into a zone of better disaster preparedness. While Pakistan's status for management of disasters from river floods may be rated satisfactory, flash floods continue playing havoc with life and property every year and Pakistan has a long way to go to cope effectively with this disaster.

Regardless of whether the **national instruments** exist at whatever stage of preparation and whether the institutions and the infrastructure are available, the recurring reason for the failure of the countries in the region to cope with the recent mega natural hazards resulting in enormous losses of lives and damage is the gap between the policy and the implementation. At a deeper level, the common pattern that emerges is that decision-makers and technocrats have constantly failed to respect and consequently see the value of involving local communities (especially the vulnerable and marginalised groups) in the disaster preparedness process. There has been a lack of decentralisation and devolution of power and resources to the local government level to implement local plans. Government officials and politicians are still, to a great extent, in the relief and response mode; however, as indicated, a paradigm shift is currently occurring, and the region will witness great changes in the near future.

In addition to the national efforts, SAARC has recently taken a step as part of the paradigm shift. Following a decision of the 13th SAARC summit to address disasters, the SAARC Disaster Management Centre was put into place in New Delhi in October 2006, and is hosted by the NIDM. The new centre is yet to be developed and strengthened and it remains to be seen how it will coordinate with other players in the region. Undoubtedly, however, this is yet another step showing an increasing willingness among policy- and decision-makers to foster a more disaster-resilient region.

Disaster Preparedness Planning and Social Inclusion

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 to disasters. Similarly, the high magnitude earthquake in Kashmir on October 8th 2005, caused more than 73,000 deaths and affected more than half a million people. The death toll among women and children was disproportionately high.

Major disasters often reveal pre-existing social insecurity and vulnerability. In fact, the somewhat invisible but 'real' disaster is often not the natural hazard itself. It is the increased vulnerability of poor people, women, children, and the elderly and disabled following natural hazards. For example, women's role as caregivers in the family is intensified during and after the occurrence of natural hazards, thereby increasing their vulnerability to disasters. They often face overwork, stress, health problems, and premature death as they struggle to compensate with the loss of land, absent husbands, and loss of other resources following natural disasters. Simple improvements in the security of the more vulnerable can dramatically reduce losses and increase community resilience.

Cultural norms often contribute to gender inequities which increase their vulnerability to natural hazards and disasters. Cultural norms refer to rules or values that prevent or limit women's access to food, education, health services, and any other resources that are vital before, during, and after a disaster. For a socially inclusive, gender-sensitive perspective on disaster management, vulnerability assessments need to take into account local knowledge and risk-reducing activities and disaggregate what is often conceived as a homogenous 'community'. A great need still exists for bridging the social-technical divide across disciplines.

India is one of the countries with comparatively extensive experience in the exercise of social inclusion. Its efforts and challenges, to a certain extent, reflect what other countries in the region can undergo as they embark on this relatively new journey of social inclusion in disaster preparedness. India has recently fostered social engineering to give due share to the socially excluded.

Despite affirmative legal, social, and economic measures, however, discrimination and social exclusion still persist. The mega disasters of the last decade and a half have accentuated the discrimination when more women than men have died in disasters. The burden on women has increased and they face more exploitation and violence and as a result women have faced more trauma and distress. Children have suffered serious disruption in critical stages of development and have become vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. Separation and experiences of death of their parents have created traumatic conditions and bases for long-term mental health problems. The disabled have not been given due priority and sometimes have even been left out during evacuation operations. Early warning systems are not disability friendly. Relief workers are generally insensitive to the needs of the disabled. The majority of short- and long-term shelters – including latrines, health care, food and water services – have not been accessible for disabled people.

The fact that social exclusion is deeply ingrained in social and economic systems in the region gives rise to issues that are multi-dimensional in nature. This scenario calls for the ability to deal with and get results from a multi-cultural, multi-tasking, multi-disciplinary, and multi-level setting. Added to this is the focus on the social aspects of gender, caste, class, ethnicity, age, and disability. There is a need to bridge gaps between social-technical aspects and across disciplines. Understanding and acknowledging local communities as valuable resources and ensuring a place for local-level initiatives and learning experiences in DP/M policy and action call for extensive sensitisation and capacity building at all levels.

Accounting for local knowledge, practices, and contexts can help implementing organisations improve their plans for disaster preparedness. It can contribute to project performance in the local area; that is, build project acceptance, ownership, mutual trust, and sustainability. Many project planners and implementing organisations do not have a clear understanding of 1) the value of local knowledge in their project's success and sustainability, 2) the meaning of local knowledge on disaster preparedness, and 3) the methods of identifying and collecting information related to it. Understanding, accounting for, and respecting local knowledge can contribute to a project's cost effectiveness in the long term, from both a financial and a social point of view.

Solutions in the context of resource management need to go beyond the dichotomy between local versus state management levels and to integrate cross-scale institutions. As the rate of change (institutional, economic, and cultural) related to globalisation processes is increasing, innovative forms of governance are required to address the complexities and uncertainties associated with it. A better understanding of local knowledge practices can help to identify what is important and can be promoted at the local level. Building upon local knowledge and practices that capitalise on local strengths whenever relevant can decrease dependencies on external aid.

It is evident that disaster preparedness planning in the region is dynamic and vital at the moment. Although considerable initiatives have been taken recently, more effort is needed to take the entire region into a mode of sustainable preparedness, resting on empowered communities, firmly guided by national strategies and plans, and with proper inclusion of socially marginalised and vulnerable groups in all parts of the disaster management cycle.