

# INCORPORATING THE CHANGING FACE OF DISASTERS INTO DRR/CCA POLICY

## *Addressing extreme events, daily stresses and silent disasters*

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### Background

As the impacts of climate change intensify and landscapes are transformed by infrastructure construction, the very face of disasters themselves is changing. More areas are seeing unprecedented hydro-metrological events, such as flash floods in traditionally desert zones.

Emerging research is also showing that smaller disasters that occur more regularly have equal, if not greater, impact on families in the long-term as larger disasters. For example, it is estimated that over 30 million people are displaced annually due to floods.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of climate change is an additional factor that is increasing day-to-day stresses such as water shortages; particularly in poor and vulnerable communities that have little capacity to cope with these recurrent calamities. While the scale of the emergencies may not be large, the impact is as disastrous for the affected families.

### Research findings

Pan-India discussion and detailed field research in states as diverse as Rajasthan and Ladakh reveal three main sets of problems that are currently not adequately addressed in DRR and CCA policies.

Extreme climactic events: Large-scale catastrophic hydro-metrological events which are unprecedented for the area; affecting huge numbers of people and devastating the local economy.

Day-to-day stresses: Daily impacts of climate change that are exacerbated by fragile ecosystems, poverty, environmental degradation, infrastructural weaknesses and a lack of basic services. This includes water shortages, food security and new diseases.

Silent disasters: Ignored disasters that go unheard, unseen and unassisted.

### The need

These issues receive little attention, preparation, and funding; or even specific coverage in disaster and climate change policies. Stronger mechanisms for policy convergence between climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction are clearly necessary for long-term impact!

### Long-term benefits

The economic impacts of these disasters may be small individually, but add up to be a massive portion of the economic loss due to disasters annually. For instance, floods accounted for 2/3rds of the total damages due to disasters in India between 1990 and 2011. This is compounded by the fact that this is not a one-time loss. Its repercussions can affect livelihoods for years to come, crushing local development gains and keeping people trapped in cycles of poverty. This is not counting the spiralling effect on health, education and gender issues that in itself compromises development.

Above all, addressing these problems can lead to greater community resilience that will have spin-off effects on every walk of life.

### SILENT DISASTERS: A SUMMARY

**The Red Cross estimates that 91% of disasters worldwide are silent!**

*What defines 'silence'?*

- The story is not widely known or reported.
- Assistance is not given, is extremely delayed or vastly inadequate.
- District, State or National policies don't consider it a disaster.

*What makes a disaster silent?*

- Scale: The amount of perceived damage and numbers of people killed/affected
- Site: The place affected and its accessibility
- Significance: Economic and/or political significance of the affected areas
- Stresses: Day-to-day stresses that aren't classified as a disaster
- Slow-onset vs. sudden onset

### EXAMPLES OF DAY-TO-DAY STRESSES

- Retreating glaciers and changes in stream flows
- Water shortages and quality
- Changing rainfall and crop patterns
- New insects and pests
- Reduction in pasture land
- Increased health hazards
- Food shortages and malnutrition
- Livelihood-compelled migration

<sup>1</sup> <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/pdf/flood.pdf>

## SEVEN GOLDEN RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCORPORATE DISASTER'S CHANGING FACE INTO DRR - CCA POLICY

The following recommendations must be incorporated in the National Action Plan on Climate Change - with particular reference to the Missions on Water, Sustainable Development, Agriculture, Himalayan ecosystems and Climate Knowledge. It is suggested that a 9<sup>th</sup> Mission entitled 'National Mission on climate-induced disasters' be added to break the silos between DRR and CCA; and to build in specific attention to extreme hydro-met events, day-to-day stresses and silent disasters.

Each of these recommendations must also be integrated as provisions in the development of the National Disaster Management Plan. These must accordingly percolate into all related disaster and climate change acts and policies at the national, state and district levels.

### 1. Break the silos and develop DRR - CCA policy as a cross-ministerial team

Stop thinking in silos and bring DRR and CCA into all aspects of the mainstream development. Create a provision for a cross-ministerial team including representatives from Ministries such as Environment and Forests, Home, Rural and Urban Development and Agriculture and others, who will look at policy creation and implementation across the disaster cycle.

### 2. Put together small problems to create the big solution

Build policy from the ground up, not top down; integrating small problems to look at larger solutions. Policy built top-down is often not implementable at the district and local levels precisely because it fails to take into account the ground realities.

### 3. Interpret disasters beyond numbers

Make provisions of new and locally relevant ways of evaluating disaster-related losses. Part of the definition of a disaster in the National Disaster Management Act states that it is "*of such a nature or magnitude as to be beyond the coping capacity of the community of the affected area*". Guidelines to define this 'coping capacity' need to be created, for a disaster is still usually narrowly interpreted based on numbers of lives lost, houses destroyed or vast economic impact on the national/state economy.

### 4. Qualify 'silent' disasters and day-to-day stresses

Define, make provisions for and commission initiatives specifically on 'silent' disasters and day-to-day stresses.

### 5. Expect the unexpected and make rules for exceptions

Include planning for the complications arising from secondary and tertiary disasters; with specific provisions for fast-growing urban areas and remote rural locations. Create provisions for exceptions to the rules, such as unexpected disasters which are uncommon to the area.

### 6. Pre-empt politics

Make provisions for the serious social and political implications of mass migration, climate refugees and large-scale livelihood losses. Include provisions for how inter-state or cross-border issues will be addressed.

### 7. Integrate DRR and CCA components into the market system

Create provisions to localise and mainstream projects to the extent possible; including the use of locally available material, resources and techniques. Promote R&D and widespread use of DRR and CCA components among mainstream corporations to create the demand and incorporate long-term sustainability of the policy.



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