

DRAFT

Mismatch in Priorities between Local People and Humanitarian Agencies

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About the Document

Is there a missing link between the disasters and the relief given to local people by humanitarian agencies? Is there is mismatch between the priorities of NGOs and those of local people? If yes, why so? How much do cultural and social issues influence the preparedness and risk perception?

These are a few questions that are answered by Inter-cooperation Social Development (ICSD), Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI) and Climate Development knowledge Network (CDKN), through the research study under the project '*Getting Climate Smart for Disasters*'. We have strived to get a closer understanding of what is required by the people of the state. Through this exercise AIDMI and its project partners aim to put forward the voice of the people to the institutions such that policies that address the areas accorded priority to by the people are developed and implemented by the institutions.

1. Background

Disasters can affect everyone, and therefore is everybody's business. Disaster risk reduction should be a part of everyday decision making – from how people are educated about disasters and better prepared against local hazards. Each of such decision can make the population either more vulnerable or resilient (UNISDR, 2012). However, despite all the efforts expended toward disaster risk reduction, the vulnerability of the people of the state to disasters seems to be escalating. The possible reason behind this can be the lack of alignment of the priorities of the people and the humanitarian agencies or authorities.

The research study has focused on the lack of alignment of priorities because it can have far reaching implications. For, the institutions in the name of public welfare might focus their energies on areas that the general public does not deem as necessary. Thus, good intentioned efforts of the institutions might come to naught because of they might not address the needs of the people.

Apart from the difference in priorities between the people and the institutions, there is also a difference between the approaches advocated by them. The people still and justifiably so have faith in their traditional knowledge systems for resilience against disasters and natural hazards. On the other hand, the institutions have largely if not completely neglected these traditional knowledge systems. This research study has also focused on integrating these traditional knowledge systems with the institutional measures for DRR.

2. Disaster Response and Recovery

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) is multi faceted (political, social and economic) and should be based around three independent issues: climate change adaptation, DRR and poverty reduction. It is inevitable to reduce poverty and affects a climatic disaster it can have on people to work on disaster risk reduction. The basic needs of the people in rural area must be answered first. People cannot worry about future security when they are starving from hunger today. For them, adaptation is about finding solutions to these problems. In order for them to adapt, we must start by addressing basic and immediate needs like water and sanitation, food security and livelihood strategies, while at the same time reducing the risks of extreme weather events. In reality, people are so excruciatingly poor that they have very little surplus to think about adapting for the future. Adaptation can only happen through addressing poverty.

On the other hand, climate change in itself is not a problem, but it is also interwoven social, cultural and environmental factors that puts extra strain on people who are already extremely poor, socially excluded and disadvantaged. It should therefore be managed with other problems that are caused by climate change are a combination of overpopulation, environmental degradation and poor governance of resources. Increase in climate change will lead to increase in natural disasters intensity and frequency; despite of this very little is done in response to be prepared. This is due to lack of resources, infrastructure and resistance to change seen in the coastal communities. Thus, a disaster management approach is inevitable.

It therefore becomes inevitable for humanitarian agencies to make disaster policies and plans that based on experience and evidence on how people typically behave and respond post disasters. The resilience of people's livelihood and their vulnerability to food security is largely determined by the resources available to them; and how these have been affected by disasters. The main priority for the communities affected by disasters is the recovery that provides them with food security and resilient livelihood. The problem of food insecurity is often solved by food distribution; however humanitarian agencies fail to understand that other types of response may actually help people meet their needs. Examples will include cash for work jobs, improving purchasing power of people through employment programs. This problem can be effectively solved by humanitarian organizations by training the workers in activities that reduces their climate dependency. Moreover, the humanitarian agencies must conduct monitoring visits every few months to see the real situation at grass root level.

Furthermore, it is very difficult to convince and encourage the community members to participate in DRR activities in normal times. They participate in such activities post disasters as the projects are combined with food or cash for work. However, it is essential that such activities are conducted regularly reduce dependency and create self sufficiency. People in villages tend to learn from neighbours and other members. Therefore, participation of members who are committed to helping themselves is essential. People will start following and be involved in the programs when they see the difference (UNDP, 2010). Therefore, a long term commitment is required on the part of humanitarian agencies. However, project based organization cannot successfully implement this as they tend to move to other projects.

3. Perception of Risk

Risk perception is the judgment made by any community towards any hazard and the severity associated with the hazard. The risks perceived the communities are different depending on the knowledge, experiences, values, feelings and the level of exposure of the community to any hazard. Each community, village, city or state has different perception to risks depending on their experience. In the same way, disaster management holds different meaning for different actors. Until major disasters in India such as 1999 super cyclone, 2001 earthquake and 2004 tsunami; neither the government nor humanitarian agencies focused on early warning systems, rehabilitation or safer shelter construction. Thus, the communities were not prepared in the face of the disaster. It is often perceived by the community that disaster management is the whole and sole responsibility of government or humanitarian agencies; and that it is their responsibility to insulate the community from all the risks. However, that should not be the case and it is a responsibility of everyone. There is lack of public awareness on the need of preparedness and long term strategies that requires disaster risk reduction. In addition, it is essential to understand that it is impossible to have a ‘disaster proof’ society; that only exists in theory. Nevertheless, we can only reduce risks and make a resilient and prepared society.

There is always a difference in the perception towards risks due to natural hazards between nongovernmental agencies and local community. In order to successfully implement disaster risk reduction practices, it is important that the gap is bridged as soon as possible. It is been observed that there is always a mismatch in expectations between the victims of disasters and

humanitarian agencies post disasters. The humanitarian agencies are funded by international agencies that have a fixed approach towards resilience. They have a perception to reduce people's vulnerability to hazards and have a rational approach to risk reduction. The community will not share all of the same values and purposes as the international humanitarian agencies. This is because the cultures are very different; the decision makers of the humanitarian agencies come from highly politicized and economic environment whereas the communities are very traditional and believes that old methods will work. In addition to this, the divergence exists because different people or humanitarian agencies address disaster management from different operational perspectives. The humanitarian agencies focus on the academic methods and past experiences so that the relief based operations are successful. However, in reality the needs of the people will be very different from that of the aid given.

Risk Perceptions of Minorities

The problems faced by rural and urban representatives of humanitarian agencies are not always directly related to obstacles in disaster preparedness. There are various issues that emanate from local politics, caste issues, social taboos and cultural ethos. These issues are as pertinent as issues of faulty planning or lack of resources or coordination. The key to coping with risk is being sensitive to differences in people's perceptions of the problem and hence understanding their levels of vulnerability. It is essential to incorporate the ideas of risk management when working with the communities at risk. Following are perceptions of risks before and after disasters in vulnerable communities including minority and casual labour.

Minorities: The level of perception of risks becomes low when minority communities are battered by poverty too. Several studies have shown that poverty not only affects any communities' preparedness to disaster risks but also affect their morals and resilience to fight and recover from the disaster. The following are the socio-economic reasons for the low level of risk perception among the minorities:

- A politically unstable government in a country or a state increases the risk of the minority communities being neglected. In India, several political conflicts arise because of vote bank politics and it is generally the poor who are affected the most. If in a state, the local authorities neglect one community, then that community suffers during the budget allocation process too. This result in lower or no budget allocated to

reduce the disaster risks or increase the preparedness thus making the communities more vulnerable to disasters.

- Under-treatment by local authorities reduces the trust of the minority communities on the authorities and hence reduces their ability to cope any disaster.
- The lack of attention from the local authorities and humanitarian agencies often leads to improper healthcare and sanitation facilities which lead to increase in chances of outbreaks of diseases post disaster.
- Fear of social instability and dearth of opportunities provided to the minority as compared to other communities leads to reduction in the ability of those communities to cope the disasters.

The factors mentioned above leads to higher disaster risks and low risk judgment or perception which reduces the preparedness for any disaster and increases the response and recovery time after any disaster.

4. Integration of Development Activities with DRR and CCA to reduce the Mismatch

Ominously, several climate models predict that such events will increase in frequency and severity of disasters against the background of climate change (IPCC, 2012). This has increased stress and vulnerability of people and disempowered individuals and society hampering individuals and communities' development even in the long-run. However, the degree to which these so called natural hazards to be considered as "natural" is being questioned. Natural hazard alone cannot create extensive losses and damages, but poorly managed interactions between society and environment contribute to convert natural hazards into disasters. Vulnerability of community towards a disaster can depend upon the factors related both physical and social elements of the community, but do not need to totally depend on the natural hazard itself.

Vulnerability of any community can be understood as a set of prevailing or consequential conditions, which might affect the community's ability to prevent, mitigate or prepare for any hazards. The development process does not necessarily reduce vulnerability to natural hazards. A community can be vulnerable before the disaster occurs which further impedes the disaster response and recovery; thus have an influence on the community for a long time after

that. It is argued that “natural disasters” are also created by humans by increasing the vulnerability of people towards extreme physical events by constructing unsafe buildings, poor urban planning, poverty and dense population. Therefore, considering natural hazards as events beyond human control is being challenged but the root causes of the disasters are evaluated to find effective solutions to minimise the losses and damages to humans, economy and social activities.

Therefore, all the policies should intend to minimize the vulnerability of people; to evade or limit the adverse impacts of hazards or risks. The impacts of disasters can be substantially reduced if the people are aware about the disaster preparedness measures. However, it is been largely observed that this information or awareness does not successfully inculcate the culture of risk avoidance or preparedness among local communities. Unfortunately, the local mechanisms for communicating and raising public awareness about disaster risk and preparedness remains very weak. Without any fundamental transformation, climate change will make things worse. Investments need to go into providing training for alternative livelihood so that the climate dependency is reduced. In addition, investments and cash transfers must be made in assets to create an enabling environment that can support rural non farm economy and increase their spending power.

It has been observed that the differences between relief and development become difficult in practice. The relief and development agencies are not same; relief agencies reach first and provide help to the survivors of the disaster and once the suffering has been relieved to a certain extent, another set of agencies that work for development arrives to organise a better functioning society. In the changeover between these different sets of agencies, there was an exodus of local knowledge. Development agencies have to remake contacts and build a new rapport and earn trust with local people, to implement the activities (Treasure, 2009).

The nature of work done by the two set of agencies are different; and so is the response from people. The provision of water, basic health and sanitation services by relief agencies makes people's lives more pleasant on a day-to-day basis. But development is about creating a fully functioning society with opportunities for people within a framework of rights and freedom from oppression. Therefore, the line between relief and development is extremely blurred, and of course development is inconceivable if people are struggling to survive (Treasure, 2009).

Majority of Indian population is employed under the ‘informal’ sector. Economic development of India has not led to formalization of the employment; this is seen in many developing countries. These informal sectors are not acknowledged by the humanitarian agencies post disasters and are unprotected under legal and regulatory framework of the country. Therefore, the losses incurred by them are also not recognized. This leads to a greater vulnerability of the informal workers – employees or owners of informal enterprises – typically lack basic social protection as well as voice and representation in civic life (UNDP, 2013). It is necessary to address this problem and include such minorities in the rehabilitation and preparedness programs to successfully reduce the vulnerability of people.

Another important factor is accountability of loss and damage suffered by women and law that covers women’s right to property do not match. Legal rights of women to property may vary and are not equal to men. Women may be left out, that is, losses and damage suffered by women may not be fully and equally accounted for in most situations. For example, loss and damage to the care giver at home is hardly even accounted for and as a result “care economy” is overlooked. The study of conflicting priorities related to climate smart disaster risk management between citizens and authorities in Odisha clearly pointed this out. This was also seen in the recovery efforts post cyclone *Phailin* in 2013.

Further, major problem is the lack of communication. For example, post Gujarat earthquake in 2001, large amounts of clothes donated to the victims were dumped along the highway “to be spirited away by the Rabaris (nomadic people)” because the trucks sent too much to certain locales, and as a result the trucks just dumped their supplies along the side of the road (Buck, n.d.). INGOs are well known for their ability to assess and respond to humanitarian crises precipitated by several disasters. To avoid the duplication of effort, several organizations have developed a joint response protocols and decision tools (Global Center on Disaster Risk and Poverty, 2012). Another problem regarding the immediate relief is the distribution of supplies is based on favouritism for some NGOs. This happens when powerful and influential families or communities pick the most of supplies for themselves and leave very little for the rest of the community.

5. Influence of Culture on DRR and CCA

Within the main stream literature on DRR, it is often claimed that cultural elements are neglected when planning and implementing DRR strategies. People's ideologies are sharpened by culture regarding what is right and wrong that could create a certain mind-set or beliefs for people. Failing to address cultural aspects could lead to increase the vulnerabilities of community towards disasters and the development of unsuccessful DRR strategies. It is evident in some context that in some situations cultural beliefs and attitude has helped to the survival of the communities from disasters whereas in some cultures it has acted as a barrier for effective disaster risk reduction or recovery activities. Few of the following examples will help to understand this further.

These cultural beliefs act as a barrier in DRR preparatory and recovery activities as shown in the following example. The Merapi volcano in Indonesia is one of the most active volcanoes in the world. Despite the risk from the volcano, Jevanese community lives on the slopes of the volcano due to their livelihood patterns and cultural believes. Communities living near the volcano, carry out annual offerings to the volcano following their traditions. Because of the religious beliefs, majority of community living near the area thinks that losses due to the volcanic eruption are under the control of divine forces. During the eruption of Merapi in year 2006, going against the instructions of government authorities, some communities refused to evacuate their villages until they got instructions from their "cultural leader". This example shows that community's vales judgment regarding following the orders of their cultural leader. The community's idea is such that they believe following the instructions of the cultural leader is "correct" than following scientific knowledge and instructions given by the government. As a result of that even during a disastrous situation, people do not prefer to evacuate their village (Kulatunga, 2010).

Another example suggests that women should stick to strict code of conduct and modesty to protect themselves from natural disasters. Hojjat ol-eslam Kazem Sediqi, the acting Friday prayer leader in Tehran, explained that "Many women who do not dress modestly lead young men astray and spread adultery in society which increases earthquakes" (BBC, 2010).

On the other hand, some cultural beliefs and attitude have helped DRR preparedness and recovery activities as shown in the following example. The importance of local, indigenous

knowledge towards DRR was evident during the Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2004. Different communities and individuals reacted to the tsunami disaster in varied ways. Some communities and individuals had expertise information and understanding regarding tsunami who successfully survived it. The Moken community in Thailand identified the signs such as unusual behaviour of animals, birds and low tide as indications for a tsunami from their traditional stories. Thus this community moved away from the sea towards protective areas. However, some of the communities in Sri Lanka who lack such historical knowledge about the Tsunami moved towards the sea rather than moving away from the sea, when they saw the low tide created (Kulatunga, 2010). Therefore, it is essential for the humanitarian agencies to learn from the communities and make disaster risk reduction strategies that are compatible with cultural aspects of the community in further strengthening community's coping capacity towards disasters.

6. Community Based DRR (CBDRR) – The way forward

Capacity building should not be limited to professionals and personnel involved in disaster management but should also focus on building the knowledge, attitude and skills of a community to cope with the effects of disasters. Identification and training of volunteers from the community towards first response measures as well as mitigation measures is an urgent imperative. A programme of periodic drills should be introduced in vulnerable areas to enable prompt and appropriate community response in the event of a disaster, which can help save valuable lives.

The goal of any disaster management initiative is to build a disaster resistant/resilient community equipped with safer living and sustainable livelihoods to serve its own development purposes. The community is also the first responder in any disaster situation, thereby emphasizing the need for community level initiatives in managing disasters. To encourage such initiatives, the following are required:

- i. Creating awareness through disaster education and training and information dissemination are necessary steps for empowering the community to cope with disasters.

- ii. Community based approach followed by most NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) should be incorporated in the disaster management system as an effective vehicle of community participation.
- iii. Within a vulnerable community, there exist groups that are more vulnerable like women and children, aged and infirm and physically challenged people who need special care and attention especially during disaster situations. Efforts are required for identifying such vulnerable groups and providing special assistance in terms of evacuation, relief, aid and medical attention to them in disaster situations.

7. Conclusion:

Disasters are not new to human experience. For most of history, the devastation brought on by an earthquake, floods or drought was considered an act of God and people usually resign themselves to fate (UNISDR, 2008). Many people still feel helpless and believe that they are punished by Gods. This perception has led to strong emphasis on responding to disasters rather than reducing the factors that make us vulnerable.

The mismatch between the humanitarian agencies and local people can be seen as an opportunity to grow. Disasters test the reactivity of the systems, especially the capacity of different actors to work together. They demand solution that includes government, civil society, military and humanitarian agencies amongst others. In normal conditions they have a very little incentive to work together, however when a disaster strikes, they are all forced to work together and combine their capacity to reduce human suffering. It has been observed that the lack of clear coordination at the national and departmental level has led to ineffective systems of management. This is often reflected in the poor responsiveness to dealing with disasters, and mixed signals from sources of expert information (Republic of Kenya, 2010).

Humanitarian agencies implement the risk reduction activities that will build a resilient society. However, as most of the humanitarian organizations are project based, they get involved in other project. Thus, no one is there to help the community when they struggle with the new methods and ways, and thus they stop using it. It is essential that monitoring visits after the completion of projects are conducted so that they can see the actual situation. However, some of them tend to impose their own agendas and become self interested at the expense of people they are helping.

Furthermore, it is important to make the DRR strategies compatible with cultural aspects of the communities to strengthen community's coping capacity towards disasters. The integration of local knowledge with appropriate scientific knowledge in an effective way can make the disaster affected communities' resilience against natural disasters. It is important to note that understanding and studying culture only on surface will not lead to be successful. Proper engagement with culture is therefore, a vital part if we are to utilise culture towards effective DRR activities and vice-versa.

There is a fundamental difference between the approach, values and organizational mandates of the humanitarian agencies and disaster affected communities in south Asia. Following important questions must be answered to ensure that the priorities of the community and humanitarian agencies are same;

- How can we develop a shared understanding in ways that are relevant to humanitarian action?
- How does the community challenge our understanding of vulnerability?
- What should our next steps be – collectively, and as individual organisations?
- What commitments are needed / possible from across the international community?

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