

## **Preparing communities for disaster management: Myths and challenges**

**S. M. Patnaik**

University of Delhi

**Nilika Mehrotra**

Jawaharlal Nehru University

The Himalayan state of Nepal is at high risk of natural disasters. People's vulnerability to disasters like floods, landslides, and snow avalanches acquire alarming proportions due to chronic poverty, involuntary migration, and unplanned settlements. Attention of the nation state and international non-government organizations (INGOs) has been drawn towards planning for disaster prevention and preparing local communities in developing the capacities.

This paper is derived from an empirical study carried out in 2007 to assess the programs that aim to strengthen community resilience to disasters in three districts of Nepal, viz. Rupandehi, Makwanpur and Sarlahi. The overall objective of the evaluation was to reflect on the role of INGOs and their accountability, to document the learnings for future initiatives, to use the findings in promoting good practices in disaster risk reduction (DRR), and finally to assess the value of these initiatives in formulating a long term strategy of integrating DRR in national development.

The data was collected through Participatory Ethnographic Method (PEM) where the ethnographic insights were validated through people's participation in the interpretation of social-economic and political data.

The paper underlines some of the challenges emerging from the grassroots such as conceptualizing the notion of 'community,' sustaining people's committees, integrating indigenous people, gender concerns, resource sharing, mobilizing the youth, locating the indigenous knowledge, issues of communication, replicability and scaling up of programs. Comparative issues of citizenship, civil rights and governance are discussed along contested structural and cultural terrains. Through anthropological insights, the study suggests further inputs into development policies in Nepal.

**Objectives:** The specific objectives of the paper are to examine the collective achievements and learnings of the project against the set outcome of the proposal; to analyze the strength, shortcomings and limitations of the methods and approaches used by civil society institutions in Nepal; and to explore the potential for sustainability, scaling up and replication of the approaches used for ‘mainstreaming’ DRR.

**Methodology:** A methodological framework was developed to provide the basis for addressing the evaluation questions. In all cases, the framework was aimed to ensure an appropriate, complete, rigorous, and unbiased analysis. Many relevant documents were reviewed to support the investigation.

Primary data collection through fieldwork was done through Participatory Ethnographic Method (PEM) where the ethnographic insights were validated through people’s participation in the interpretation of social and cultural data.

Prior to the commencement of the field visits, checklists were developed for interviews and focus group discussions, with district level project staff, district or village development council (VDC) level stakeholders and members of the local communities. The main focus of the field work was on interaction with the communities, which took place primarily in the form of focus group discussions. Wherever possible, discussions were conducted with men and women separately. Efforts were made to interact with the field mobilizers and other staff separately.

The team met a diverse group of stakeholders ensuring that data and information came from a variety of sources to ensure validity and reliability through corroboration/triangulation. This included District Administration Office, DDC officials, VDC secretary, line agencies staff (District Education Office, District Soil Office, DWIDP) teachers and media.

Observation visits were made to various project sites using consistent criteria to assess disaster mitigation measures and service utilization.

The project is implemented in eight VDCs of three districts, as follows:

<u>Districts</u>	<u>VDCs</u>
Rupandehi	Makraher, Devdaha, Keruwani
Makwanpur	Basamadi, Handikhola
Sarlahi	Sunderpur, Laxmipur, Fulparasi

The team visited all these districts with a plan to spend two days in each of them. The visit to Sarlahi was, however, confined to just one of the scheduled days due to closure of the highway that restricted vehicular movement to districts in the Terai region.

**Notion of Community – Myth and Reality:** The very word “community” is contested in the contemporary discourse in social development. In case of Nepal, the way “community” is understood by the development professionals, planners, and nation builders is far from what it actually means to the people on the ground. Administratively the Village Development Committees (VDCs) are regarded as the smallest functional units for developmental initiatives. Each VDC comprises nine wards which are usually territorial units. People live in small settlements locally known as *tol*. A *tol* provides the space for everyday interaction and serves as the base for group cohesion and solidarity, which obviously are very important in combating a disaster in emergency situations.

In the villages the VDCs are identified as the units where Disaster Management Committees (DMCs) are formed. Practically speaking, wherever a DMC is formed its office is located in the ward from where the president of the DMC comes. Sometimes the secretary or the treasurer also comes from the same ward. The meetings of the DMC are held in this ward. Though street drama and other training programs are organized in different wards, the decisions are taken in the same *tol*. Even the local people from other wards sometimes find it difficult to communicate or travel to reach the *tol*.

The wards that have been left out mainly belong to the indigenous groups such as Tamang or in some cases Chepang or Vankariya. It could be attributed to difficulties in geographical or cultural/social communication with the mainstream community. Needless to say, the formation of VDCs was more of a political and administrative decision representing a top-down approach to classify local communities in a decontextualized manner without regard to the cultural sensibilities.

**The Process of DMC Formation:** DMCs are the key structure playing an important role in emergency and everyday situations. Ideally they are to be formed at the level of VDC with a commitment to policies of inclusiveness and equality.

The manner in which DMCs are formed and continue their activities has several implications that require a closer examination. The field mobilizer in consultation with the community members organizes a general body meeting of the residents (different wards of VDC) where the president, the secretary, the treasurer and other members of the DMC are elected. We observed that sometimes the message of the donor or the mission does not reach all wards, much less all the ethnic communities residing there. Moreover, even where a message reaches, it always acquires a different meaning.

The villagers are facing the challenge of not only streamlining the formation of DMCs but also ensuring its continuity over time in an institutionalized manner. Once the DMC is formed, there is no scope for its expansion. Due to shortage of time the partners could not mobilize members from all the wards to take part in a DMC as members.

**Awareness and Capacity Building:** The tools and approaches used, especially the FM radio broadcasts, the street plays, and competitions at schools were found to be working well in awareness and capacity building. They also helped the community to overcome the superstitious beliefs such as treating disasters as *daivi prakop* (the wrath of god). We feel the training programs should be sensitive to differential abilities of rights holders, for instance, in groups where both the teacher and illiterate youth work together. Training should be in accordance with the cultural needs and resources, e.g. women should be trained to learn to rescue in a *sari* as it is their traditional wear. The focus in training should be clear as to what they are being made aware of and how they would deal with particular situations.

**Integrating the Indigenous People:** Looking at the list of the DMC members, it is encouraging, at least as viewed from the outside, that the stakeholders have ensured the representation of marginalized communities in DMCs. However, with regard to the nature of their relationship within the DMCs, the particular ethnic groups such as the Tamang, Chepang, Tharu and Vankariya still remain some of the marginalized communities of the areas.

**Sharing the Resources:** Construction of shelters or community halls has created greater visibility of the resources generated under the initiatives of the civil society. It was only in the last few months that these halls were ready and were rented out. However, differential renting policy might convey a message that the members of the *tol* where the community hall is located has a greater privilege.

**Gender Issues:** Since it is intended for the entire population, the disaster preparedness tends to rely on existing social structures built on patriarchy. Women face the likelihood of being marginalized in accessing benefits from the project. The project proposal, in its policy and general guidelines, is silent about gender issues as it fails to mention the rights and entitlements women should have in this patriarchal social setup, thereby having implication for the project's overall achievements. But in terms of the practice the project has given due attention to the participation of women in all project activities.

**Coordination with Other Agencies:** The project has undertaken a multi-dimensional disaster management program that includes raising awareness, capacity development and mitigation measures. The project has supported communities to be organized and has built solidarity in the form of Disaster Management Committees and Youth groups.

**Interface with Local Bodies:** The project has taken initiatives to interface and coordinate with local bodies, the DDC and the VDC. The DDC officials, including the Local Development Officer, attend programs organized by the project at the district level while partner organizations are invited to the annual planning meeting in the DDC. In some districts, the DTO has supported the project by sending technicians to inspect the project's mitigation works. The DDCs have also provided disaster preparedness materials (such as gabion wire and stone/sands) when requested by the DMCs.

**Coordination with Government Agencies:** Though development agencies play a key role in disaster preparedness and management, they are not formally involved in the District Disaster Reduction Committee which is headed by the Chief District Officer (CDO) and comprise representatives of line agencies, army/police units and the Red Cross. The project's coordination with District Administration Office is generally limited to involvement in functions and inaugurations.

**Civil Society Linkages:** To avoid duplication and share information and learning, all district based organizations working in disaster related issues were invited by the project during its orientation stage. These organizations also interface and come together in the DDC's annual planning meeting and other formal events organized at the district and local levels. The project has also pooled in resources with other development agencies for implementation of larger mitigation works.

**The Issues of Communication:** The reasons for some of the wards of a VDC remaining unrepresented in a DMC is due to the process of communication. While the active members of some of the wards convey the message of DMC formation at least a week in advance to their fellow residents, the message is sent through local leaders and other contact persons towards that may be far off and mainly inhabited by ethnic groups or marginalized people. In most such cases the political leaders and other contact persons are not from the ethnic communities and a given message can acquire an unintended meaning when transmitted indirectly.

**Sustainability, Replicability and Scaling-up:** Sustainability is one of the areas where key issues cutting across all major and interrelated themes converge. For sustainability of the project, community awareness should attain a desirable level in terms of its magnitude and spread transcending the assumptions. A follow up for training programs to prevent loss of skills should be given priority. It is important that the issue of loss of skilled personnel due to migration be discussed. Coordination with various government agencies at the district level for mainstreaming DRR is highly essential. Overdependence on partners could pose a problem and thus needs to be addressed. High visibility of structures, and the emerging issues of ownership and resource sharing all point toward challenges that lie ahead. In addition, the mitigation work has to follow adequate awareness generation and capacity building for sustainability.