

Community Based Disaster Preparedness in the Darjeeling Hills Context National Day for Disaster Reduction

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Disasters:

Disasters are dramatically increasing in frequency world wide. This increase in frequency cannot be attributed to a single factor but to a complex combination of factors and issues like climate change, population increase, reduction in green cover, increase in pollution levels, political and economic will...etc. Disasters today need to be reflected both from the perspective of natural or anthropocentric disasters. These factors are again a complex result of actions locally as well as globally. Addressing these factors and issues needs a complex system of local and global actions based on individual as well as global commitments and responsibilities. These systems are so complex that it cuts across actions at inter- as well as intra-generational levels. The result of these combination of factors and issues, a common action towards disaster reduction at a global level seems a distant possibility.

A stark reality in this increasing frequency is the increase in impacts and magnitude of disasters. Impacts cannot be generalised within a geographical disaster hit area. The impacts of disasters are seen more on the poor and marginalised sections of the community. Even within the poor and the marginalised, the most vulnerable groups are the women, children, elderly and differently abled.

With this background of the complexities of disasters, whether it be natural or anthropocentric, it is evident that solutions are not possible in the immediate future, yet a need to act proactively is evident. Relief and rescue measures are short-term actions that are being undertaken on a regular basis, traditionally. But in the new trend of increasing frequency of disasters, relief and rescue measures itself are not enough. Restricting actions to relief and rescue also means a huge recurring investment that might be difficult to access regularly for development agencies, whether government, non-government or voluntary agencies and the community at large. Also this recurring expenditure means that there is less amount of resources available for other activities like investing on the social sector of primary health and education. Thus, there is a growing consensus that investing on preparedness before the disaster is more cost-effective.

Investing on preparedness with marginalised sections of the community has a more long-term benefit too. Marginalised sections of the community; small and marginal farmers, indigenous fisherfolk, rural artisans, pastoral communities, urban poor...etc have small productive assets like their land, productive units and tools, which are the most affected during disasters. The consequences of disasters, being loss of life as well livelihoods. Disasters further marginalise, marginalised sections of the community. Marginalised sections being prepared for disasters means faster recovery time to pre-disaster or near pre-disaster situation of the community.

The presentation focuses on a single disaster of landslides in the Darjeeling Hills and does not try to define disasters and other related terms like hazard, vulnerability and risks. The focus, draws on world experiences contextualises it to the landslides in Darjeeling and draws lessons in the increasing frequency of disasters. The objective being, a case for discussion of a positive action at a community level as an intermediary action till a long term global as well as a local solution becomes possible.

The presentation revolves round a belief that community based disaster preparedness is more cost effective and essential in the increasing frequency of disasters. Preparedness enables a quicker recovery time for communities and for marginalised sections of the community, this becomes even more essential as their small productive assets are also lost in disasters. It also revolves around an understanding that global initiatives and consensus actions are required for a long term solution but local actions are essential even with the global consensus.

Landslides in the Darjeeling Hills:

Darjeeling, the northern most district of West Bengal, India is the only hill district in the state. It is part of the Hindu-Kush Himalayas. The Himalayas is a young mountain range formed due to tectonic forces. The tectonic forces are still at work thus the mountain range is still growing which results in landslides. Thus, with the active tectonic forces, landslides are a natural phenomenon in the Darjeeling Hills, with some areas in the hills having the highest landslide zonation of IV. But in the recent years besides the tectonic forces, anthropocentric forces have led to the increase in the frequency of landslide as a disaster in the Darjeeling Hills. The active tectonic forces makes Darjeeling an active seismic area with zonation upto IV(very High). Earthquake coupled with landslide has had devastating effect on Darjeeling.

There are three types of landslide that occur in the hills. One is due to Geological movement due to the movement of the tectonic plates. Secondly, human induced, where human interference changes natural drainage pattern leading to landslides. Third, earthquake related landslide. Darjeeling lies in an active seismic zone where earthquakes are a frequent phenomenon. During an earthquake, the soil behaves like a liquid, liquefaction, thus increasing landslides. This is aggravated during the monsoons where there is added water in the soil. The major devastating landslides in Darjeeling have always been a combination of earthquakes and heavy rain. The two need not be on consecutive moments, but can be co-related in a span of three years differences. Major landslide have occurred in the span of twenty years as the rainfall pattern in the hills have a 15 to 20 year cycle with respect to amount of rainfall which have created havoc in the lives of people and environment in Darjeeling. Thus landslides are always a part of Darjeeling and in the first case nothing can be done except avoid most prone areas. But in the second human made cases one can avoid and reduce the risk of landslide with proper study and intervention.

The frightening aspect of the trend post 1980s is the increase in frequency of landslides that are beyond the 15-20 years cycle. Not only is the frequency increasing but the magnitude and the impact.

Response to the landslides:

The community, Governmental, NGO response till date have been focussed on reaction after the landslide. The focus of the action is providing rescue, food and shelter relief after the disaster strikes where there is little primary stakeholder participation in the relief process.

Rehabilitation is a huge effort, as the entire area gets swept away leaving no physical land asset for the victim. Thus rehabilitation necessarily means relocation, which brings in a dimension beyond simple rehabilitation due to the loss of land in the landslide and the need to acquire new land for rehabilitation. This means various acquisition procedures in various departments depending on the area of rehabilitation.

Way Forward:

The development paradigm that is increasingly practised world wide is decentralisation and peoples participation. In the Indian context the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Ammendments and the 6th Schedule promotes the process of decentralisation and peoples participation. Peoples participation in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes is the manifestation of the paradigm.

With the constitutional background, in the context of landslides in the Darjeeling Hills there is scope for peoples participation in the relief, rescue and rehabilitation process. This needs to be done as a human right of the affected community and will reflect upon the change in the impacts of relief. Peoples participation will ensure that the relief reaches all in equitable terms. On the long term, it will ensure that the affected communities do notef agencies and responsible to themselves.

At the district level, it is pertinent that the disaster plans are formulated with the peoples participation. This is insitutionalised by the 73rd ammendment but needs to be put into practise.

The larger long term need is to look at the Sphere Standards. The Sphere Project was launched in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement.

Sphere is based on two core beliefs:

- first, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of calamity and conflict, and
- second, that those affected by disaster have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance.

Sphere is a broad process of collaboration and an expression of commitment to quality and accountability. The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response looks into the five basic life-sustaining sectors.

1. Food Aid
2. Nutrition
3. Water and Sanitation
4. Shelter and Site Selection
5. Health Services

Community Based Disaster Preparedness – a case study in the Darjeeling Hills:

A one year pilot initiative of community mobilisation and planning has been undertaken for disaster preparedness in the Kalimpong Block and Algarah Block of Kalimpong Sub-Division by Anugyalaya Darjeeling Diocese Social Service Society. The villages are Nimbong, Suruk, Lolay, Kankebong, Pringtam and Gitdubling. The project area selected comes under zone IV for both landslide(highest risk) and earthquake with a devastating history of landslides.

The intervention is built on the experiences and resources of the community and the organisation. Conceptually and in terms of intervention the programme is a long term one.

Overall objective:

To reduce the impact of disasters especially landslides among the most vulnerable population in 7 Gram Panchayats in District Darjeeling, West Bengal, India.

Specific Objectives:

- a. To enable the communities of the 7 GPs to undertake a proactive action towards disaster management especially landslides.
- b. To enable the communities of the 7 GPs to plan and respond to disasters effectively in order to mitigate the impact of disasters especially landslides.

The project aims to enable the communities of the 7 GPs to take a proactive stand with regard to disaster rather than the reactionary stand after a disaster. It also takes into account that at a micro-level community initiatives have a limited impact on a global phenomenon but actions must begin locally. Enabling a proactive stand addresses the change in attitude of the communities from a passive victim to an active primary stakeholder, addressing the issues of mitigation of impacts of disaster. The proactive change also involves proactive promotion of linkages, sharing of responsibilities, accessing benefits and rights and addressing policy issues with regard to landslides.

The enabling process is based on the existing resources and experiences of the community and expanding to include process and products to reduce the outcomes and impacts of landslides. Thus, at a social system the project is based on Samajs(traditional community based organisations), Self Help Groups, Farmers Groups, Forest Protection Committees and Eco-Development Committees. The project enables the communities to respond to landslides better with the

formulation of community based landslide preparedness plans with proactive participation of all the groups in the community and endorsed by the Samaj.

The methodology adopted to build upon the community experience and resource is through community mapping and planning using Participatory Methods. The tool that are being used is a combination of Appreciative Enquiry and Participatory Learning in Action titled APPA Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action. The outcome are the community plans for disaster preparedness. The plans have hardware and software components. The software components are the formations of groups with specific tasks for relief and rescue. Necessary components of capacity building is incorporated for these specific roles of these groups. Demarcation of the community along lines of vulnerability is also an important component. The hardware components include tools for rescue and relief which are made ready before the disaster. An additional part of the programme is the need for afforestation programmes by the community as a means of landslide mitigation. Teaching learning materials are an important part of the programme and includes posters, handouts and AV documentaries. Issues of land planning in agriculture is also a necessary component that is incorporated which addresses both livelihood and environmental issues. The base of all action is the community mobilisation process. Based on these plans the community looks at formation of specific teams with specific tasks and skills to manage landslides at a short term level. On a long term level issues of afforestation and adapting agricultural practices for landslide prevention and reduction is adopted.

These community plans will be linked to and made part of Institutions of the Panchayat, Forest, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and Education.

The outcome of the process will be that the community will be proactively able to manage disaster better and will also promote better co-operation and collaboration with various Government and Non-Governmental Agencies that are involved in disaster management. The preparedness will reduce the impacts of landslides and the recovery time of the community after the landslide is reduced. This is an important aspect of the process as the poor and the marginalised need to get back to normal life faster after a landslide so that they are not further marginalised.

Thus community based disaster preparedness is an important tool to reduce the impacts of disaster on a short term level till a more long term global disaster reduction process is developed. This process is not exclusive but is integral to the process of community development.

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