

Role Of Non-Government Organisations (NGOS) In Disaster Management - Their Strengths And Weaknesses

In India, the types of roles and responses to situations of natural disasters by the NGOS can be broadly classified into the following categories :

- a) For large relief agencies and NGOS, the main response is to provide material relief and rescue operations (to the extent possible) during times of disasters including medical relief.
- b) This is followed by a longer period of reconstruction activities of the physical infrastructure like roads, houses, community buildings, drinking water facilities, etc. and continuation of medical aid. In some instances, some financial aid and other assistance are provided to the affected people to start their traditional economic pursuits.
- c) For the small and localised NGOS, the initial response is in the form of rescue and material relief. In instances where other activities like reconstruction of houses, etc. are undertaken, they are usually dependent on support from the large relief agencies and international aid.
- d) Most of the larger India agencies, which are not located in the disaster prone areas, withdraw after the initial phases of relief and reconstruction, while only a few prolong their presence in the areas for re-starting some developmental activities. Government support is also restricted to relief and rehabilitation.
- e) Only a few external agencies stay back in the disaster prone areas for disaster mitigation, long-term development of the people of the area and especially for disaster preparedness before the next disaster strikes. This approach, till date, can be seen only in a few rare exceptions.
- f) Local NGOs, who also participate in relief and reconstruction activities during times of disasters, revert back to their usual pre-disaster activities after the initial phase. The linkages between the usual developmental activities and the requirement for adopting a methodology where such activities will lead to state of disaster preparedness of the community is rarely observed.

Though all agree that larger areas and number of people are becoming increasingly vulnerable to disasters, the planning and interventions alongwith the form and content of disaster aid do not consciously incorporate the aspect of promoting disaster preparedness. Most responses have therefore primarily remained in the form of relief. The form and content of Disaster Aid has only promoted this approach. However, given the greater degree of flexibility of the NGOs and their regular contact with the people residing in remote and disaster prone area, their involvement during times of disasters and post-disaster activities have been also very positive. Some of the major activities of the NGOs which should be highlighted are :

- a) A more co-ordinated and just distribution of relief materials and the capacity to involve a larger number of volunteers for such operations, especially from amongst the community. The effectiveness of a much more effective disaster and post-disaster medical relief and health services should also be mentioned.
- b) A large participation of the community in the planning and implementation of relief and reconstruction activities - ensuring people's participation;
- c) Because of greater degree of flexibility, adoption and modifications of physical infrastructure development work to suit the local conditions and aspirations of the people. In this context, a great deal of experimentation especially on modified forms of housing for specific disaster-prone areas needs special mention - e.g. Housing in the flood prone-areas of West Bengal, earthquake prone areas of Himachal Pradesh and the newly designed cyclone shelters and housing in Andhra Pradesh. The NGOS, in a few states, in recent years, have also been largely involved in micro watershed development, forest protection and plantations and other forms of micro conservation experiments in drought and land-slide prone areas.

- d) Only the NGOs have been involved in training and awareness building amongst the local communities for disaster preparedness. However, there is a further scope of development of training and training systems for disaster preparedness.
- e) The NGOs have been also involved in creating and promoting community funds, grain banks and other resource base amongst the community for disaster preparedness.

However, in the rush to provide relief or what at that time remained an urgent need, there have been many unintended effects. Some glaring instances are :

- a) The total non-use of raised school buildings after the 1978 floods in West Bengal and a similar or worse fate to the houses and cyclone shelters constructed during the 1977 A.P cyclone.
- b) Large number of tubewells in drought-prone areas and accompanying introduction of high-yielding variety crops, unsuitable for the area, leading to depletion of ground water resources and further damage to the fertility status of the soil.
- c) Resorting to eucalyptus and other exotic breed plantations under social forestry programmes have also has negative environmental effects
- d) The aspect of protection of livestock during times of national disasters and post-disaster operations in aspects of animal health and development has been an area of neglect both by Govt. and NGOs.
- e) However, what should be mentioned that the dominant form of disaster aid (both by the Govt. and NGOs) and subsequent actions have increased dependency at all levels.
- f) The form of material relief after distributed after national disasters in many instances led to wastage and misuse since it did not consider the cultural and need aspects of the people in specific areas. These practices of dumping non-acceptable material aid to distressed people still persist
- g) While there has been a greater degree of flexibility and adoption of appropriate measures for relief and disaster preparedness, there has been very little or no change in the attitude and the forms of disaster aid

