

# Role of NGOs in Community Based Disaster Preparedness

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*"World is increasingly being threatened by large scale disasters triggered by hazards, which will have long term negative social economic and environmental consequences on our societies and hamper our capacity to ensure sustainable development and investment particularly in developing countries"*

*(Geneva Mandate on Disaster Reduction July, 1999)*

**F**or a safer world in 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the vision envisioned then is:

To enable all communities to become resilient to the effects of natural, technological and environmental hazards, reducing the compound risks they pose to social and economic vulnerabilities with modern societies.

To proceed from protection against hazards to the management of risk through the integration of risk prevention and sustainable development.

On December 22, 1989 the UN General Assembly, while proclaiming 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction asked nations throughout the world to give special attention to programmes and projects designed to reduce loss of life, property damage, and economic and social disruption caused by natural disasters. This proclamation came on the basis of a report that was based on the "basic premise much that is known is not universally applied in the context of disasters". The resolution proposed several innovative approaches including:

1. A shift in emphasis to predisaster planning and preparedness;
2. Public education, and
3. Enhancement of organizational strengths and training of specialists.

**The UNDRO while outlining what can be done to achieve the above clearly stated that** none of the preventive and protective measures will be fully effective without the informed participation of the whole community. **On the eve of UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Yokohama (May, 1994), a SAARC study clearly outlined the limitation of the Government system and called for a greater role for NGO sector. The Conference itself stressed that** capacity building and education at all levels have an important role to play in the development of a culture of prevention by ensuring a two-way flow of information between decision makers and communities at risk.

## Preparedness at Community Level

So far as India is concerned a distinct national capability exists in terms of technologies for monitoring prediction and forecasting, relief administration, safe housing and shelters, development of suitable infrastructure. However, despite the fact that we suffer from perhaps the largest number of disasters round the year, these capabilities have not become nation's capability that would enable action for mitigating disaster impact at local level with local resources which may be supplemented by outside support when the impact causes damage beyond the local resources.

Panchayati Raj Institutions have come into existence and can play an increasingly important

role in building up disaster resilient local communities. This however is possible only with concerted efforts and conscious policy at top level.

That towards the end of the decade we are still debating the need for preparedness at community level is indicative of much greater efforts needed in the next millenium. Have NGOs done anything other than providing food, clothing, shelter or even medicines during the emergency phase, as a matter of relief? Are they really capable of taking up responsibilities in preparedness activities? We must concede that this has not yet become a priority agenda for most NGOs. Perhaps due to lack of a clear policy and lack of funding, most Government schemes encourage NGO participation in fields like environment, adult education, health care, development and issues connected with women, youth, children, aged and the poor/backwards.

I wish to give below few examples of the work done by NGOs in other areas:

1. National Institute of Amateur Radio based in Hyderabad have in July, 1999 launched a Hamulance aimed at providing emergency care and carrying a mobile amateur radio station. This would fulfill the need for effective communication and prompt relief of medical nature. Such a scheme has been launched under the provisions of Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme
2. Ahmedabad Study Action Group have undertaken an appropriate technology development project following the Latur Earthquake. They have now developed a 'shake table' located in the villages that is carried on the roller wheels and can be given horizontal thrust equivalent to various earthquake magnitudes. This can test side-by-side the traditional housing structures and structures with the earthquake



NGO trained civil engineers in community level participation.

Photo Courtesy : Tarun Bharat Sangh (NGO)

resistant features, by applying forces to half-scale models. They have even produced educational material and a video - "Seeing Is Believing". The ASAG Team undertakes a three month long awareness building campaign in earthquake affected areas in Chamoli region.

3. JAC based in Gurgaon collaborated with a food manufacturer to develop 'disaster food'. It was developed duly packed in food quality tins and long shelf life. The food meets the requirements of WHO standards for Calorie intake in relief situations and the nutrition standards set by National Institute of Nutrition. The food was developed specific to the tastes prevalent in four regions of India i.e. East, West, South and North. It was tested in laboratories and presented in samples to the First World Assembly of NGOs for Disaster Reduction held in Kathmandu in October, 1996.
4. JAC was again involved in a National Programme of Community Hazard Mapping as a tool for Disaster Preparedness at the school level. A programme that was commended by the UN/IDNDR as a Low Cost Activity capable of replication.
5. JAC has been involved in conducting studies on community based disaster preparedness and have organised training courses in Nepal and in India at Pune, Dehradun and Deoria.
6. Centre for Rural Developed based in Guntur has devoted the HUDCO Building Centre to promoting disaster resistant technologies. Infact, HUDCO beginning with Uttarkashi Earthquake (1991) have almost throughout the decade setup large number of Building Centres in disaster prone belts.
7. During the World Conference at Yokohama (1994), NGOs from six continents got together and established Global Forum of NGOs for Disaster Reduction. It initiated several schemes like, twinning for Disaster Reduction, Volunteers for Disaster Prevention, Register for Disaster Resources. It works within the framework of the IDNDR and in close co-operation with it.

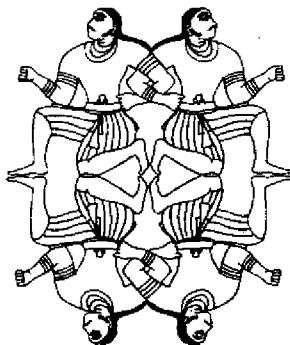
8. Several international NGOs in consultation with large number of individuals, researchers, agencies have evolved a "Code of Conduct" for Relief Agencies, established principles for People in Aid and have developed a human charter for Disaster Response and Minimum Standards in Relief. These are landmark documents that will perhaps, in times to come, will be quoted like the Geneva Convention.

### Community Based Preparedness Planning

Any community is a reflection of our society in terms of their culture and behaviour patterns. Hence in the event of a disaster for calculated response some sort of a plan is essential. While details could be spelt out to the minutest point, yet essentially any DBDP would be:

1. Clearly perceived hazard and development of hazard profile of the community and its neighbourhoods.
2. Assessment of risk and vulnerability.
3. Identification of individual and community resources.
4. Identification of gaps and knowledge or resources that will impede effective emergency response.
5. Like any other plan it must be clear and simple, specific in details, define duties and responsibilities of each member, earmark various escape routes and locate shelter sites.
6. Since no community can be 100 per cent self sufficient for an effective response, identification of resources and development of mutual aid agreements with neighbouring resource providers, is vital.
7. Periodical mock drills to test the plan and update it are of paramount importance. Since community is a dynamic entity, no plan can be a static document.
8. The plan has to be written and in order that we do not have to refer to the document when emergency arises, a simple concise 'checklist' is needed.

### MEMBERS OF THE NETWORK AND INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES



### DETAILS OF PARTNERS



*"Communities respond to their real priorities in the context of all the constraints they face, including social, economic and political pressures, whereas outside experts never see the full picture. By itself, community capacity is not sufficient for effective disaster mitigation. But it is a vital part of any integrated and sustainable disaster mitigation strategy. With the changing nature and the increasing intensity of the impact of disasters, community efforts barriers to the full realisation of community efforts".*

### Conclusion

It is the NGOs, by virtue of their proximity to the people and their comparative flexibility in operations, that are better suited to work in the area of community based disaster preparedness, than the Government or the Government organised NGOs (GONGOS). Herein lies the key for making it a safer world in 21<sup>st</sup> century. JAC, a voluntary agency with over two decades of work in the area of prevention and preparedness and having developed a unique resource centre is willing to play its part in building up local capability to cope with the disasters, with or without external assistance.