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## Role of non-government organisations in disaster management: An overview

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### Abstract

India is the most dominant area in NGO activities and they play an important role in different stages of Disaster Cycle, and different elements are attributed for its successful operation. Technical skills of NGO's are important for rescue, coordination and for relief activities. Commitment is the key word for reconstruction and rehabilitation and cooperation of different stakeholders is important for preparedness. Sustainability, flexibility and motivation are the key words for the successful NGO operation in the field of disaster management and role of NGO's is well appreciated. NGO's provide linkage between the people and help the people during, before and after the disasters. The critical role of the NGOs in disaster reduction and response has been widely acknowledged. More and more NGOs are involved in disaster-related activities in Asia; however, networking and collaboration among them has been weak due to the lack of resources and organizational constraints.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, flexibility and motivation, successful NGO operation, field of disaster management

### Introduction

There has been a paradigm shift in our approach to disaster management during the last one decade. The shift is from a relief centric approach to a multi-dimensional endeavour involving diverse scientific, engineering financial and social processes to adopt a multi-disciplinary and multi sectorial approach with stress on building up capabilities of community to enable them to work towards their own risk reduction. The role of NGOs in this context therefore assumes added significance. The role of NGOs is essential in building the resilience of local communities to sustain development and supporting local-level implementation and action. A comprehensive approach to Disaster Management requires a combination of changes in practices at the local level and changes in policies at the state and national level. The establishment of such a network will also facilitate the development of strategic partnerships with NGOs, aimed at addressing poverty issues at the sub-national and community level.

The High Powered Committee (HPC) on Disaster Management carried out a nation-wide consultation process with over 600 NGOs to address the lack of a well-coordinated network between the government systems and the NGO sector and also among the NGOs themselves. HPC recommended a nationwide network of NGOs for coordinated action encompassing all aspects of disaster management. The Disaster Management Act, 2005 has given legislative back-up to this endeavour by entrusting the State Executive Committees and District Authorities with the responsibility to advice, assist and coordinate the activities of NGOs engaged in disaster management. The District Authorities are mandated to encourage the involvement of NGOs and voluntary social welfare institutions working at grass root level in the districts for disaster management.

The role of NGOs in the pre-disaster phase should include awareness generation, education, training, formation of village level Task Force, Disaster Management Committees and Teams, development of Disaster Management Plans, conduct of mock drills, vulnerability assessment and coordination with Government and non-government agencies. The NGOs can play a key role in the immediate aftermath of disasters by extending assistance in rescue and first aid, sanitation and hygiene, damage assessment and assistance to external agencies bringing relief materials. During the post disaster phase, the NGOs can take a lead by providing technical and material support for safe construction, revival of educational institutions and restoration of means of livelihood and assist the government in monitoring the pace of implementation for various reconstruction and recovery programmes.

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There is a need to encourage NGOs already active at grass root level at each district or sub-district level. The larger NGOs can provide technical and material support to these NGOs since they are already working closely with the community and have better appreciation of their vulnerabilities, needs and the capacity for revival so as to bring them back to the pre-disaster stage at the earliest. A well-coordinated approach giving a lead role to local NGOs with necessary linkages with larger NGOs and District Administration will go a long way in institutionalizing the role of NGOs in disaster risk reduction.

### Statement of the Problem

Disasters and India have had a long unfortunate relationship together. Floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and landslides have been recurrent phenomena. About 60% of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of various intensities; over 40 million hectares is prone to floods; about 8% of the total area is prone to cyclones and 68% of the area is susceptible to drought. Latur, Bhuj, tsunami in South India, Uttarakhand floods and recent Kashmir floods left thousands homeless.

India is the most dominant area in NGO activities and they play an important role in different stages of Disaster Cycle, and different elements are attributed for its successful operation. Technical skills of NGO's are important for rescue, coordination and for relief activities. Commitment is the key word for reconstruction and rehabilitation and cooperation of different stakeholders is important for preparedness. Sustainability, flexibility and motivation are the key words for the successful NGO operation in the field of disaster management and role of NGO's is well appreciated. NGO's provide linkage between the people and help the people during, before and after the disasters. The critical role of the NGOs in disaster reduction and response has been widely acknowledged. More and more NGOs are involved in disaster-related activities in Asia; however, networking and collaboration among them has been weak due to the lack of resources and organizational constraints. Yet, networking and enhancing the capability of the NGOs is considered to be an important strategy for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of disaster risk reduction and response activities, especially at the local level in various aspects such as training and public education, sharing of information, experience and expertise on best practices, and transfer of relevant technology in disaster reduction and response. The present study is meant to understand the functioning of Non-Governmental Organisations in Andhra Pradesh and to examine their role in disaster management in terms of relief, response, rehabilitation, reconstruction, recovery, preparedness and mitigation.

### Review of Literature

Disaster is defined as a severe disruption, ecological and psychosocial which greatly exceeds the coping capacity of the individual and the community (UNDP, 1992) [12]. Anything that exceeds one's personal ability to cope with a stressful event becomes a crisis. The Webster's Dictionary defines a disaster as 'a grave occurrence having ruinous results'. In the last two decades over three million people have been killed in natural disasters worldwide. According to statistical evidence there have been three times as many losses resulting from disaster events in the last ten years than was the case in 1960s. As a consequence economic

losses have been nine times greater during the last decade, with losses over US \$ 90 billion per year. In 1998, natural calamities claimed the lives of over 50000 people worldwide (CRED, 2000) [3]. Most disaster victims live in developing countries, where poverty and population pressures force growing numbers of people to live in harm's way (Chawla P.S, 2008) [4]. Given that the pressures of poverty and population growth continue to increase, the disaster trend is likely to worsen, if we do not take disaster prevention more seriously (UNEP 2001 GEO 3 Report). The Centre for Research on the Disaster Management –The Role of Local Self Government and the Community Participation in Kerala Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED, 2000) [3] and Red Cross recently published their report on vulnerability to disasters in 2000. The number of people affected by disasters in 2000 went up to 256 million compared to an average from 1991 to 2000 of 211 million per year (World Disaster Report, 2001).

Disaster Management is defined as an applied science which seeks, by the systematic observation and analysis of disasters, to improve measures relating to prevention, mitigation, preparedness, emergency responses and recovery (Carter, 1991) [2]. When public participation is integrated into disaster management planning and community planning, the result is sustainable hazard mitigation (Laurie Pearce, 2003) [3]. It is well felt that community participation, local planning, development of self-reliance and man power resource within the community itself can strengthen the efforts of disaster preparedness and response (Biswas R, *et al.* 1997) [1]. The community bears the burden of disaster and is the first responder to the event and so it is imperative to build the capacity of the community to enhance their coping mechanism and resilience to prepare for and face the disaster (Rajibshaw and Krishnamurthy, 2009) [9]. Over the past decade, the numbers of 'natural' and technological disasters have increased. From 1994 to 1998, reported disasters averaged 428 per year; from 1999 to 2003, this figure shot up by two-thirds to an average of 707 disasters each year. For the first five years of the decade, 213 million people, on an average, were affected. The second half of the decade saw this figure rise by over 40 per cent, to an average of 303 million per year. The loss to assets has been increasing, much more than the number of disasters. The Asian tsunami that devastated the coastal areas of over 12 countries, killing around 200,000 people and seriously affecting over 1.5 million people has changed drastically human perceptions about the dimensions of natural disaster. Developing countries suffer the greatest costs when a disaster hits – more than 95 percent of all deaths caused by disasters occur in developing countries, and losses due to natural disasters are 20 times greater (as a percentage of GDP) in developing countries than in industrialized countries (Luis Flores Ballesteros, 2008) [5]. All disasters are hence the result of human failure to introduce appropriate disaster management measures (Wisner, P. Blaikie, T & *et al.* (2004). Hazards are routinely divided into natural or human-made, although complex disasters, where there is no single root cause, are more common in developing countries. A specific disaster may spawn a secondary disaster that increases the impact. A classic example is an earthquake that causes a tsunami, resulting in coastal flooding. Researchers have been studying disasters for more than a century, and for more than forty years disaster research. The studies reflect a common opinion when they argue that all disasters can be seen as being human-made,

their reasoning being that human actions before the strike of the hazard can prevent it developing into a disaster (Marwaan Macan-Markar, 2011) <sup>[6]</sup>. Disaster management processes depend on administrative as well as civil society actions. The role of the civil society becomes more prominent in states where governments do not have sufficient resources (Satish Modh, 2006) <sup>[11]</sup>. Capacity for disaster management intervention calls for perspective building through training and awareness programmes for elected representatives, officials and departmental staff, NGOs, community organisations and the community at large, as well as the creation of an organizational set up for intervention. Moreover, an inventory of technical and technological manpower, financial and material resources should be kept updated (Vaidyanathan. S, 2011) <sup>[6]</sup>. Apart from responding to a disaster community should also be prepared for disasters. We need to incorporate disaster preparedness in the micro plan (Prasad. S, 2009) <sup>[9]</sup>. The brief literature review reveals that there is a need to explore how best the Governments, communities and NGOs can be actively involved in dealing with natural disasters. The present study will be a pioneering effort in this direction.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To conceptualise and understand the Disaster Management in India in general.
2. To study the role of Non-Governmental Organisations in managing disasters.

### Disaster Management and NGOs-Conceptual Framework

Disasters have been defined variously by different scholars and agencies. According to the definition provided by the Government of India and United Nations Development Program (GOI-UNDP), a disaster is defined as “The product of a hazard such as earthquake, flood, or windstorm coinciding with a vulnerable situation which might include communities, cities or villages”. The Disaster Management Act 2005 of India defines disaster as a catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence affecting any area, arising from natural or man-made causes, or by accident or negligence which results in substantial loss of life or human suffering or damage to, and destruction of, property, or damage to, or degradation of, environment, and is of such a nature or magnitude as to be beyond the coping capacity of the community or is of a sufficient magnitude that it completely disrupts life in the affected area. Disasters are ‘events’ as crises situations, which brought out social behavior only in response to the event, ‘intrusion of something alien’. This type of analysis assumes that disasters are something out of the ordinary, not part of normal social processes, and only when they occur, do those affected respond to it. The need to return to ‘normalcy’, which was how it was before the disaster occurred, is stressed in this form of analysis (Clausen *et al.* 1978). As an alternative to this view on disasters, there is another point of view that rests on a vulnerability framework, and argues that in certain situations, it is difficult to differentiate between normal life and disasters. The emphasis is put on the social systems which make people vulnerable to disasters. Therefore, the whole system is such that even normal life has various hazards in it and is prone to risks and disasters which do not come as a sudden event.

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is any non-profit,

voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions. There are national level NGOs acting as donor and advocacy organizations, state level NGOs involved in mobilizing communities through various campaigns as well as action research and local NGOs working directly with communities. There are many Community Based Organisations (CBOs), which also play a significant role in disaster management.

The National Policy on the Voluntary Sector (2007) was the first step which paved way in evolving a new working relationship between the government and voluntary organizations. Voluntary organizations are defined as formal as well as informal groups such as: community-based organizations (CBOs); non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs); charitable organizations; support organizations; networks or federations of such organizations; as well as professional membership associations.

This Policy recognizes three instruments of partnership, *viz.*, (i) consultation, through a formal process of interaction at the Centre, State and District level; (ii) strategic collaboration to tackle complex interventions where sustained social mobilization is critical over the long term; and (iii) project resource generation through standard schemes.

### Conclusion

NGOs' influence is not merely limited to development alone but it has entrenched on the issues of disaster management. A major shift in the role and responses of NGOs has occurred from its traditional strategies of support from development to more specialised areas like rescue, relief, construction of transit and temporary shelters, rehabilitation of disaster victims, counselling and trauma care, participative training and sensitisation campaigns etc. In fact, NGOs have been playing commendable role in creating greater interaction and empathy in disaster management initiatives because they are equipped well with local knowledge, indigenous methods and skilful activities to deal with the problems of disaster. 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:

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

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