



Institutionalising Sustainable CBDRM

Demystifying the Smartest Approach to Disaster Risk Management





Sumoni Chapori, a village of 350 odd people nestled on the floodplains of Brahmaputra river in Assam, relived the same nightmare repeatedly every year when flood waters gushed over their homes and land, sweeping away their huts and belongings, drowning crops, killing livestock. Even before they would start to pick up the pieces of their lives and try to recover from the losses, it was time for another round of ravaging floods. The village located in Jhanjimukh, Jorhat district in Assam in India's north-east experiences torrential rain during the monsoons. The resulting floods leave hundreds of people dead in the state every year.

Seven years ago, with the guidance of local advocacy groups, residents of Sumoni Chapori designed a process to help them organise and streamline the practices they had applied for years to survive the floods and rebuild their lives in the aftermath. Sumoni Chapori's valiant effort to utilise their resources, traditional wisdom and skills to create a system that built a primary wall of resistance between them and disasters lies in the heart of the idea of Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM).

In course of the village practicing CBDRM, local non-governmental organisations like NEADS partnered with SEEDS India to help institutionalise the practices. An important aspect of the programme was facilitating easy channels of communication between the community and local government bodies so that they could work organically together to increase the village's resilience to disasters.



It has become very important to decentralise the process of disaster management, for it to be effective.

Dr. Manu Gupta

With the process of institutionalisation of CBDRM in place, Sumoni Chapori residents built public toilets at an elevation of at least 6 feet above the ground so that the villagers — especially women and children — have access to sanitary washrooms even when the village is flooded. The residents usually use boats to reach the washrooms during emergencies.

The residents have also built hand pumps at elevated levels so that they have access to clean drinking water during the floods. Women in the village learnt professional techniques of growing food in their own backyards to help them tide over financial crises. The women have also taken to learning handicraft and making household items which are sold through NGOs and other organisations to supplement their incomes. Villagers have been able to organise funds from local government bodies to build new facilities in the village. In essence, villagers and local governing bodies have distributed the work of identifying challenges and addressing them successfully.

How necessary is institutionalising CBDRM in India?

With a population of 1.38 billion people, the probability of communities themselves having to stand as the first line of defence against a disaster in India is undeniably high. The novel coronavirus pandemic that has been tearing through the world has underlined the importance of intensive community-based endeavours in preventing tragedies like never before.

From enforcing precautionary measures to facilitating quick emergency solutions, communities in India have had to come up with strategies based on their resources to battle the pandemic. The only way to face the pandemic has been through coordinated action within communities and through their efficient communication and collaboration with various stakeholders like the media, corporate entities and the government machinery — exactly what institutionalising of sustainable CBDRM involves.

The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) has advocated the adoption of community based action to prevent disasters and minimise their effect for years. Taking a step forward in that direction, they launched a project called Institutionalising Sustainable Community Based Disaster Risk Management. Funded by the USAID/OFD, the project envisaged equipping communities with the knowledge of political, social and financial environment conducive to designing and implementing processes that would help them be better prepared in the face of disasters. GNDR partnered with six national and three regional organisations to execute this project. In India, they partnered with SEEDS.

Dr Manu Gupta, co-founder of SEEDS India, explained that with patterns of disasters becoming increasingly unpredictable due to unhinged climate change, it has become important to refashion traditional methods of disaster management.

CBDRM and efforts to institutionalize it, Dr Gupta pointed out, answers to the new realities of the planet that communities have to learn to deal with.



Women in West Bengal attend a CBDRM training session.



“What we are trying to achieve through institutionalising CBDRM is to find a reasonable arrangement and understanding between communities and governments, make sure communities have their own coping capacities and figure out where the government can step in to facilitate that,” Dr Gupta said. CBDRM and institutionalising it, Dr Gupta added, it gives communities agency, dignity and choice to chart a course of action that best suits their needs and respects their interests.

From Vulnerability to Resilience

So how can communities make informed choices about securing their futures against disasters and also collaborate with governments to turn their planning into reality? The answer, as the work of SEEDS and its partner organisations has revealed, begins with instilling a sense of ownership within the community, so that people actively engage with the idea of working towards a common achievable goal.

In Sumoni Chapori, NEADS set up ‘Duruyug Bebothapana Samiti’ (Disaster Preparedness Group) comprising young farmers and elders from the village. The villagers learnt to do risk mapping — an evaluation of how vulnerable they are to disasters and what actions they could take for prevention and relief. This led to the setting up of a raised granary, to help

them store food for emergency situations. The villagers came up with the idea of cultivating 'bao' rice seeds, known to be a resilient variety of paddy.

During the programme, villagers worked with anganwadi workers, ASHA workers and government school teachers. They also communicated with core government bodies like the District Disaster Management Authority, Agriculture department, Public Health Engineering Department.

While securing funding for CBDRM continues to be a challenge, in Bihar, SEEDS helped create a Community Disaster Relief Fund (CDRF). The emergency fund is mostly maintained and monitored by the women in the villages and families contribute a small amount monthly to keep in going.

The minimum contribution was set at Re 1, but most communities have been contributing significantly more. To stem the erosion of soil and the velocity of water during floods, bamboo and banana saplings were planted in strategic areas. Produce from these trees are also sold and the funds deposited in the CDRF. Farmers who suffered losses of property and farm animals due to the Koshi river flooding were introduced to the concept of livestock insurance. At the heart of these activities undertaken in Assam and Bihar was what Dr Gupta said is the essence of CBDRM — fostering ownership within communities to help them fight disasters with dignity.



How can you get involved?

There are hundreds of meaningful ways that individuals and organisations can get involved and contribute to the process of institutionalising sustainable CBDRM. Are you a journalist or a media person? Write and raise awareness about communities who could benefit from a CBDRM intervention.

Dr Gupta explained that funding always remains a challenge in CBDRM initiatives and while corporate bodies graciously focus on education and health in various CSR initiatives, preparing an at-risk community for a disaster goes a long way in ensuring they can tide over disasters to avail opportunities of education. Civil society organisations can play the important role of setting up pilot projects in CBDRM, which governments can then replicate with their own resources. SEEDS helped set up a rehabilitation cluster of 30,000 bamboo houses in the poorest areas of flood ravaged Bihar. Witnessing the feasibility of the project, the state government endorsed the idea and sanctioned funds to the affected families under the Indira Awas Yojana scheme to build houses modelled after the pilot.

“By institutionalising CBDRM, in a way, we are trying to get ahead of the curve”.

If the last year has taught us anything, it is this — be prepared, and stand together to tide over the worst. - Dr Gupta said.

