

## Calling for Seven Shifts in the Humanitarian Sector (by: Gargi Banerji and Sunil Pillai, PRAGYA)

A significant portion of the world's disasters and conflicts happen in remote areas far from the mainstream. Typically these areas are also poorly connected by roadways or other means of transport and underserved by medical facilities and existing responder services networks. In South Asia for instance, earthquakes periodically rack the remote Himalayan belt of Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India; floods and cyclones regularly wreak havoc in far-flung coastal areas and mountains in India, Bangladesh and Nepal; ongoing armed conflicts mar the isolated border areas of all these countries. In East Africa, recurrent droughts and the struggle for food, fodder and water has meant protracted armed ethnic conflicts in the Karamoja triangle of Rift Valley across Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia.

The communities that reside in these areas are trapped in a state of '*chronic crisis*' in the disaster zones, and many of these suffering communities are unknown to the world at large. Already poor and deprived of welfare facilities and development services, their poverty and distress is deepened with every successive disaster-experience, and their trauma and sense of hopelessness exacerbated. Natural disasters that occur in such areas often do not even register among the mainstream populations, including responder agencies, and the media only covers such disasters if they be of immense scale; frequently, the disaster-affected remain overlooked and their misery neglected. The growing impact of climate change and protracted political paralysis has meant the shocks of such calamities are increasingly frequent. Left to fend for themselves without timely or sufficient assistance in the wake of such disasters, the victims are rarely able to recover from one before the next hits them.

Lack of infrastructure, low visibility, and governmental neglect in these remote areas frequently combine with difficult terrain conditions as well as complexity of contributory factors. 'Combination-disasters' result – earthquakes *plus* landslides, droughts *plus* ethnic violence– most often followed by famine and epidemics. They rend the social fabric and infrastructure of the affected areas, wounding the people in multiple ways, and making effective response even more difficult.

The nexus of conflicts and natural hazards, particularly slow-onset or frequent disasters is increasingly evident, with strong correlation between inadequacy of natural resources exacerbated by climate change, and intensifying battles for scarce resources. So is the nexus between development neglect and humanitarian crises - stark differences in development, between population groups, is leading to the use of violence by the deprived groups as a tool to exert pressure for their rights.

Humanitarian response experiences in last-mile communities demonstrate the need for the following seven shifts in the humanitarian architecture particularly for remote, impoverished, areas and their communities:

- i> The international community needs to recognize the disaster zones characterised by '*chronic crisis*' and help national governments and local responders to put in place effective hazard and risk management systems in these zones with special emphasis on prevention and mitigation of the disasters and protection of vulnerable communities. Although droves of humanitarian agencies and workers descend on disaster zones after the disaster occurs, if this attention were to be given to pre-disaster actions, we could make a substantial reduction in the frequency of these disasters, denting their scale and magnitude, and reducing the number of lives affected by them. In fact, the current focus on post-disaster relief alone smacks of a short-term attitude that precludes sustainable solution-building. A pre-disaster build-up of protective and mitigation measures would significantly reduce the need for build-back.
- ii> In the design and installation of suitable preparedness and response systems, it is imperative that due note be taken of the unique 'place conditions' along with the specific geographical, infrastructural and socio-political context. Place conditions imply particular combination of hazards and hurdles to effective response including logistical hurdles, leakage and corruption in the aid delivery channel, and biases or prejudices in the selection of beneficiaries of relief. The humanitarian sector unfortunately

tends to follow a 'template approach', whereby a method applied successfully in one locale is applied across the world, with low regard for local hazards and hurdles. This makes for ineffective preparedness measures on the one hand and weakens the response on the other, with many misses and much delay and wastage, often compounding the distress of the affected people following the disaster. Consultation with local actors is imperative to ensure area-specific design and targeting.

- iii> The multiple hazards a community is exposed to are themselves constantly evolving and hazard zones constantly changing as are the vulnerabilities of communities, even as humanitarian and political actors act on them, and as development progresses through actions by a range of associated stakeholders. Yet disaster management action adopts, in general, single-dimensional assessment methods with infrequent recalibration. However, effective risk prevention and protection of communities calls for dynamic monitoring of community vulnerability against its specific multi-hazard framework. Multi-dimensional and micro-scale monitoring with the involvement of local communities and actors should be integrated in pre-disaster interventions and would serve to greatly reduce the level of uncertainty associated with natural hazards and help reduce the impact of disasters.
- iv> The inclusion of vulnerable/affected communities in all aspects of the management of those disasters which they are vulnerable to is not just a required value to be embedded in humanitarian action, it is also the most feasible option for last-mile communities. Last mile communities are frequently the first responders to disasters that affect them, due to their remoteness and distance from responders and services. Inclusion in design and implementation of early warning systems, and in the response and build-back, would build their capacities and serve to make them effective responders. The humanitarian sector however, continues to function on a top-down, hierarchical and 'charity' mode with governments and aid agencies in control, with their major focus being on rescue and relief, rather than empowering communities and recognizing their right to protect themselves and to shape the build-back. The sector must decentralise the management of disasters, recognizing communities as active actors in the complete spectrum of interventions, and adopt the approach of risk governance.
- v> In spite of the networked world we live in today, vulnerable communities in remote locations live in an information vacuum, on the other side of the digital and infrastructure divide, and are out of the media-eye, invisible to the world at large. But humanitarian action is largely driven by media reports, and thereby often bypasses these communities. The information-deficit contributes to the increased disaster risk, and reduces the effectiveness of the response. IEC (Information, Education, and Communication) related to disasters and their effective management, from prevention to coping, is an imperative first step, particularly necessary for last-mile communities; area-specific IEC resources on specific hazards, on committed responders for each location, would be critical to bridge this information deficit.
- vi> Resilience is an aspired quality for vulnerable areas and communities and is anchored in local actors and structures. Hence, developing and supporting local civil society for effective and long-term action related to disaster response is tantamount to impact-investing towards resilience. External responders are slow to respond and quick to leave, lacking the time and the quality of engagement of local actors. Governments are not perceived as close, personal or compassionate by the survivors. Local civil society - actors with a deep and long engagement with the vulnerable communities – on the other hand, when adequately capacitated would be quick and effective in responding, would begin their efforts long before a disaster with the build-up measures and continue long after it with build-back actions. It must be noted, however, that local actors could themselves be affected by the crisis or even partisan in their approach. Hence humanitarian action needs to adopt a philosophy of co-management and co-decision with local actors and institutionalise processes that engage with them in a spirit of partnership and collaboration.
- vii> Finally, it must be said that communities do not see humanitarian action as different from development programmes- both should serve to help them cope with disadvantage and progress in spite of them. The artificial divide created by the actors therefore needs to be questioned and a

greater integration effected between development programming and humanitarian action in disaster/vulnerable zones. This would ensure that there is adequate focus on long-term solutions to core causes of disasters - such as to disaster prevention and mitigation of risks as well as IEC related to disasters – minimizing the forces that derail development - and also to building back better after disasters.

We would like to close with a thought-provoker: There is much talk today about resilience of affected communities- how can that happen with the current exclusionary practices in the sector? Communities that are only 'passive recipients of aid' would remain 'passive victims of disasters'.