

Risk Sensitive Development towards Building Resilient Communities: A Review of Community Based Disaster Risk Management in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

While Sri Lanka has historically experienced the impacts of multiple hydro-meteorological disasters such as flood, drought, landslides as well as geological disasters such as tsunamis and earth tremors, more than 90% of the disaster victims in Sri Lanka result from hydro-meteorological disasters (SLCDMP 2014). Concurrently, the frequency and severity of natural disasters attributed to rapid urbanisation, industrialisation and unplanned development has escalated, causing serious loss and increased vulnerability in terms of human and property, socio-economic and cultural infrastructure and environment.

Sri Lanka historically embraced an ecosystem based approach to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) within a tank and village culture. This system was disturbed by colonists and the resilient capacity of communities gradually eroded. Since independence the government has established systems to provide welfare assistance and from the 1990s formalised provision of relief and shelter assistance through the Ministry of Social Services, and community based disaster management programs (CBDRM) were also launched.

The 2004 Tsunami and the subsequent Disaster Management Act significantly altered the existing DM system, establishing necessary institutional and administrative foundations for disaster management, developing disaster management plans from national to local level, and establishing coordination for risk reduction, initiating mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) into other development sectors, as well as knowledge building programmes at various levels towards creating a culture of safety. New Disaster Management Policy assigned collective responsibility, equality, diversity and inclusion towards building a safer nation for all with increased resilience to disasters and identified Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) as the tool for risk reduction at the local level (“Section 5.1.9 the CBDRM to be accepted as a tool for disaster risk reduction at local level”).

Context

CBDRM implies the participation of communities including most vulnerable groups in the identification of risk and risk management proposals including mitigation of potential hazards, enhancing coping capacity, preparedness planning and response. While the emphasis by the Disaster Management Centre has been on development of preparedness and response plans at all levels, some NGOs have been engaged in piloting and implementing preparedness, response, and risk reduction and development activities at community level within the past 20 years. While some organisations have included DRR into development planning at the GN level

through inclusive approaches, others have confined their activities only to developing GN/Village level development plans without due consideration of risk reduction aspects.

While the current practice of CBDRM is well accepted as a tool and the process for building safer communities, challenges arose in (1) practical implementation of CBDRM and (2.) affordability of mainstreaming into government community development programs. Therefore, current practices of CBDRM need re-examination and a common CBDRM and contextualising approach has to be considered which also mainstreams the risk into the government's programs.

The National Disaster Management Plan 2013-2017 and the Sri Lanka National Disaster Management Policy emphasise the importance of community engagement in disaster management. Further, CBDRR is prioritised in the National Policy and Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction. However, CBDRR was identified as a standalone intervention where clarity on its connectivity in influencing scaling up development planning is not adequately addressed. Hence, it becomes of paramount importance to look for opportunities on how development planning can be influenced through the CBDRM approach.

Objective of the Study

To examine current practices of Community Based Disaster Risk Management and critically review the effectiveness of its implementation on Divisional/ District development decisions.

Methodology

Methods included review, discussions and wide stakeholder consultation. More specifically,

Review of existing studies on the learning from Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) Programmes which have been implemented for the last two decades on various scales and also best practices in the region.

Review of existing CBDRM training materials, guidelines, and manuals in Sri Lanka and other countries in the Asia Pacific Region.

Discussions with CBDRM practitioners such as District Secretaries, planning directors at District Secretariats, officials of the District Disaster Management Coordination Unit (DDMCU), and NGOs, to identify the strengths and gaps of the present CBDRM systems and to ascertain the level of information required for the proposed model

Discussion

Historically, Sri Lankan communities have had their own systems and strategies of managing disaster risk dating back many centuries. This history of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) goes back to the village tank (reservoir) system which was based on an ecosystem management approach and supported the country's agrarian civilisation.

Ancient community governance systems covering agriculture, irrigation and social institutions were abandoned by the colonials but some of these reappeared following their recognition as valuable tools for social governance. Although the term was not formally used, community participation was practiced at various levels in post-colonial times. During the last two decades various agencies including the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) piloted programmes towards community participation in risk reduction.

Community Based Disaster Risk Management Approaches in Risk Reduction

Community involvement is essential in order to identify needs and patterns of vulnerability and to improve their resilience. Here, at-risk communities are actively engaged in the identification, analysis, treatment, monitoring

and evaluation of disaster risks in order to reduce their vulnerabilities and enhance their coping capacities. The involvement of highly vulnerable social groups such as women, children, the elderly and the disabled is considered as paramount.

CBDRM implementation in Sri Lanka- Limitations and Challenges

1. Whilst the number of casualties is decreasing, the impact on the economy and livelihoods of the communities affected by disasters is escalating. The CBDRM, whilst it functions as a tool to develop community preparedness capacities, has so far failed to look into development needs in general.
2. Community participation and local leadership in making decisions and sharing outcomes jointly has to arise through an organically grown system. The project-oriented CBDRM approach actually consists of preconceived activities without adequate room for changes or adaptation based on local risk perspectives
3. Lack of or limited government, multi stakeholder participation. The DM activity/process is seen as limited to the DMC and not other departments.
4. Since DM is not a subject devolved to the local governance system, local authorities (LAs) cannot allocate the considerable resources required for the implementation of DRR activities. Further, most LAs do not consider DRR activities and programmes as their own often expecting external support through international agencies.

Concept of Community Resilience and Risk Sensitive Development

The community or village level is the first affected in a disaster and must use coping and survival strategies to face the situation before outside help arrives. Communities facing simultaneous or repeated shocks are better supported when humanitarian action also addresses the underlying vulnerabilities and builds capacities to better cope. The Community based approach corrects the defects of the top-down approach in development planning and disaster management which fails to address local needs, ignores the potential of indigenous resources and capacities, and may even increase people's vulnerabilities. CBDRM covers a broad range of interventions to reduce disaster risks designed by people in at-risk localities and are based on their urgent needs and capacities. However, with the paradigm shift from reactive emergency management to disaster risk reduction, there is more stress on proactive pre-disaster interventions, which are usually categorised as prevention, mitigation, and preparedness. These sectors are not in the control of the community themselves and beyond their scope. Similarly, most disasters by nature are trans-boundary and need higher level interventions in addressing risk factors. Thus, a more comprehensive community centred approach is required to address limitations of the CBDRM framework, which enables risk sensitive development while adopting the principles of CBDRM. Risk assessments and reduction strategy must be integrated into public investment policies and planning including community based interventions. Policy makers and other relevant key stakeholders should encourage the development and financing of plans in a coordinated and coherent manner across sectors recognising community voices.

Conclusion

Increasing incidents of disaster in Sri Lanka's set back the economy and development and require many years to recover from. Communities must participate actively, lead and share the decisions which impact in their lives, strengthening the village development planning to be more risk sensitive, smart and sustainable. The study

recommends a shift in community based planning for development and investment, from disaster management towards better resilience of the communities.

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