

6.2

Newport , J. K., & Jawahar, G. G. P. (2003). Community participation and public awareness in disaster mitigation. *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 12(1), 33-36.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969
WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Charles Sturt University pursuant to Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act). The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Community participation and public awareness in disaster mitigation

Jeyanth K. Newport
Godfrey G.P. Jawahar

The authors

Jeyanth K. Newport is a Development Consultant, and Godfrey G.P. Jawahar is Executive Secretary, both with the Society for National Integration through Rural Development, India.

Keywords

Disaster management, Disaster recovery, Contingency planning, India

Abstract

Describes how the Society for National Integration through Rural Development in India involves the local communities when developing disaster mitigation measures. Shows how participation of the community in resource identification, capabilities, coping mechanisms and vulnerability assessment will be more effective in the planning of a sensible and practical system, more suitable for the needs of the community. Covers contingency planning, community preparedness, task forces (comprising active youths in the ratio of one youth for ten families) and response mechanisms.

Electronic access

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister>

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0965-3562.htm>

Introduction

Poverty and unemployment are major threats for the process of socio-economic development in our country. An effective development program cannot be implemented effectively without participation of the target community in particular, and the public in general. Hence the disaster mitigation measure has to be a part of the socio-economic program initiated in vulnerable areas and has to be included in pre and post disaster phases. Obviously, the mitigation efforts have to be linked up with different phases to sustain the developmental process.

Community participation

Disaster preparedness will not be effective without the participation of the vulnerable communities. The prime component is to involve the vulnerable community in the disaster mitigation process. Building their capacities in coping mechanisms and their involvement creates confidence among them and paves the way for a self-reliant community. Community participation in disaster mitigation requires all the possible resources to make it more sustainable. Disaster mitigation requires not only the participation of the individual within the vulnerable community, but also the involvement of related government institutions, NGOs and the general public. Hence, disaster mitigation has to be supported with effective management strategies with operational planning, education and training of vulnerable groups and related formal and informal institutions.

Participation of the community in resource identification, capabilities, coping mechanisms and existing facilities towards vulnerability assessment will be more effective in the planning of a sensible and practical system, which will be more suitable for the needs of the community.

Community participation should be viewed as a social process, in which the vulnerable groups organise themselves for their common needs and problems available, and supplement them when necessary with materials from various sources. However to make community participation more practical, there has to be a need for a



concentrated effort in education, trainings and awareness building within the vulnerable groups as well as with related departments and general public.

The strategies for community participation must emphasise the following steps in pre and post disaster mitigation efforts.

Contingency planning

Contingency plan has to be prepared at village level by involving the communities. A village contingency plan is a list of activities that a village agrees to follow to prevent loss of life, livelihoods and property in case of cyclones, tidal surges and floods. The plan has to be prepared by involving the various groups within the village. The plan should envisage the community experience during the different stages of the past disasters, description of the village with social and resource mapping, details of hazards, risk assessment and strategies for minimising the risk through community participation and external support.

The existing community resource in minimising the risk has to be taken into consideration, which will be cost-effective in formulating the contingency plan. Further, the plan should envisage a holistic socio-economic development of the community.

Community preparedness

The concept of awareness has to be generated at the village level. Meetings and awareness programs can be organised to make the villagers aware of the disaster preparedness and management. Under community mobilization, female groups can be formed and can be involved in micro credit activities. Community plantation can be promoted to safeguard the villages. Seed banks can be developed and can be managed at community level. Low areas within the village can be elevated through proper motivation and community participation. Panchayat radios can be repaired and kept in good condition during the disaster months for notifying disaster warnings. Weak community structures and individual assets have to be repaired through community participation under "Shramadhanam" (community voluntary involvement in development activities). High voltage wires have to be brought to the notice of concerned departments and have to be repaired to minimise the effects during disasters.

Resources for preventing pollution of drinking water have to be mobilized for the benefit of the community.

The management plans that are envisaged in the contingency plan have to be initiated under community preparedness.

Task force

Active young people and women within the village can be motivated and formed as task force groups with the ratio 1:10 (1 member:10 families) depending on the village population. The members can be formed into subgroups with specific roles and responsibilities. The members of the group have to play key roles in pre disaster preparedness, during disaster and post disaster. These responsibilities include:

- cyclone warning patrolling and liaisoning;
- shelter management;
- evacuation, relief and rescue; and
- medical, first aid and sanitation.

The task force members have to be trained in pre and post disaster management skills. Gender component can be included to make the role of the task force more effective. The trainings should improve the performance and capabilities of the task force members, further the training should increase the ability of the task force members to use the skills and information from the course for fulfilling specific tasks within a joint disaster management program.

Linkages within the task force have to be established to serve at a wider level. Similarly, the task force details have to be submitted to the concerned formal departments to utilize their services during disasters in a particular area.

Under public awareness, the task force members can demonstrate disaster management techniques to make the general public aware of the coping mechanisms.

Response mechanisms

As many formal departments are related to be active in the response mechanisms, they have to be involved in training. The health department personnel have to be trained on emergency health, agriculture department personnel have to be trained in soil and moisture conservation, etc. The public relations can use the media to generate awareness in vulnerable areas and among the general public.

The management committees formed at the various levels can be involved in mapping vulnerable areas and groups and the information can be updated regularly.

A task force team comprising of district administrators, planners, NGOs and community members can be formed at the district level to handle emergency situations without depending on central assistance.

A resource center can be established at regional level and can build the database of the impact of disaster and coping mechanisms. The resource center can provide training to government, NGOs and vulnerable groups on disaster management. Resources for pre and post disaster management and emergency relief can be maintained at district/regional level in making the response mechanisms more effective.

NGO approach and experience

The Society for National Integration through Rural Development (SNIRD) has initiated "disaster management programs" in 44 fisherfolk villages of Prakasam District from 1992 onwards. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) exercises have been conducted in the target villages to identify the availability of resources such as existing cyclone shelters, warning systems, and the traditional knowledge to cope with natural calamities. Also information regarding the occurrence of disasters and their impact on the villages was analysed from time trend and the entire information was documented.

The involvement of the villagers in social mapping exercises and the distribution of houses, streets, schools, temples and other infrastructures was portrayed. In short, the village layout was drawn and documented. It clearly revealed the availability of government infrastructures, including the cyclone shelters and schools, which will provide shelter during natural calamities.

Resource maps were drawn and information was documented. Through seasonality, the rainy seasons and the seasons for fishing were gathered. Also the fisherfolk community stated the months of May and November as disaster prone because of monsoons.

Transect walk is a part of the PRA exercise in which the villagers and the staff inspected the village situation and resources through observation to collect first hand information regarding the possibilities and the coping mechanisms.

Meetings were conducted at the village level, and the types of natural disasters that have occurred in different parts of the state were discussed and analysed. This made the villagers aware of the magnitude of the problem and the concept of preparedness was kindled.

Active youth members, in the ratio of one youth for ten families, were selected to form the task force. On average, 10 to 20 members constitute the task force committee, depending on the population of the village. The members of the committee elected a leader, who in turn co-ordinates the activities of the task force. Within the task force, 40 percent representatives are women to make the functioning more effective. The task force members were given regular training and orientation on disaster management. They were involved in surveys of vulnerable groups such as disabled persons, pregnant women, children below five years and old persons once every six months.

'... SNIRD felt that the strategy was more effective towards disaster management, as the community will be involved in the preparation of management plans which will reduce duplication, acceptability of program components and reduction in inequalities...'

Information was provided to prepare representations to repair weak electricity connections in the village, repair of cyclone shelter, repair of roads, etc. If there were disaster warnings, the task force members were involved in pre disaster planning measures. Sub-groups within the task force share the responsibility of preparedness and mitigation measures. The task force has taken the responsibility of disseminating the warning and for evacuating the vulnerable groups to safer places. In times of emergency, they have mobilized medical relief and food provisions to victims. It is noteworthy to mention that the task force members maintained a community kitchen to feed the

victims during floods in Prakasam District. They also played a key role in de-silting the potable water systems in the village, in removing animal carcasses and bodies and in rebuilding the entire village.

Conclusion

SNIRD felt that this strategy was more effective towards disaster management, as the community will be involved in the

preparation of management plans which will reduce duplication, acceptability of program components and reduction in inequalities. The involvement of the community as part of the rural appraisal in the preparation of a contingency plan will strengthen the community/individual assets and community response during disasters. Further community participation and response mechanisms in disaster management will result in the continuum of development, which in turn will benefit the economy of our country.