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Enhancing Disaster Management Capacity in South Asia

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As the Himalayan ecosystem is susceptible to natural disasters due to the global climate-change patterns, the earthquake that struck Nepal recently might not be the last or the deadliest. An important outcome of the Nepal earthquake will be to draw on the event as a good opportunity to broaden the scope of coordination among the states of South Asia beyond the economic arena which currently dominates the discourse of regional cooperation in South Asia.

Introduction

On 25 April 2015, Nepal witnessed one of its deadliest earthquakes, which has so far claimed about 8,500 lives – a figure that might rise as relief teams struggle to reach the more remote areas. Despite local and international relief teams trying to do the best they can, protests outside government offices and the escalating anger over the government's slow response have brought into sharp focus questions about the country's disaster management capacity.

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Conversely, it took neighbouring countries like India and China only hours to swing into action by sending military planes and disaster management personnel to help Nepal. India sent 187 tons of supplies (including water, food, medicines), as well as troops for rescue operations. Nearly 2,000 Indian nationals were air-lifted out of the disaster zones.²

Keeping aside the widely-reported geopolitical calculations of the actions of China and India, it is important to analyse the diversity of disaster management capacities within South Asian countries and draw accurate lessons. Though the previous deadliest earthquake to strike Nepal was in 1934, which killed at least 8,519; this may not be the last time the nation faces a calamity of such catastrophic nature, given that the Himalayan region is prone to such disasters due to global climate-change patterns. So, Nepal must also recognise that aid from foreign governments could at times become a sensitive political issue, besides hurting the pride of a nation receiving such aid. A country in such a situation may also find itself vulnerable to uncontrolled foreign access. For example, the Indian media has now been criticised in Nepal for their ‘insensitive’ and ‘intrusive’ coverage of the post-earthquake situation. Hence, it is imperative that a nation equips itself with a necessary amount of relief resources, expertise in organising initial rescue efforts and gathering real-time information about natural calamities, obviating the need to rely on international help.

Disaster Management Capacity in Nepal

The size of the latest calamity caught the Nepalese Government completely unprepared. The United Nations estimates that a staggering one-third of Nepal’s population may have been affected by the earthquake, i.e., 8 million. Aid has been slow in reaching those affected by the calamity, and some remote villages have still not received any relief. Accessibility of certain areas only by helicopter (The 90,000-strong Nepal Army just had one MI-17 helicopter³), lack of medical facilities and other resources, as well as the spread of diseases among the wounded, heightened the immediate need for international help and for a long-term robust national disaster management plan. The gravity of poor disaster management became clear by the probability of finding survivors in remote places plummeting by the hour.

² Robin Seemangal, “Disaster Diplomacy: After Nepal earthquake, China and India race to give aid”, *Observer*, 1 May 2015. Available at: <http://observer.com/2015/05/in-nepal-china-and-india-engage-in-disaster-diplomacy/>

³ Dr Nischal N Pandey, ISAS Brief No. 367: Nepal after the Mega Earthquake, 26 May 2015. Available at: http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_No._367_-_Nepal_after_the_Mega_Earthquake_26052015150324.pdf

Nepal's attempt at a National Disaster Management dates back to the early-1990s. In response to United Nations' International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) 1990-2000, Nepal set up the IDNDR National Committee under the chairpersonship of the Home Minister. Subsequently, the National Action Plan (NAP) consisting of disaster preparedness, response, mitigation, rehabilitation and reconstruction, was finalised in 1996. The target-year for the completion of most of these measures was 2000; this was not achieved.⁴

Nepal's annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2000 (US\$ 5.5 billion) - which increased to US\$20 billion by 2013 - may indicate the difficulty of allocating sufficient funds for disaster relief or preventive measures. Disaster management was included in the 10th five-year Development Plan (2002-2007), following which the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management in Nepal (NSDRMN) was formulated in 2008.⁵ It was to serve as a guide for subsequent planning and implementation of disaster management schemes. However, political instability, following the Maoist insurgency in 2008, has stalled any progress in implementing the NSDRMN.⁶

India's Experience

A World Risk Index was published by the United Nations University for Environment and Human security (UNU-EHS) in 2013 ranking 173 countries on the basis of a country's vulnerability to natural hazards.⁷ Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Bangladesh were ranked at 106, 74, 73, 61, 57 and 5 respectively, with rank 1 being most vulnerable country. The indicators used to calculate this index were the risk of a hazard, exposure of population and infrastructure of the nation, vulnerability related to social, economic and physical factors, capacities for coping with crises as well as adaptation.

This places India at a more vulnerable spot than Nepal. India was indeed in a situation similar to Nepal by accepting international help until the Tsunami of 2004. Since then India has

⁴ "National Action plan on Disaster Management in Nepal", 1996, Ministry of Home, Nepal. Available at: http://www.preventionweb.net/files/30532_nepalnationalactionplandisastermana.pdf

⁵ "National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management in Nepal", 2008, UNDP. Available at: <http://www.nrcs.org/sites/default/files/pro-doc/NSDRM%20Nepal.pdf>

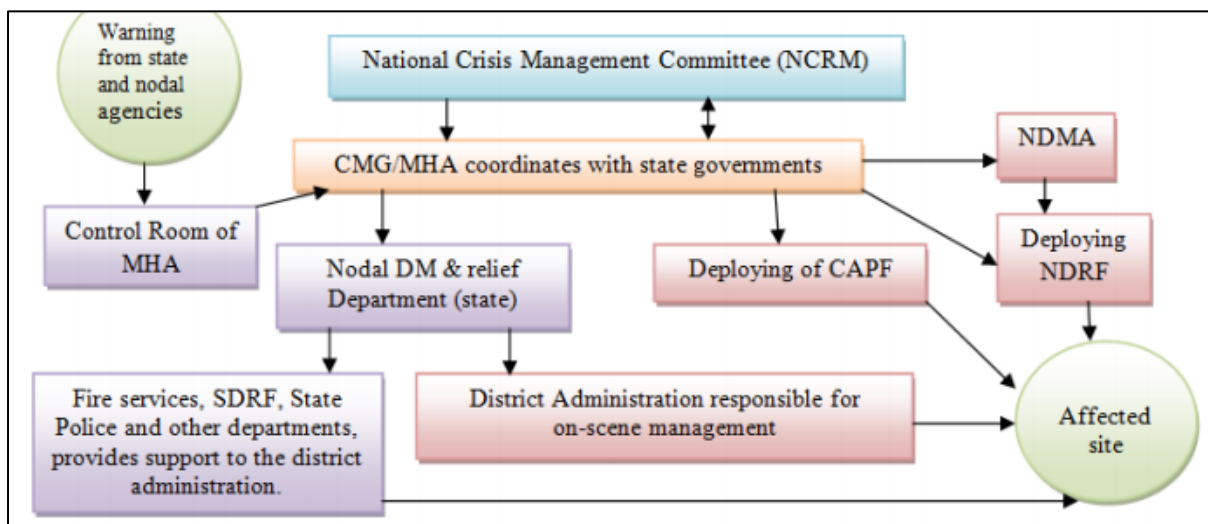
⁶ "Mounting anger over Nepali government's disaster management", DW, 5 May 2015. Available at: <http://www.dw.de/mounting-anger-over-nepali-governments-disaster-management/a-18428030>

⁷ World Risk Report, 2013, UNU-EHS. Available at: http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:2044/WorldRiskReport_2013_online_01.pdf

come a long way – from providing relief in the wake of disasters, to proactively dealing with disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness. When the 2004 Tsunami struck, India was in a position to refuse offers of aid from foreign governments. In addition, India deployed its defence personnel, medical teams, disaster experts, ships, helicopters, and material resources and equipment to help Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Indonesia.⁸ The Disaster Management Act (DMA), enacted in 2005, led to the creation of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in 2006 for a disaster resilience movement in the nation. The National Institute of Disaster Management and similar state cells were equipped for training purposes. Disaster awareness even reached the curriculum of schools through the CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education).

National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) battalions are located at nine different locations in the country – at Kolkata, Gandhinagar, Pune, Guwahati etc., based on the vulnerability profile – to cut down the response time for their deployment.

Figure 1: Disaster Response Mechanism in India



Source: CAG report on Performance Audit of Disaster Preparedness in India, 2013.

MHA – Ministry of Home Affairs

SDRF – State Disaster Response Fund

CMG – Crisis Management Group

CAPF – Central Armed Police Force

⁸ Thoke, Deore, “Deadliest natural disasters in India: responding through corporate social responsibility”, K. R. Sapkal College of Management Studies. Available at: file:///C:/Users/Admin/Downloads/202-497-1-PB.pdf

It is true that the NDMA has been criticised for non-performance of some functions specified in the DMA. However, India has a strong track record of converting past lesson into better preparedness for the future. India operates a 24/7, year-round Tsunami Early Warning Centre in Hyderabad after the devastating 2004 Tsunami. The NDMA, along with other local institutes, set an example in 2014 through early warning and timely evacuation of up to 400,000 people from Andhra Pradesh, saving many lives and much economic loss, ahead of Cyclone Hudhud.⁹

Lessons to be learnt

A comparison between Nepal and India – with its much larger economy and state capacity – might appear invidious. However, nature knows no boundaries or national borders, and may affect more than one country at a time. Hence, neighbouring countries should consider pooling their expertise in disaster management capacity and come together in generating resilience as well as vigilance towards natural disasters. For e.g., most earthquakes under sea trigger a fast-moving but non-lethal wave before a massive deadly wave strikes. This tiny window is the best early warning of an earthquake since it is difficult to forecast an earthquake.¹⁰ Warning systems are already in place in Japan, China, Mexico etc., and India has now embarked on creating an early warning system within the country. Exchange of such expertise and knowledge on best-practices, as well as technology transfer within the South Asian nations, will not only prepare them individually but also lead to more cooperation in the region.

Japan is considered a leader in Disaster Preparation, and in 2013, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) assisted Pakistan finalise its National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) that will deal with capacity building and upscaling of inventories. Already-existing international organisations such as SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) should initiate such cooperation and exchange of information within member-countries. SDMC was established with the view to providing policy advice and facilitating capacity building services, exchange of information for effective disaster risk reduction and for planning and

⁹ Andy McElroy, “India sets example ahead of World Conference”, 14 October, 2014. Available at: <http://www.unisdr.org/archive/39847>

¹⁰ Pallava Bagla, “India working on early warning system on quakes”, 17 May, 2014. Available at: <http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/india-action-on-early-warning-system-on-quakes-50736.html>

coordinating the setting up of a mechanism for rapid regional response to disasters within the region. However, the latest activities of SDMC date back to 2011.

In a short span of two weeks, Nepal experienced another earthquake on 12 May 2015 which has claimed more lives while the country is still reeling under the earlier calamity. According to United States Geological Survey (USGS) geologists, there is a possibility of such earthquakes in the region in the near future. In the light of these findings, the opportunity should not be lost to collectively prepare, as a region, to cope with natural disasters. An important outcome of the Nepal earthquake will be to draw on the event as a good opportunity to broaden the scope of coordination among the states of South Asia beyond the economic arena which currently dominates the discourse of regional cooperation in South Asia.

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