

How can NGOs help ?



NGOs can facilitate preparation against risk and provide necessary inputs where possible. It is important for NGOs and government to work together to ensure that all the necessary precautions have been taken prior to a natural disaster and to ensure early effective response after such a disaster.

■ Abhijit Ganguly

NGOs are very often the first people on the ground after an emergency. They provide immediate response in the form of rescue, shelter, food and healthcare. In addition to this, NGOs have been working in communities for a long time and have a good understanding of the needs of communities as well as a strong knowledge of the area.

As Cathal Elder, international programme manager of Sabuj Sangha, which works in the Sunderbans, said, "At times of emergencies, this knowledge and

understanding is an invaluable asset and plays an important role in ensuring the safety of thousands of people." He added that time is a critical factor when responding to a natural disaster and NGOs can not only provide immediate response but also facilitate the rapid response of larger humanitarian or government organisations.

A high intensity earthquake requires immediate rescue operations, medical aid and treatment. As Anju Sheth, founder director of SAATH based in Ahmedabad that did a lot of work during the *Bhuj earthquake*, said "Tsunami can be tackled

effectively by shifting reluctant people of coastal areas to safer areas. Well equipped boats and para-medical teams should be ready to render help." Every single person has a role to play. NGOs can coordinate flow of public help in an organised manner ensuring adequate distribution of help from various states and organisations. She added, "a team of experts should shift the injured to various hospitals for treatment and establish communication with their relatives. These people should be provided with emotional support so that they can face the trauma."

Outside of emergencies, NGOs are responsible for generating awareness among communities on disaster preparedness, as well as, providing training to necessary stakeholders. Cathal felt that "It is vital that communities understand the risks and prepare themselves accordingly. NGOs can facilitate this preparation and provide necessary inputs where possible. It is important for NGOs and government to work together to ensure that all the necessary precautions have been taken prior to a natural disaster and to ensure early effective response after such a disaster."

Early Warning and Disaster Management Systems

Both state and local governments have Early Warning and Disaster Management Systems in place through the Department of Civil Defence and the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation. In the case of a potential disaster, the state government will notify national radio stations who in turn broadcast warning messages. In addition to this, the state government will notify the district magistrate, who in turn will notify relevant parties at block and gram panchayat levels. While these methods are effective in disseminating warning messages, it has been found that messages do not always reach field level putting communities at risk. Even if messages do reach field level, given the poverty in the region, people are forced to ignore messages and instead go out and work putting themselves at risk.

It is felt that while existing systems work to a certain extent, there is a need to constantly monitor and strengthen them to

ensure they are operating efficiently and effectively, thereby reducing vulnerability of communities even further. Also, with the wealth of technologies now available, including mobile phones, new and innovative techniques should be explored and developed.

Case Study

Disaster relief in Sunderbans after Aila

In 2009, the Sunderbans was devastated by the massive cyclone Aila, which ripped through the region levelling homes and villages, rendering fields unusable and destroying the fishing industry, which so many families are dependant on. Due to Sabuj Sangha's location and experience in the region, it was one of the first organisations on the ground providing relief. It set up temporary kitchens across multiple locations in Pathar Pratima block, one of the worst hit areas in South 24 Parganas district and provided various items of immediate use and facilitated medical check ups. It coordinated with PRIs and other interested individuals and agencies for facilitating collection and distribution of relief materials and other related measures.

Partnering with GOAL, it undertook relief initiatives in five villages. The key components included providing food and other items, cash for work, desalinating ponds and repairing hand pumps.

Sabuj Sangha's focus has now shifted to Disaster Risk Reduction to ensure that communities are better prepared when faced with natural disasters and to ensure that appropriate systems are in place in the wake of such disasters. It recently developed a Disaster Risk Reduction programme with the first 18 month phase to begin April 2011. This project has four main components:

- **Construction** – two flood shelters will be constructed to reduce vulnerability of at least 200 families in the wake of natural disasters. These shelters will be used as information centres to generate awareness of the need for disaster preparedness. The shelters will also be used as schools to ensure the facilities are fully utilised when there is no emergency.

- **Taskforce** – a task force will be formed to develop and implement disaster response warnings and systems. This task force will work with the local and state Government to ensure the necessary precautions are taken in the event of disaster warnings.

- **Awareness** – a number of awareness programmes will be conducted in communities to educate communities on disaster risk reduction and systems in place to deal with disasters. Once flood shelters have been constructed, they will be used as information centres to further generate awareness.



- **Advocacy** – promoting the model of flood shelters for implementation throughout the region to ensure that all communities in the Sunderbans are adequately prepared and protected in the wake of natural disasters. ■

EXPERT COMMENT

After the initial shock of destruction and huge loss of life during the earthquake of Gujarat in 2001, the volunteers of SAATH formed two groups and visited the affected areas of Kutch. They joined other NGOs and visited temporary relief shelters. Providing “emotional support” to such a large number of people, was a challenging task. Sincere efforts were made to divert their attention from the immediate tragedy to more positive thinking. With shattered hopes, battered psyche, broken homes, despair and helplessness, the victims needed someone to be with them, listen to their grief, pain, trauma and anxiety. We succeeded in building a strong bridge of love and understanding.

Anju Sheth, Founder Director, SAATH

Government, research institutes, Indian meteorological department, NGOs have to take proactive role to play to disseminate and develop early warning system to make the community alert. Early warning system is to alert the community so that the community members prepare themselves to combat the natural hazards. They may first of all save their own lives and livelihood. The following should be ways and means for an effective early warning system. But the sms alert system is very useful as the mobile set has gone even to the remotest corner of any village. What we need to promote is that administration should take a proactive role and be prompt to disseminate the information to the NGOs or to the proper authorities. There should be proper system to receive the information from the Indian meteorological department in advance so that all the information could be disseminated in time. In the panchayet office there should be some system of updating the information during the period of cyclone and flood so that people are acquainted with the information.

Father Shyamal Bose, Convener, State Inter Agency Group, West Bengal

Since most of our engineers are onsite, our primary essential techniques are to assist employees with personal safety (physical and mental) followed by helping them reconnect with family members. We have in place a crisis management plan where senior staff have practised worse case scenarios, know who's leading and how to communicate with each other especially when geographically removed. This plan includes ensuring as much as possible that staff are healthy and safe, contacting next of family, supporting medical needs/evacuations, business continuity with backing up business information outside the main location. We conduct risk assessments for all locations and buildings where staff are working and include fully equipped first aid kits. We have annual evacuation drill exercise to get employees out of the office if calamity occurs. ■

Anil Mehta CEO, Sarla Technology.

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