

**South Asia Policy Dialogue:**  
*Towards A Regional Roadmap for  
Disaster Risk Reduction and Management*

**NEW DELHI DECLARATION**

22<sup>nd</sup> August 2006

**1. Background and the context**

1.1 The South Asian region, comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka is bound together by shared natural resources and common geological and climatic features. The civilizational roots and socio economic profile of South Asian people transcend the geo-political boundaries of the nations. The long-established trend of natural hazards and their manifestation as disasters have demonstrated time and again that many natural hazards cross national boundaries and affect multiple countries in South Asia. Drought, flood, cyclone, earthquake, tsunami, glacial lake outbursts etc have become shared risks for all countries in the region.

1.2 The drought of 2000 gripped parts of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan simultaneously; a severe tropical cyclone in 1998 caused heavy damages in south-eastern Sindh province of Pakistan and moved into Indian State of Gujarat, causing extensive damage in both countries. In October-November 2000 monsoon flooding and subsequent river erosion in north-east India, Nepal and Bhutan triggered severe floods in the western districts of Bangladesh. In December 2000 a cyclone crossed the northern part of Sri Lanka and it reached the southern tip of India damaging houses, fishing boats and crops. The impact of the earthquake of Gujarat India in 2001 was felt throughout northwest India and much of Pakistan. December 2004 tsunami in Indian Ocean and October 2005 earthquake in the Himalayan region are the most recent examples of disasters, which crossed state borders and triggered the need for regional cooperation for disaster risk reduction and management in South Asia.

1.3 The need for such cooperation has heightened on account of the ongoing unplanned urbanization, rapid population growth and effect of climate change in aggravating coastal submergence, glacial melt and increasing desertification in South Asia.

1.4 The country-wise disaster management policies, processes and performances in the region vary widely. While some countries have fairly well-developed disaster management frameworks and institutional structures, others are only taking first steps to develop the same.

1.5 Within the existing disaster management policies and structures of the South Asian countries while there is appreciation of the need to mainstream disaster risk reduction into development, there are still considerable gaps in the conceptual clarity and understanding on the integral linkages and dynamics between hazards, disasters, natural environment, social and economic variables, and development interventions. Gaps are also noted in hazard, risk, and vulnerability assessments.

1.6 As a consequence, there are yet no long-term, inclusive and coherent institutional arrangements to address disaster issues with a long-term vision. Disaster management policies and responses are not informed by concepts, methods, mechanism and tools for preventive and sustainable interventions. For instance, despite the new institutional structures for disaster preparedness, and strong poverty alleviation programmes, the region lacks adequate frameworks to integrate disaster risk reduction with poverty and livelihood issues.

1.7 Disasters are viewed in isolation from the processes of mainstream development and poverty alleviation planning. There are numerous examples of large-scale development projects bringing new forms of disaster risks and adding to the vulnerability of at-risk communities.

1.8 Disaster management, development planning and environmental management institutions operate mostly in isolation. Integrated planning between these sectors is virtually absent, and there are intra-institutional conflicts and lack of coordination within and between organizations.

1.9 Country-level disaster preparedness and mitigation measures are heavily tilted towards structural aspects, and undermine nonstructural elements such as social and economic aspects of risk and vulnerability, knowledge and capacities of local people on coping and risk management. Also, the interventions are mostly top down, which do not engage people at risk and the local, state and community organizations adequately.

1.10 In the above context a two day *South Asian Regional Policy Dialogue on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management* involving all stakeholders within and outside the governments of all the eight South

Asian countries was held in New Delhi on 21-22 August 2006. The Dialogue was attended by more than 100 participants from Governments, community, scientific and research organizations, NGOs, UN agencies, various multi-lateral and regional organizations and media representatives from eight South Asian countries, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

## **2. Regional initiatives**

2.1 The Dialogue noted that as yet there are no clear-cut regional policy or programme interventions which look at disaster risk reduction and management from a regional perspective, although there have been some initiatives by the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the areas of environmental management. The SAARC initiated a 'Regional Study on the Causes and Consequences of Natural Disasters and the Protection and Preservation of Environment', which was completed in 1991. A study on 'Greenhouse Effect and its Impact on the Region' finalized in 1992, recommended regional measures in sharing experiences, scientific capabilities and information on climate change, sea level rise, technology transfer etc. As a follow-up to these studies, SAARC Plan of Action on Environment was adopted in 1997. The Action Plan provided for the establishment of Regional Centers of Excellence. The SAARC Meteorology Research Centre (SMRC) was established in Dhaka in 1995 and the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC) was set up in Male in 2004. The 25th Session of the Council of Ministers held in Islamabad in July 2004 approved the establishment of the SAARC Forestry Center in Bhutan. None of these initiatives focused on the multi-dimensional aspects of disaster risk reduction and management.

2.2 More recently, particularly after the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 and Kashmir Earthquake of 2005, a few regional initiatives have been undertaken in the field of disaster risk reduction but the process is yet to mature and demonstrate concrete results. The 13<sup>th</sup> Summit at Dhaka approved the setting up of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) at New Delhi, which is expected to be commissioned in October 2006. Earlier an Expert Group of the SAARC had drafted a *Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management*, which has been endorsed by the SAARC Environmental Ministers' Meeting in May 2006, which has urged the member countries to formulate their National Plan of Action by December 2006 and also to formulate a Regional Plan of Action by 2007. The *Comprehensive Framework* is likely to be adopted at the 14<sup>th</sup> Summit scheduled to be held in New Delhi in April 2007.

2.3 Outside the framework of the SAARC, the countries of the region have extended mutual cooperation and assistance to each other on a bilateral basis for responding to situations of disasters and for providing humanitarian assistance to the people affected by disasters, but due to various constraints the potential capabilities of the countries to respond quickly to such situations have not been fully utilized. Ironically, South Asian countries have looked towards humanitarian assistance from distant countries when such assistance could be mobilized nearer home with much more promptitude and effectiveness. Surely there is ample scope for institutionalizing cooperation among the countries of the region for responding to disaster situations, as is being done in other regions, such as the ASEAN Standby Arrangements for Disaster Relief and Emergency Response created under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response 2005.

2.4 Outside the framework of the Governments of the region, various non-governmental organizations have been working to promote regional understanding and sharing of knowledge and good practices particularly at the community level. For example, Duryog Nivaran has developed a network of individuals and organizations from South Asia who are committed to promoting an ‘alternative perspective’ on disasters and vulnerability as a basis for disaster mitigation in the region.

2.5 There is a need to broaden such networks to involve multiple stakeholders to include sectors like gender, media, research and training organizations, corporate sector etc and to bring them together in one platform to further strengthen and promote the cause of regional cooperation and to supplement the efforts of the SAARC to build a disaster resilient South Asia.

### **3. Priorities for the South Asian regional cooperation**

3.1 Taking into consideration the *Hyogo Framework of Action 2005-2015* adopted at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction at Kobe, Japan in January 2005 and the *Disaster Management in South Asia: A Comprehensive Regional Framework for Action 2006-2015* adopted at the Expert Group Meeting held at Dhaka in February 2006, the Dialogue recommends the following *Regional Plan of Action* for effective disaster risk reduction and management in South Asia based on its specific characteristics – the geography and natural environment, hazards, socio economic parameters and governance structures.

i)	<p><b>Develop and strengthen conceptual clarity on the inter-linkages between hazards, risk, development and natural resource management.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b> A suggested conceptual framework for this purpose could be the Disaster Resistant Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (DRSL) presented in ‘Livelihood Centered Approach to Disaster Management: A Policy Framework for South Asia’, Duryog Nivaran, January 2005.</p>
ii)	<p><b>Develop and promote methodologies for risk and vulnerability mapping across the region with a regular cycle of updating.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and develop national institutions engaged in hazard risk vulnerability (HRV) analysis</li> <li>• Integrate national HRV reports to develop regional reports</li> <li>• Develop mechanisms to share the HRV analysis with all the development planning institutions, policy and decision making bodies.</li> <li>• Integrate climate change adaptation mechanisms and the role of technology in these analysis</li> <li>• Develop communication policies that can lead to better information sharing across borders.</li> </ul>
iii)	<p><b>Establish Regional Hazard Risk Management Centres in respect of specific disasters and develop mechanism of excellence for HRV assessment and capacity development across countries in the region.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b> Based on the track record of existing institutions and aspirations of different countries designate institutions of repute as Regional Hazard Risk Management Centres for specific hazards, which would network with the proposed SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) and other regional and national institutions for conducting hazard, risk and vulnerability analysis of the regions. The designated institutions can also take up training and capacity building initiatives for the region in respect of specific disasters.</p>
iv)	<p><b>Develop people centred Early Warning Systems - specific and</b></p>

	<p><b>relevant to the multi hazard profile of the region.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree on regional systems of information sharing and warning specific for various disasters like floods, cyclones, drought, landslides, and earthquakes</li> <li>• Link to the national systems of reaching people at risk with warning information.</li> <li>• Build the capacities of people at risk to access and interpret warning information and respond.</li> <li>• Monitor the effectiveness of weather information sharing</li> <li>• Agree on sharing real time data relating to natural hazard</li> <li>• Agree on accountability aspects of information sharing</li> </ul>
v)	<p><b>Develop tools and methodologies for mandatory disaster risk analysis for major development projects (dams, infrastructure, highways, water management, forest cover reduction and agriculture development projects)</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify barriers and impediments for arriving at regional cooperation</li> <li>• Develop tools, methodologies and templates acceptable at national and regional levels</li> <li>• Take into account indigenous knowledge, community capacity, gender concerns and environmental sustainability in developing the methodologies</li> <li>• Agree on forums for discussion and accountability mechanisms</li> <li>• Mainstream disaster risk reduction in education</li> <li>• Incorporate disaster risk reduction into the EIA procedure in countries</li> </ul>
vi)	<p><b>Encourage systems for decentralized disaster management in the region by strengthening and involving the local authorities in disaster risk reduction and development planning</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <p>Key local level functions on disaster risk mitigation and management can be better performed by the local authorities. Such functions should be devolved to these bodies with adequate resources for performance of the functions.</p>

vii)	<p><b>Mechanisms for inter-country information sharing and learning from preparedness, response and recovery experiences from previous disasters.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop plans and methodologies to document the learning from disasters.</li> <li>• Identify institutional mechanisms for sharing and application of good practices and success stories as well as lessons of failure.</li> <li>• Develop a strategy for increased awareness raising and education on disaster risk reduction</li> <li>• Facilitate movement of professionals and experts across the region</li> </ul>
viii)	<p><b>Strengthen the existing institutions and networks, and identify new institutions for regional sharing and cooperation on disaster risk reduction and management, including response.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proposed SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) at New Delhi can facilitate such a networking of institutions</li> <li>• The existing regional initiatives should be provided technical and financial support in order to enable them to carry on activities for enhanced regional cooperation</li> <li>• New initiatives should be encouraged for promoting regional cooperation in specific sectors such as community organizations, research, capacity building and training organizations, corporate sectors, media etc.</li> <li>• Carry out capacity building exercises to empower countries that need strengthening of their disaster management capabilities.</li> </ul>
ix)	<p><b>Strengthen linkages and networking with global organizations like ISDR, IRP, Sphere, Pro-vention etc.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <p>List out the key international bodies for networking and identify content, methods and strategies for networking to maximize synergies.</p>

x)	<p><b>Towards a Disaster Risk Reduction and Management action plan for the region</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree on a set of guiding principles for disaster risk reduction and management in South Asia region</li> <li>• Identify immediate, medium term and long term priority actions</li> <li>• List out the main stakeholders of the South Asian Region; identify the roles and responsibilities of each organization in the action plan.</li> <li>• Identify implementation mechanism to operationalize the action plan in accordance with the Hyogo Framework of Action and SAARC Comprehensive Regional Framework of Action</li> <li>• Agree on communication channels between countries and key departments</li> </ul>
xi)	<p><b>Assess the resource needs to support the regional programme of action and develop resource mobilization systems</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b> Make realistic assessment of the resource needs, work out the share of each country according to the agreed formula and make efforts to mobilize resources from bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies.</p>
xii)	<p><b>Review progress of the regional plan of action at agreed intervals and agree on action forward</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b> Apart from the evaluation mechanism available within the SAARC system regional non-governmental organizations may take up such evaluation in each sector on a periodic basis.</p>
xiii)	<p><b>Create space for non-governmental organizations to take part in disaster rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction works in coordination with Governments and communities.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b> Doors should be open for non-governmental organizations of South Asia to work for humanitarian assistance in disaster situations anywhere in the region.</p>

xiv)	<p><b>Agree on a multi-stakeholder mechanism for debating contentious issues that have implications on national and regional disaster risk reduction and management.</b></p> <p><b>Suggested action:</b> If such issues cannot be debated within the SAARC forum, efforts shall be made for debating the issues on non-government channels for creating informed public opinions and for facilitating regional consensus on the issues.</p>
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#### **4. South Asia Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management**

4.1 *Hyogo Framework of Action* has recognized the complex, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder functions of disaster risk reduction. National governments are the most important stakeholders in the implementation of the *Framework*, since the policies and legal and institutional frameworks within which all other stakeholders shall operate shall be determined by the national governments. But the national governments have to work within the parameters of global and regional standards and procedures that have been adopted by the countries.

4.2 This has created wide space for global and regional stakeholders to play their legitimate and desired roles in facilitating the tasks of national governments in disaster risk reduction and management. In the context of South Asia not many regional initiatives have been encouraged in the past since a regional framework for disaster risk reduction was not available. With the adoption of the *Hyogo Framework of Action 2005-15* and the proposed *Disaster Management in South Asia: A Framework for Action 2006-2015* the regional stakeholders outside the framework of the government shall have a significant role to play in tandem with the initiatives of national governments. In fact they have huge responsibilities to take the agenda of disaster risk reduction and management forward across the sectors at all levels. Government would create an enabling environment, but it is the communities, the local authorities, the research and technical organizations, the corporate sector, the voluntary sector and the media who have to play their role in creating a Movement for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia. At the national level many initiatives are being taken by various organizations, but at the regional level such initiatives are limited. Therefore, new alliances, networks and organizations have to be developed at the regional level for creating a regional movement for disaster risk reduction in South Asia. A road map

should be developed in each sector for the next ten years according to the priorities and needs of each sector. The New Delhi dialogue on South Asia Regional Disaster Risk Reduction was the first step in this direction.

4.3 The two day Dialogue unanimously adopts this New Delhi Declaration and calls for:

- a) Early adoption of the document *Disaster Management in South Asia: A Framework for Action 2006-2015* developed by the Expert Group of the SAARC.
- b) Operationalization of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) at New Delhi.
- c) Strengthening of the existing SAARC institutions related to disaster risk reduction and management.
- d) Networking of institutions and organizations within and outside the governments in the countries and the region under the leadership of SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC).
- e) creation of adequate space in each country for the operation of various existing and new regional organizations on different sectors for disaster risk reduction and management in accordance with the global and regional conventions adopted by the countries of the region.
- f) and setting up of a Regional Platform for all stakeholders in the region including the Governments, which would encourage, facilitate, catalyze and promote regional cooperation on disaster risk reduction and management in South Asia.
- g) Holding of annual convention of the Regional Platform in each country of the region.
- h) Establishing a secretariat of the Regional Platform at an appropriate place for furthering the objectives of the Platform.

4.4 The Terms of Reference, Rules and Constitution of the Consensus shall be drafted in consultation with the various stakeholders. The first convention of the Regional Consensus shall be held in 2007.