

# Disaster Preparedness and Risk Reduction - Significance of Empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions

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## Abstract

*Passing the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act was a defining moment in the history of decentralisation of political power in India. These amendments have resulted in changing the dynamics and equations of power significantly in the country at the cutting edge levels. The uniqueness of Local Governments is that it not only provides direct participation of people in administration but also plays an important role in bringing good governance at the grassroots through various dimensions like accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equity, inclusiveness, effectiveness, efficiency and consensus. This paper highlights the significance of empowering the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the process of disaster preparedness and risk reduction. PRIs can analyse the hazard, risk, vulnerability and capacity effectively, which is imperative in disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Being close to the people and by virtue of its sheer mandate for local leadership, they have a greater responsibility to take all possible efforts to forecast, prepare and meet any such eventualities. Local knowledge about the resources, facilities and support systems, and the alternative options are crucial in disaster management. In addition, PRIs are in a better position to understand the social vulnerability of the disasters, and to address its differential impacts on children, women, differently abled, the sick and the elderly. To perform effectively and efficiently during disasters, PRIs must have an organisational set up, a disaster management plan for the village and capacity building of its stakeholders. Local Government is the most important political institution to realise 'community-based disaster preparedness' by ensuring active involvement of elected members of PRIs, officials at the local level and community members. While conceiving and operationalising the capacity building programmes, emphasis can be given to youth who may bring in new ideas, approaches, strategies and practices in disaster preparedness and risk reduction.*

**Keywords:** Disaster Preparedness, Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Social Vulnerability, Capacity Building, Role of Youth

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## Introduction

Disaster is a sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, destruction and devastation to life and property. It results in a serious disruption of the functioning of the society, causing widespread human, material or environmental losses which often exceed the ability of the affected society to cope with it, using its own resources. The damage caused by disasters varies with the geographical location, type of earth surface, climate, degree of vulnerability, etc. Disaster influences the mental, socio-economic, political and cultural state of the affected area. The damage caused by the disaster is not easily measurable and may have ever-lasting impacts on the psyche of those affected and survivors.

National Disaster Management Act (2005) views disaster as ‘a catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence in any area, arising from natural or man made causes, or by accident or negligence which results in substantial loss of life or human suffering or damage to, and destruction of property, or damage to, or degradation of environment, and is of such a nature or magnitude as to be beyond the coping capacity of the community of the affected area’.

India has a large land mass with diverse geo-agro-climatic zones. The country has varying topographical features ranging from the great mountain zones (Himalayan region), plain lands (Indus-Ganges-Brahmaputra regions), deserts (Kutch and Thar regions) and the peninsular region (South of Vindhya mountains). The country also faces diverse climatic conditions like snow-clad regions almost throughout the year in Himalayan regions, varying climate at different times in plain lands, extreme climates in deserts and moderate climate in the peninsular region. India has been traditionally vulnerable to natural disasters like floods, droughts, earthquakes, landslides and cyclones, on account of its geo-agro-climatic zones. Because of very large geographical size of the country, India often faces natural hazards like floods, cyclones, drought, etc. occurring frequently in different parts of the country. Significantly, some of the areas that are normally subjected to drought situations may be flooded in subsequent years and vice versa.

India is vulnerable, in varying degrees, to a large number of natural as well as man-made disasters. National Policy on Disaster Management (2009) reported that 58.6 percent of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of moderate to very high intensity; over 40 million hectares (12% of land) is prone to floods and river erosion; of the 7,516 km long coastline, close to 5,700 km is prone to cyclones and tsunamis; 68 percent of the cultivable area is vulnerable to drought, and hilly areas are at risk from landslides and avalanches. The country has several unique features which add to its

vulnerability like very large population, large number of housing units, significant size of BPL population, significant number of illiterate population, lack of sanitation coverage, non-availability of potable water to all, poor health, low nutrition intake, poor infrastructure, absence of multi-purpose institutional facilities, etc.

Disasters differ in terms of their nature and extent of impact. Disasters like earthquakes and landslides occur suddenly but are restricted in their impact in terms of time and space. Cyclones and floods occur with some element of warning, but their occurrence is confined in duration. Drought spans over a much longer time frame and its adverse impact on the economic activities and the life of an area is more lasting. As the nature and extent of impact of disasters differ, the measures for disaster preparedness also vary significantly.

One of the UNDP documents defines 'Disaster preparedness' as that 'minimises the adverse effects of a hazard through effective precautionary actions, rehabilitation and recovery to ensure the timely, appropriate and effective organisation and delivery of relief and assistance following a disaster' (Kent, 1994). The same document highlights the differences between 'active' and 'passive' forms of disaster preparedness measures. 'Passive' aspects of disaster preparedness incorporate the preparation of disaster manuals, stockpiling of relief goods and the development of computerised lists of resources and personnel, whereas 'Active' aspects include developing comprehensive response plans, monitoring hazard threats, training emergency personnel, and training members of the communities at risk. In this context, as a prelude to the discussions on disaster preparedness, certain disastrous events affected in the South-Asian region will be highlighted.

In October 1999, the super cyclone hit the coastal districts of Odisha, causing immense loss of human lives, livestock, agriculture and ecology, in addition to destruction of property. Balasore, Bhadrak, Cuttack, Dhenkanal, Gajapati, Ganjam, Khurda, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, etc. were some of the most affected districts of Odisha. On 26 January 2001, a devastating earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale shook different parts of Gujarat, the areas of Kutch and Bhuj were affected badly with death and destruction all around. In December 2004, an earthquake of magnitude 9.0 on the Richter scale in the Indian Ocean triggered a Tsunami that seriously affected the coastal areas of Thailand, Srilanka, Maldives, and many other countries. The Tsunami caused extensive damages especially in the southern coast of India and the most affected areas were Andaman & Nicobar islands, parts of Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Kerala. The official death toll in India was reported around 11,000 which excluded many thousands missing from the islands of Andaman & Nicobar. During June – July 2013, flash floods and cloud bursts affected several parts of Uttarakhand resulting

in loss of several human lives and animals, severe damage to infrastructure, and irreparable loss to the environment. After each disaster, lack of preparedness used to be reported by the media. Reports published in major dailies like The Hindu, Indian Express, The Times of India and Deccan Herald in English and, Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhumi in Malayalam during June-July 2013 portrayed the magnitude of damage caused in Uttarakhand. No doubt, better preparedness measures, the casualty and damages owing to disaster could have been brought down significantly. Interactions with the personnel involved in the relief and rehabilitation of the 2013 floods in Uttarakhand indicated that the disaster in the State affected the livelihood of people in the area significantly the author held discussions with functionaries of Pragma, Janamaitri Kalpgathi Youth Organisation, NGOs actively involved in the relief and rehabilitation works in Uttarakhand.

Disasters indicated above point towards the need for a holistic and integrated approach in disaster management, with thrust on measures for preparedness and risk reduction. Setting up of the High Powered Committee on Disaster Management was the first major initiative by the Government of India in this direction. The Committee was set up in August 1999 by the Department of Agriculture and Cooperation, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India along with the National Disaster Response Plan. The scope and mandate of the Committee was enlarged in April 2000 to cover man-made disasters also, in addition to chemical, industrial and nuclear disasters. The report of the High Powered Committee on Disaster Management (2002) advocated for ushering in a new culture of disaster management which will stand on the four pillars - culture of preparedness, quick response, strategic thinking and culture of prevention. The report, while explaining the culture of preparedness, explains that destruction from natural hazards can be minimised by the presence of well-functioning warning systems, combined with preparedness on the part of the vulnerable community. Warning systems and preparedness measures reduce and modify the scale of disasters. A community that is prepared to face disasters, receives and understands warnings of impending hazards and resorts to precautionary and mitigatory measures, is able to cope better and resume normal life sooner.

National Disaster Management Act (2005) laid down institutional, legal, financial and co-ordination mechanisms at different levels. The Act clearly indicated that these institutions are not parallel structures and will work in close harmony. The Central Act advocated for a paradigm shift in Disaster Management from relief-centric approach to a pro-active approach that lays greater emphasis on preparedness, prevention and mitigation for conserving developmental gains and to minimise loss of life, livelihood and property. It also paved way for new institutional mechanisms

like National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA), District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), etc. As a natural follow-up to the promulgation of Act, NDMA brought out several disaster-specific guidelines, which enabled the practitioners and other stakeholders in managing disasters more effectively and efficiently.

National Policy on Disaster Management (2009) visualises a holistic and integrated approach towards disaster management with emphasis on building strategic partnerships at various levels. Community-based disaster management, capacity development in all spheres, etc. were some of the themes underpinning the policy. The objectives of the National Policy on Disaster Management are:

- Promoting a culture of prevention, preparedness and resilience at all levels through knowledge, innovation and education.
- Encouraging mitigation measures based on technology, traditional wisdom and environmental sustainability.
- Mainstreaming disaster management into the developmental planning process.
- Establishing institutional and techno-legal frameworks to create an enabling regulatory environment and a compliance regime.
- Ensuring efficient mechanism for identification, assessment and monitoring of disaster risks.
- Developing contemporary forecasting and early warning systems backed by responsive and fail-safe communication with information technology support.
- Ensuring efficient response and relief with a caring approach towards the needs of the vulnerable sections of the society.
- Undertaking reconstruction as an opportunity to build disaster resilient structures and habitat for ensuring safer living.
- Promoting a productive and pro-active partnership with the media for disaster management.

Among the objectives listed above, certain key words like traditional wisdom, developmental planning, efficient mechanism for identification, and caring approach towards the needs of the vulnerable sections of the society could be well

integrated with the attributes of Local Governments. However, a review of disasters mentioned above and post-disaster interventions in these affected areas indicate that the Local Governments had no specific role. It is reported that 'they had practically no stake in the disaster management – no administrative decisions or operational activities pertaining to prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery or rehabilitation' (Placid, 2006).

A document by the Trust for Village Self Governance (2007) highlighted that 'We must equip our Panchayat for effective disaster management. It is the body vested with first response to disaster and front line response to disaster. The Panchayat needs a plan and the process should be participatory'. It is noted that the process of developing the village-specific plan is equally or more important than the end-product, looking from the view of empowering PRIs and members of youth organisations.

This paper attempts to document the role of PRIs in disaster management through its different phases. It analyses the efforts for capacity building of elected members of PRIs, officials of local level institutions (including those from Gram Panchayat, School, Anganawadi, Balavadi, Health Centre, Village Administrative Office etc.), and community members by examining the measures for disaster preparedness and risk reduction. It highlights the significance of empowering Local Governments by suggesting several areas to be incorporated in the capacity building sessions, for elected members of PRIs, officials, members of youth organisations, and other stakeholders.

## **Methodology**

Interactions and deliberations with the key informants formed the major inputs for this paper. Elected members of PRI from different parts of the country provided useful inputs for the deliberations (the author interacted with the elected members of PRIs from Assam, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Kerala, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura and West Bengal, as part of capacity building programmes organised for them). As they are local leaders and opinion makers, they are able to bring in positive approaches and attitudes among the community. In addition, office bearers of political organisations, functionaries of non-political organisations and other members of community also provided the inputs. Among the elected members of PRIs, necessary efforts were made to interact with more young men and women respondents using semi-structured interview schedule. These categories of respondents were preferred as they are more active, challenge-taking, dynamic, and may bring in new ideas, approaches, strategies and practices. In addition, it is hoped that they shall ensure active participation of the community

in disaster-related activities. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with the office bearers of youth wings of major political parties across the country (Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura and West Bengal) towards understanding their involvement and participation in disaster preparedness. Interactions with the functionaries of non-political organisations like Youth Clubs, mahila mandals and Self Help Groups (SHG) in Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Lakshdweep, Odisha and Tamil Nadu were also undertaken using semi-structured interview schedule. These deliberations provided several useful inputs to highlight the role of different stakeholders during demanding situations. In addition, the researcher interacted with the officials of various local institutions like Schools, Health Centres, Anganawadis, Public Distribution System (PDS) shops, Agriculture Office, Veterinary Hospital, etc., who also provided with several useful inputs.

Regarding the process of data collection, interactions with the elected members were made either in Panchayat office, in public place or in their homes. Interviews with most of the elected women members were organised in their home itself, as they felt more comfortable there, when compared to the Panchayat or other public places. FGDs were held with the office bearers of youth wings of major political parties in public places like Schools, Libraries, etc. Deliberations with the functionaries of non-political organisations were organised mostly in public places. In most of the cases, the interviews and FGDs with the respondents were held after fixing the date, time and venue as they were busy in various engagements.

## **Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Disaster Management**

Constitutional status to Local Government was an important moment in the history of decentralisation of political power in India. It has brought in a paradigm shift in the operational domain of local governance in the country. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments enabled the Local Governments with the power, authority and resources to function as 'units of self government', though with varying levels of initiative, drive, interest, intensity and diversity of operations in practice. Drawing power and inspiration from the Constitution of India, the Local Governments have started assuming the centre stage by ushering in effective, efficient, people-centric and responsive system in decentralised governance, at least in the selected areas of the country.

Impact of the historic constitutional amendments has resulted in changing the dynamics and equations of power significantly at the local level. The uniqueness of Local Government is that it not only provides direct participation of people



in administration but also play an important role in bringing good governance at the grassroots through various dimensions like accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equity, inclusiveness, effectiveness, efficiency and consensus. It is also noted that the significance, operations and the impact of PRIs across the country are improving over the period, despite wide disparity in their approach and extent in different parts of the country.

The Report of High Powered Committee on Disaster Management (2002) indicated that disaster management should be seen as a part of good governance. It is viewed that Local Governments can be effective instruments in tackling disaster through early warning system. They can be relied on at the time of relief distribution, providing shelter to the victims, medical assistance, etc. since they are closer to the communities. They are in a better position to undertake such tasks than the State and Central government. The report viewed that creation of motivation, community level coordinated action, disaster mitigation education, etc. are all tasks that can be provided by the Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies. For the above, it is required that they be involved in the formulation and implementation of disaster management plan and subsequently look into the short term, medium term and long term development plans.

National Policy on Disaster Management (2009), highlighted that 'local authorities like Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Municipalities will ensure capacity building of their officers and employees for managing disasters, carry out relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities in the affected areas and will prepare Disaster Management Plans'. While citing the role of State, District and Local Authorities, it is reported that 'the local authorities like PRIs and Municipalities will play a significant role in the entire process, particularly in response and rescue operations, relief and rehabilitation, awareness generation and disaster preparedness, restoration of livelihood options and co-ordination with NGOs and civil society'.

It can be seen that Local Governments in rural as well as urban areas have an important role to play in disaster management, with special reference to disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Some of the major roles of Local Governments in different phases of disaster management (Gireesan, 2011) are discussed in the subsequent section.

### ***Role of Local Governments in the Pre-Disaster Phase***

Local Governments are expected to carry out the following, in line with the measures for disaster preparedness.



- (i) Initiate the 'Mapping of Resources and Facilities' in and around its functional area with emphasis on their suitability for disaster management. For example, identifying temporary locations for keeping evacuated persons, storage of food, drinking water, medicines, etc., availability of necessary equipment and its status like tractors, trolleys, JCB, etc., list of human resources with their skill-sets like doctors, engineers, nurses, plumbers, electricians, etc., and, list of emergency items to be procured.
- (ii) Carry out 'Vulnerability Mapping' of the area and update the vulnerability profile at regular intervals.
- (iii) Prepare an 'Evacuation Plan' with priority for children, women, differently abled, the sick, and the aged.
- (iv) Devise an 'Early Warning and Reporting System' with the list of Nodal persons from the functional area and update their status at regular intervals.
- (v) Prepare a directory of blood donors, youth volunteers, etc. with contact address and update their status.
- (vi) Constitute a 'Disaster Management Cell' at the local level which will act as a 'Core team' for all the activities. Each member of the core team will be assigned with specific responsibilities (Main and Stand-by) to avoid overlapping and duplication of efforts.
- (vii) Capacity building of different stakeholders will be organised at regular intervals: every family to prepare the 'emergency kit' in case of an emergency; every official on documenting vital information for disaster management; every citizen on 'Disaster-specific drills'; every youth volunteer on application of first aid, carrying out safe evacuation procedures, operation of stand-by power and communication equipment, etc.
- (viii) In case of an early warning about the onset of disasters, core team member will brief the nodal persons about the disaster plan and their expected assignments.
- (ix) Formulation of a Plan for Disaster Management in the area, with inputs from elected members of PRIs, officials, village elders and community members.
- (x) Setting up of community volunteer teams for search and rescue, communication, first aid, preparation of shelter, provision of food and water, maintenance, etc. The teams may consist of primarily consisting of elected members of PRIs, representatives of youth organisations, community leaders and other stakeholders. Capacity building programmes for the members of these volunteer teams need to be taken up in this phase.

It is noted that the role of Local Governments in the 'pre-disaster phase' is significant, as they are expected to take appropriate measures for disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Local Government is in a better position to analyse the hazard, risk, vulnerability and capacity effectively, which is imperative in disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Local knowledge about the resources, facilities and support systems, and the alternative options are crucial in disaster preparedness. Being close to the people and by virtue of its sheer mandate for local leadership in its functional area, the Local Government has a greater responsibility to take all possible efforts to forecast, prepare and meet any such eventualities. And, they are in a position to understand the social vulnerability of the disasters, and to address differential impacts of disasters on different sections of the society, with special reference to children, women, differently abled, the sick and the elderly from their functional area. Based on the above, they are expected to formulate a 'Disaster Management Plan' for the village, which is an essential component for disaster preparedness and risk reduction. For effective application, this plan needs to be revised at specified intervals depending upon the changes in environment, availability of resources and facilities, etc. In this phase, Local Government is expected to function as a '*Leader*', through mapping of resources and facilities, formulation of a plan and constitution of a team with defined functions and responsibilities. It is also expected to take up appropriate measures to develop the capacity of different stakeholders towards systematically and comprehensively address the situation.

When compared to other levels of government, role of PRIs in the pre-disaster phase is quite unique and significant. It is unique for a simple reason that it is the nearest government to the people; and it is significant, as it is expected to take appropriate measures for disaster preparedness, depending upon the local context. However, interactions with elected members of PRIs, officials, functionaries of Youth Clubs, Mahila Mandals, SHGs and office bearers of youth wings of major political parties revealed that the measures adopted towards the disaster preparedness and risk reduction are far below expectation. Interactions with the different stakeholders revealed that the preparatory measures were limited to formation of a core team in certain areas. It was noted that there was no proper allocation of responsibilities to the members of the core team, which ultimately reflects the presence of the team in theory rather than in practice.

### ***Role of Local Governments in the Disaster Phase***

During the onset of any disaster, the following activities are expected to be taken up by the Local Governments.

- (i) Opening of a 24 x 7 emergency control room with necessary data bank about the resources and facilities, communication equipment, back-up power and staff.
- (ii) Core team members are to be available in the control room, round the clock, for continuous monitoring of all the activities.
- (iii) Convene an emergency meeting of all political parties, non-political bodies and Community-Based Organisations, towards seeking support and enabling co-ordination.
- (iv) Ensure that all communications, both out-going and incoming, are to be channelised through a single point.
- (v) Collect the field data from the nodal persons, verify the information, collate them and communicate the same to the Block and District administration.

During disasters, people look up to the Local Government at the first instance, for addressing their basic needs, concerns and issues. Being the nearest government, it is likely that the affected persons will approach the Local Government for their basic services and other requirements. And to perform up to their expectation, the Local Government must be adequately equipped to tackle such situations with efficiency and speed. PRI is expected to gear up its activities to take all possible steps to monitor the situation and ensure that forward and backward communication is established at the earliest. They are expected to gather and verify that the information furnished is 'correct and complete' to enable them to seek and receive necessary support from the District Administration and other agencies. In this phase, the PRI is expected to perform as a '*Co-ordinator and Communicator*'.

Interactions with the different stakeholders indicated that the PRIs played only a limited role in this phase. During disasters, it is reported that many Local Governments did not even open a control room and even where it was started, it did not have the minimum required facilities like communication facilities and stand-by power. There was no record of communication received from different parts of the area and communication forwarded to the Block/ District Administration. Significantly, no emergency meeting of various stakeholders was convened by the Local Government. All these show that there was no sign of any significant role played by the PRIs during the disaster phase.

### ***Role of Local Governments in the Post-Disaster Phase***

Local Governments are expected to perform the following in the post-disaster phase.

- (i) Ensuring provision of basic needs like drinking water, food, clothes, etc. to the needy.
- (ii) Regulating the supply of ration, utensils for kitchen and dress and ensure their supply to every needy family.
- (iii) Construction of temporary shelters and sanitary facilities, with thrust on women, differently abled and aged.
- (iv) Ensuring supply of water purifying tablets and emergency medicines; organise medical camps at different parts.
- (v) Ensure continuity to the food and nutrition programme for children, adolescent girls and pregnant mothers through Anganawadis.
- (vi) Co-ordinate the activities of government departments, non-governmental agencies and community-based organisations for providing livelihood support for the affected families and ensure their optimum benefit.
- (vii) Restoration of education and other basic services to the citizens at the earliest opportunity.
- (viii) Restoration of livelihood assets like roads and infrastructure in the locality.
- (ix) Providing psycho-social care to the needy persons, to enable them to get over the traumatic period.

Local Government has an important role to perform in the rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities during the post-disaster phase. In this phase, it is expected to function as '*Provider, Co-ordinator and Facilitator*'. It has a primary function as a 'Provider' of various basic services and facilities, followed by special services depending upon the local context. In addition, its role is visualised as a 'Co-ordinator' as co-ordination of various activities in the field cannot be successfully carried out without the active involvement of PRIs. Being the government institution at the grass root level, PRI is expected to take the role of a 'Facilitator' also, as they are notified as the nodal point for distribution of food and other basic services. In addition, they are in a better position to examine the differential impacts of the disaster among the members of community.

Interactions with the elected members of PRIs, officials and citizens revealed that the Local Governments played an important role during the disaster phase, with their active involvement in rescue and relief. They took special efforts to provide drinking water, food, clothes, medicines and other basic services, with the support of district administration, non-government organisations (NGOs), CBOs and

others. Construction of temporary shelters, starting community kitchen, organising medical camps, arranging mobile medical facilities, etc. were some of the significant activities carried out by the PRIs in this phase. However, the efforts made by the PRIs in providing livelihood activities, rehabilitation and restoration activities in their functional area were not satisfactory. It may be owing to the reason that they did not have the adequate administrative, functional and financial autonomy to conceive such initiatives and interventions or they have not received the required support from the State Government, District Administration and other agencies. It is noted that they were able to provide the services with the limited resources and facilities at their disposal, but could not take up any long-term projects without the required support from Government Departments and other agencies. This may be so because they have not documented the extent of disaster occurred and could not scientifically project their requirements to the Government and other funding agencies or they could not receive the requisite support and guidance in this direction.

Towards functioning effectively and efficiently during disasters, Local Governments must have the following: an organisational set up, a specific disaster management plan and capacity building of its stakeholders. The organisational set up for meeting any eventualities must include representatives from all major stakeholders. It must have a disaster management plan with the details of resources, facilities and equipment for any rapid action. The plan also must specify the roles, responsibilities and functions of elected members, officials of local level institutions, NGOs, CBOs, etc. Capacity building indicates towards the provision of training and awareness programmes for elected members of PRIs, officials, functionaries of youth organisations, mahila mandals, SHGs, etc. which is very important in empowering them in disaster preparedness and risk reduction.

### **Capacity Building in Disaster Preparedness and Risk Reduction**

Capacity building in disaster preparedness and risk reduction is the ability of the Department/ Institution/ Agency/ Community to prepare, equip and reduce the impact of the disaster and bring it back to normalcy after the happening, considering the potentials of human beings and other support systems. Building capacity of different stakeholders highlights the provision of training to elected members of PRIs, officials, and members of community to enhance their awareness, as well as creating an organisational set up to take up appropriate interventions in times of need. Creation of a disaster management plan for the area in a participatory manner with specific roles and responsibilities to the members of the core team and other stakeholders must form part of capacity building exercises.

The report of the High Powered Committee on Disaster Management (2002) recommended that 'for effective implementation of disaster mitigation strategies, training and awareness needs to be provided to the members of local bodies as well as the gram panchayats, thereby setting up a trained task force that would be immediately activated should a disaster strike. They should be provided with training to handle modern communication equipment such as fax, wireless sets, etc. Of critical importance in a disaster situation is coordination between the various government agencies and at all levels - both vertically as well as horizontally'.

Involvement of community in the development process, which includes disaster preparedness and risk reduction, is essential because of the following practical considerations (Abarquez & Murshed, 2004).

- (a) Nobody can understand local opportunities and constraints better than the local communities themselves, who therefore need to be involved in the identification and resolution of disaster vulnerability issues.
- (b) Nobody is more interested in understanding local affairs than the community whose survival and well-being is at stake. Therefore the information should be generated in a manner and language that is understood by the community.

By virtue of its position closer to the community and their natural responsibility for local leadership, the Local Government is expected to perform specific roles and functions in different phases like pre-disaster, during disaster and post-disaster. However, in comparison with other two phases, the Local Government can play a pro-active and significant role during the pre-disaster phase, which needs to be manifested through adoption of appropriate measures for disaster preparedness and risk reduction. During disaster and post-disaster phases, it is in a position to execute immediate rescue and relief measures.

And, elected members of PRIs, being the local leaders, are able to mobilise community opinion, bring in positive approaches and attitude among the community members, and ensure the wholehearted participation of the community. Elected members of PRIs in general and young elected members of the PRIs in particular are visualised as one of the important target groups for capacity building. Similarly, among the functionaries and members of youth clubs, mahila mandals, SHGs, etc. who constitute an important segment of community, young persons are identified as an important target group for capacity building. Elected members of PRIs and citizens in this age group corresponds to young and dynamic individuals who are looking for active participation and can also play a pro-active role in bringing positive social changes (As per the National Youth Policy (2003), the term 'youth' refers to the persons

in the age group of 13-35 years. However, the draft document of the National Youth Policy (2012) suggested to keep the target age group at 16 – 30 years. Operationally, the term ‘Young Elected Members’ of PRIs denote those elected members who fall in the age group of 21-35 years and the term ‘Young Citizens’ refer to those men and women from the area in the age group of 18-35 years). It is hoped that when properly trained, they will be able to play a key leadership role in community-based disaster preparedness and risk reduction, more effectively and efficiently. That is the prime reason for targeting them in the capacity building programmes.

Capacity building for the elected members of PRIs will include mapping of the resources and facilities, mapping of vulnerable areas and points, preparation of evacuation plan, early warning and reporting system, starting of a disaster management cell at the local level, preparation of the disaster management plan for the area, etc. Formulation of Village Disaster Management Plan (VDMP) is the most important element in implementing Community-Based Disaster Management in any area, as it is expected to empower the community to deal with disasters on their own with necessary preparedness. It includes ‘situational and hazard, risk, vulnerability and capacity analysis, response plan, mitigation and preparedness plan, family disaster preparedness plan, etc.’ (Walia & Guleria, 2012). It also includes the list of activities the village is expected to follow to prevent loss of life, livelihoods and property in the event of a disaster. The VDMP identifies several steps in advance, which special reference to the action to be taken by the community members so that each individual knows what to do on receipt of a warning message or in the event of disaster.

Voluntarism is one of the important features of youth. Disaster preparedness and risk reduction invariably demands lot of voluntary efforts from the community, especially from the young citizens. In line with its constitutional status, popular will and leadership at the local level, the Local Government is expected to mobilise support from the youth clubs, mahila mandals, SHGs and other CBOs working in the functional area. All these organisations are expected to be registered with the Local Government to enable their services to be appropriately used for the benefit of community (In States like Kerala, there is a practice of registering the Youth Organisations and SHGs with the PRI, which enable their services to be properly utilised by the PRI for the community. Generally, communications will be sent to these organisations inviting for Grama Sabha and other programmes/activities organised by the Local Government). Representatives of these organisations can be invited to the programmes organised by the PRI and their active involvement in the preparation of Disaster Management Plan for the village would be very crucial.



Sending out invitations to them for the discussions and meetings by itself will infuse a sense of recognition to these organisations which in turn will motivate them to participate actively in the preparation of plan and make necessary contributions and support to the Local Government. And it needs no emphasis that PRI is the 'right institution' to enable proper convergence of potentials, resources, services and efforts of such grass root organisations in disaster preparedness. In this context, capacity building of key functionaries of community organisations like youth clubs, mahila mandals and SHGs is very much imperative. By undergoing suitable training sessions, the skills and competencies of community members also will be enhanced, which is expected to develop their capacity to adopt suitable measures for disaster preparedness and risk reduction.

Capacity building for the community members will include mapping of the resources and facilities; mapping of vulnerable areas and points; preparation of evacuation plan, early warning and reporting system; preparation of emergency kit, disaster-specific drills, application of first aid, carrying out Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and safe evacuation procedures; and, operation of stand-by power and communication equipment. Capacity building programmes for the community members will enhance their knowledge, attitude and skills to perform as 'Trained Volunteers' in the demanding situations. While going through the experience at Dahod district, Gujarat. It is noted that the community-based programme has a two-layered intervention - one focussing on infrastructure capacity building like formation of grain bank, watershed programme and horticulture; and, the other focussing on knowledge-based capacity building which includes formation of SHGs, youth groups, and village development committee, task force, village mitigation committee and preparing village contingency plan (Disha, n.d.). It needs no emphasis that the capacity building sessions for the elected members of PRIs, officials and community members need to be organised in a participatory manner and interactive mode.

Interactions with the elected members of PRIs, officials and community members revealed that most of them have not received any specific training pertaining to disaster preparedness and risk reduction. But in certain places, the practice of keeping the details of the resources and facilities was noted, though it was not maintained keeping in view the disaster preparedness. Traditional wisdom and knowledge contribute significantly to take appropriate measures for disaster preparedness, but no serious effort was made to document them. Discussions with the young elected members of PRIs, functionaries of youth organisations and young citizens indicated that dynamism, energy and voluntary spirit of the youth could not be incorporated appropriately for adopting measures for disaster preparedness and risk reduction.

Preparation of a work plan is necessary to guide decision makers in executing the most important tasks in the right sequence during disasters. Here, the emphasis is on what, who, when, where, resources and reporting in the event of a disaster. It points to the need for a Responsibility mapping with details about the responsibility for each stakeholder in various steps in the process. It is suggested that capacity building programmes of appropriate duration is to be taken up for the elected members of PRIs, officials and community members with thrust on preparation of a 'Disaster Management Plan for the Village' and formulation of a 'Responsibility map' for all the stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

The paper discusses the significance of empowering Local Governments in the process of disaster management, with thrust on disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Analysing the efforts made for capacity building of the elected members of PRIs, officials and community members, with special focus on youth, it is noted that lot more to be done to empower Local Governments to take suitable measures for disaster preparedness and risk reduction. The paper highlights the importance of mapping of resources and facilities in view of disaster, and the need to ensure co-ordination and convergence of efforts by the government departments, NGOs, CBOs, and other stakeholders towards seeking their participation, ensuring active presence and visualising sustainability.

It is accepted that Local Government can analyse the hazard, risk, vulnerability and capacity effectively and there is a need to formulate a 'Disaster Management Plan' for the village, which will be updated periodically. It is also noted that the Local Government is in a better position to understand the social vulnerability of the disasters with differential impacts on children, women, differently abled, the sick and the elderly, which is imperative in disaster preparedness and risk reduction. In this context, presence of able leaders, and committed and efficient officials at the local level is quite significant. In addition, pro-active role of community members at the grassroots is also very much essential. At the same time, the elected members of PRIs, officials and community members must be aware about their specific responsibilities in disaster preparedness and risk reduction. And there is a need to update the skills and competencies of elected members of PRIs, officials and community members, in line with the changing threat perceptions, rising demands and environment.

Youth have an important role to play in disaster preparedness and risk reduction, irrespective of their position and status. Their creativity, dynamism, energy level, innovative ideas, leadership qualities, pace of work, voluntary spirit, etc. need to

be properly channelised. And Local Government is the most important political institution to realise 'community-based disaster preparedness' by ensuring active involvement of elected members of PRIs, officials at the local levels, members of youth organisations, and other stakeholders. It is hoped that the emphasis on youth while conceiving and operationalising the capacity building programmes, will lead to incorporation of new ideas, approaches, strategies and practices in disaster preparedness and risk reduction.

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