



NATIONAL DISASTER PREPAREDNESS DAY

Making cities resilient: Preparing Bangladesh

STEFAN PRIESNER

Our journey towards an "urban world" sometime between 2008 and 2010, the globe crossed a momentous threshold: More than half of the world's population, over 3.5 billion people, are now living in urban areas, and more than a third of them are residents of urban slums. To place that figure in the appropriate context, consider that in 1800, only 3% of the world's population lived in cities.

The development challenges that these changing demographic realities pose require new thinking and new solutions. Urban life may seem appealing to many, but the prosperity on display in emerging cities often belies the tragedy in which many slum residents find themselves without access to safe water, health services, and human security, caught in a persistent vulnerability to disaster.

In Bangladesh, for four decades poverty alleviation was defined by its rural context, and the government and its development partners are only just beginning to realise the scope and scale of urban poverty. Acknowledging that 40% of its population will be urban residents by 2020 the Government of Bangladesh is broadening its vision of disaster management and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is supporting these efforts. The country is a global leader in disaster response, with its innovative practices now being replicated in other parts of the world. But a paradigm shift in thinking is now the need of the hour.

Whilst strengthening our efforts in responding to disasters, we must strategise on ways to reduce the risks that disasters pose, whether they be floods, cyclones or earthquakes. The vision of "Disaster Risk Reduction" seeks to target the vulnerabilities faced by citizens, particularly the poor and the disadvantaged, who often slide

back into poverty as a result of a single catastrophic event. This year's National Disaster Preparedness Day (NDPD) provides an opportunity to reflect upon the strides achieved while also recognising the challenges that remain.

A sea change

UNDP takes pride in supporting Bangladesh in a number of nationally significant and globally valued policy initiatives. The development of a revised Standing Order on Disaster (SOD) with emphasis on disaster risk reduction, the National Plan for Disaster Management (NPDMD), the Disaster Management Act (awaiting lawmakers' vetting), the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAP), among others, have positioned Bangladesh as the global leader in disaster management practices.

Since 2004, the redoubled push of the multi-donor Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP) has catalysed a paradigm shift away from reactive relief towards proactive risk reduction on a national scale.

The evolution of institutions, for instance the establishment of the Disaster Management Bureau (DMB) following the 1991 cyclone, has facilitated the institutional anchoring of an integrated approach to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). In keeping with this, Bangladesh has been a lead-

ing force in the professionalisation of disaster risk management.

It is important to appreciate that reducing poverty is an empowering process that enables people to decrease their exposure to risks. Concurrently, by mitigating disaster risk development achievements are safeguarded and, therefore, risks of people

ing with planning, implementing and monitoring improvements in living conditions. This programme enables slum residents to improve their habitat, build a secure living environment and address risk factors.

While appreciating the convergence between disaster and development efforts it is important that we take note of the

advancements in the realm of urban risk reduction. The CDMP, implemented by the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, has an Urban Community Volunteer Programme which has seen the Fire Service and Civil Defence department train 64,000 volunteers nationwide to be effective first responders in the face of disasters.

Integrating climate change risk management issues in the national primary and secondary education curriculum is also expected to pay back in awareness building and preparedness. Bangladesh has also made significant advancements in improving risk information and establishing early warning systems.

Expanding cell phone based early warning system has tremendous potential to bring about a sea change in reaching people at risk in time. The 24/7 Disaster Management Information Centre, its countrywide network and the National Disaster Response Coordination Centre are also contributing to a synchronised national alert and

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FAHAD KATZER/ DRIK NEWS

sliding back into poverty are diminished.

This relationship has been pivotal to many poverty reduction initiatives in Bangladesh. The nationally executed Urban Partnership for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) supported by UNDP and UKAid mobilises financial assistance to three million urban poor, particularly women and girls, by assist-

Reducing risk of disasters

MD. ABDUL QAYYUM

THE 2011 Global Assessment Report of the UNISDR revealed that in terms of number of people exposed to flood, tsunami and cyclone, Bangladesh is ranked first out of 162, third out of 73, and sixth out of 89, respectively. This translates into 14% GDP exposed to disasters per year. Historically, in Bangladesh, deaths from single events, such as cyclones, reached into the hundreds of thousands. The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters estimates that, in Bangladesh, close to 75 million people have been directly affected by natural disasters between 2000 and 2011, with economic damage of \$5.8 billion.

The vulnerability of Bangladesh is dominated by broad-based and persistent poverty against the backdrop of high population and density. Despite the reduction of the national poverty headcount rate from 40% to 31.5% in 2010, the 2010 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) records some 57 million people still live in chronic poverty. The country's location at the lower end of the three major river basins also makes it vulnerable to floods, flash floods, river erosion, water shortage, drought and salinity intrusion. Cyclones, floods and flash floods recur almost on yearly basis.

While there was no large-scale earthquake in the last century, the country lies in one of the world's seismically active regions. Its geographical location, geo-physical condition, and topography also render the country vulnerable to the worst impacts of climate change. Additionally, Bangladesh is prone to hazards such as water logging, water congestion, pollutions and environmental degradation.

Paradigm shift towards a comprehensive approach

While most of the world was still grappling with the relief approach, Bangladesh crafted a disaster management system founded on risk reduction through a comprehensive approach covering all hazards in both rural and urban settings, throughout all phases of disaster management, involving all development sectors and actors, at all levels of governance. It puts particular emphasis on enhancing local disaster management capability and a prepared and resilient community. Bangladesh has been undertaking a disaster management paradigm shift from the conventional relief and

rehabilitation to a more comprehensive approach putting more emphasis on reducing risk and addressing vulnerabilities.

The paradigm shift has helped reduce the cyclone-related casualties from hundreds of thousands in the seventies, to tens of thousands in the eighties and nineties, to merely thousands in the cyclone Sidr and Aila in recent years. Although the death toll has declined the economic damage and losses continue to inhibit and even to deprive the country from the hard-earned development dividend. Thus, preparedness for disasters, along with effective prevention and mitigation measures, is imperative for disaster risk reduction and resilience building.

Disaster management as part of governance

The government, through issuance of Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) in 1997 and further revision in April 2010, created a well-defined framework for disaster management. Comprehensive disaster management towards poverty reduction was considered one of the major policy agendas in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Apparently, it has been made one of the six pillars of the Bangladesh Climate Change

Strategy and Action Plan. The National Plan for Disaster Management (NPDMD) 2010-2015 was adopted to provide the overall guideline for the relevant sectors and disaster management committees for all levels and agencies as well as for other actors to prepare and implement their specific plans. Disaster management and climate change have been integrated in the 6th Five Year Plan as the medium development plan, and the ECNEC resolution requires that every development project proforma takes into consideration the disaster risks as part of the compliance, thereby allowing each development investment to be informed of

disaster risks.

The SOD created a series of interrelated committees, at both national and sub-national levels, to ensure effective planning and coordination of disaster risk reduction and emergency response management at all levels ranging from the National Disaster Management Council (NDMC), the Inter-Ministerial Disaster Coordination Committee (IMDMCC), and Disaster Management Committees at all levels all the way to the Union Parishad. At present, the National Disaster Management Policy and National Disaster Management Act are in the process of formulation.



TANVIR AHMED/ DRIK NEWS

This day also calls us to act decisively now to facilitate the mainstreaming of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation into sustainable development planning frameworks to ensure a safer Bangladesh for future generations.

The Disaster Management and Relief Division has the key responsibility for coordinating the disaster management affairs and is mandated to carry out the business through two main agencies. The Directorate for Relief and Rehabilitation (DoRR) is to deliver the conventional response, relief and rehabilitation as well as a wide range of social safety nets. The Disaster Management Bureau (DMB) is the apex organisation responsible for coordinating disaster management tasks across all committees and agencies. Disaster Management Information Centre /Network (DMIC/DMIN) have been established to

assist the concerned stakeholders with all necessary information during normal time, warning and activation, emergency response, and relief and recovery.

Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme

Since 2004, the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP) has been one of the leading programmes and a flagship initiative of the DMRD/MoFDM, providing a wide range of catalytic and pilot disaster management measures as well as substantive technical advisory ranging from policy advocacy and formulation, institutional strengthening, scientific studies, to tailor-made community-based interventions and activities. CDMP is designed to substantiate the paradigm shift and to promote a comprehensive risk reduction culture. This is a multi-donor supported programme being implemented with technical support from UNDP and financial contribution of UKaid, EU, Sida, AusAID and the Norwegian Embassy. In its numerous initiatives CDMP has signed agreements with 13 key technical government departments and ministries for institutionalisation of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation into their development plans and programmes. Further to that, it aims to reduce risk of rural and urban population, particularly the extreme poor, through structural and non-structural interventions, community empowerment, improved awareness of and planning for natural hazard events, development of city wise contingency plans, piloting of urban community risk reduction methodologies, including the likely impacts of climate change, etc.

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Facing emerging challenges

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response system.

Bangladesh's approach to disaster management has resulted in a significant drop in fatalities, whilst protecting livelihoods and assets.

Challenges remain

And yet, much hard work is ahead of us. Bangladesh is not yet ready for a major urban disaster. Much more needs to be done, to promote inter-agency engagement on disaster preparedness and response planning; to address unplanned urban growth; to bolster technical and human resources of city development authorities; to tackle the limitations of the Fire Service to adequately respond; to enforce building codes and integrate disaster vulnerability considerations into the approval processes; not to mention the retrofitting of existing buildings, such as in Old Dhaka or essential infrastructure like hospitals and schools. It is a large and daunting task.

Urbanisation is a global trend; the key is working in partnership to engage and prepare emerging cities in advance. Dhaka, already home to more than 13 million people, is growing at 4% a year, much of which is unplanned. Disaster vulnerabilities in our urban centres are clear and immediate, and they pose special challenges. The earthquake felt in Dhaka a couple of weeks ago reminded us all of this; but urban risk is not limited to earthquakes. We need to remain committed to a multi-hazard approach to urban risk reduction that will see all of our cities safer in the long run.

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impeding sustainable development around the world. Risk reduction has been gaining recognition and commitment among decision makers. Lessons from the past demonstrate that disaster risk reduction is a cross-cutting issue that needs to be met in a concerted manner. The disaster trend has been reversing with data suggesting that better preparation for and response to disasters is improving over time and thus dramatically reducing the number of lives lost.

Great strides have been made in understanding the science, engineering, socio-political and economical aspects of disaster management and strategies to mitigate the effects of such catastrophe. Yet the results of implemented strategies and benefits arising out of the existing legislations and technical knowledge are not always known with certainty. True impact can only be achieved by enhancing the overall understanding and realisation of disaster risks, and inculcating a sense of ownership by taking action with the participation of all strata of the society. It should be regarded as a transversal aspect of development, involving all sectors of society and beginning with those who are most exposed to foreseeable risks.

Looking beyond the horizon

The Bangladesh experience shows that sustaining the resilience to recurring disasters and the capacities of the masses in local communities is by far the best way of disaster management. The national level disaster management planning facilitates the people to gain the experience in dealing with natural disasters by devising coping systems for every adverse situation. There is a strong need for multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary coordination mechanisms as well as local to national ones that are capable of bringing together all concerned actors on one platform.

Bangladesh 2012 National Disaster Preparedness Day is the right time to celebrate what the country has accomplished so far. Its regional and global leadership in this emerging sector should continue developing. This day also calls us to act decisively now to facilitate the mainstreaming of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation into sustainable development planning frameworks to ensure a safer Bangladesh for future generations. The imperatives remain strong to embrace participation and partnership of all stakeholders, in particular putting emphasis on community involvement to ensure a resilient nation.

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