

Legal tool for accountable disaster management

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THE Disaster Management Act was approved by the Parliament on September 2012 with a view to creating a legislative tool under which disaster and emergency management can be undertaken with accountability. It has created mandatory obligations and responsibilities for ministries, committees and appointments to ensure transparency in the overall disaster management system. The objectives of the Act are: substantial reduction of the overall risks of disasters to an acceptable level with appropriate risk reduction interventions, effective implementation of post disaster rehabilitation and recovery measures, emergency humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable community people, strengthening institutional capacity for effective coordination of disaster management involving government and non-government organizations and, establishing a disaster management system capable of dealing with all existing hazards.

The approach of the Disaster Management Act is to promote a comprehensive disaster management program upholding an all-hazard, all-risk and all-sector approach where risk reduction as a core element of disaster management has equal emphasis with emergency response management with greater focus on equitable and sustainable development.

Globally, Bangladesh is recognised as a country with high poverty and disaster vulnerability and as a

consistent performer in disaster management. Despite that, Bangladesh had to wait more than two decades to get the DM Act approved.

After the approval of DM Act on September 2012 in the Parliament, there has been significant progress in terms of institutional reform in the last few months. National Disaster Management Council headed by the Prime Minister has been formed with an aim of implementing the overall objective of the DM Act and to guide the concerned authority in formulating the disaster management policy and planning.

In order to reform the institutional arrangement of disaster management, the government has reorganized Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief; the Directorate of Relief and Rehabilitation has been transformed into the Department of Disaster Management with a more robust and wider role focusing on comprehensive disaster management, and made responsible for implementation of the National Disaster Management related policies and plans at all levels.

Despite the achievement made so far there is much more to be done immediately as far as efficient disaster risk reduction and emergency response at national and local levels is concerned. The most important way forward is effective implementation and dissemination of awareness about DM Act with proper training and orientation at local level. To achieve this, the department of disaster manage-

ment has been undertaking several training and orientation programmes in corporation with national and international organizations. Continuous training and orientation will be arranged for the Disaster Management Committees at union, upazila and district level for their better understanding.

Bangladesh got National Disaster Management Plan approved long before the approval of DM Act, therefore this plan needs to be revised and redesigned based on the DM Act to provide the overall guideline for the relevant sectors and disaster management committees. Additionally, some hazard specific management plans, such as flood management plan, cyclone and storm surge as well as tsunami management plans, earthquake management plans, etc. need to be undertaken.

A National Disaster Management Research and Training Institute needs to be created with the objective of undertaking different research initiatives regarding the impact of disaster and climate change and to increase the capacity of disaster management system itself. The government may also sign agreements with foreign countries, national and international institutions to undertake disaster management related research programmes, exchange information and use space-based technologies.

According to the Act, a national disaster response coordination group should be formed for effective and smooth running of response after catastrophe. National Volunteer Corps has to be estab-



lished with the existing volunteers of Cyclone Preparedness Programme and urban volunteers by the Department of Fire Service and Civil Defence in order to ensure fast response in pre, during and post disaster scenarios. The disaster management fund needs to be constituted both at national and district levels from own resources as well as contributions from home and abroad and any other legal sources including personal contribution from the elites and rich people.

There is a specified guideline in the Act regarding declaration of emergency at any disaster affected area which needs to be disseminated at the local level because the local disaster management committees have been given the provision of recommending to the Deputy Commissioner for declaring the emergency for a particular disaster affected area. The president is the sole authority for declaring the

emergency based on the situation and recommendation from Deputy Commissioner. The DM Act has also a provision for rewarding individuals and organisations for their contribution in post disaster emergency management.

Rules are to be formulated to determine the process of requisition of assets, services, vehicles and buildings as required and also for the specified offences, such as, creation of obstacles in delivering services in disaster management activities, violation of government orders relevant to media and coordination groups, baseless statements and claims, misappropriation of resources, false allegation, intentional price hike of essential items in the disaster affected area, creation of obstacles in water flow for personal benefit such as creating salinity and flood, making illegal holes in the embankments etc, disobedience of emergency directives to the mass media and others,

failure to discharge the duty by government staff and misuse of position etc.

Since independence, Bangladesh has been proactive in formulating so many policy frameworks like Standing Order on Disaster, Bangladesh National Building Code etc, but in many cases, our successes are not commendable in implementing the policy frameworks. Bangladesh was first to envisage the DM Act among the south Asian countries in mid 90s but it took over 20 years to get the DM Act enacted. Many countries like India and Sri Lanka took Bangladesh as an example and endorsed DM Act and SoD quite earlier. We should take this into account and give proper attention in terms of implementation of the Act.

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Managing disaster for sustainable development

Exposure of Bangladesh to hazards is rising at an alarming rate due to climate change impact. Though the natural hazards cannot be prevented, but the risks and vulnerability can be reduced through increasing the capacity of community with preparedness.

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Bangladesh being a disaster prone country, development efforts would not bring about sustainable changes in the lives of people if disaster management, in particular, disaster risk reduction, is not included in the development programmes. Disaster hit people are generally left in abject poverty while poor people are more vulnerable to natural disasters. Climate change has added a new dimension to community risk and vulnerability. Both the magnitude and frequency of these hazards are increasing in Bangladesh due to climate change. International Climate Change Risk Assessments, published in 2010 identified Bangladesh as the world's most vulnerable country to negative impact of climate change due to high intensity of natural disasters.

Over the past 40 years since independence, Bangladesh has increased its real per capita income by more than 130 percent, cut poverty rate by sixty percent, and is well set to achieve most of the millennium development goals. But this growth cannot be sustained if the future disaster risks are not minimized to a reasonable level.

Disasters like cyclone, flood and river erosion spell havoc in the communities in terms of casualty and property damage every year. The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters estimates that about 229 million people were directly affected by natural disasters between 1979 and 2008, with over 191,415 killed and economic damage scaling up to US\$5.6 billion.

Disasters affect all spheres of the economy -- agriculture, health service, education and transport. The agricultural sector contributing around 29 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and generating employment for 63 per-

cent of the total labor force (BBS, 2006) is one of the major sectors to be affected by increasing frequency and magnitude of disasters. Health and educational infrastructures damaged by floods and cyclones hamper normal health service delivery and make continuation of education difficult for the students. Transport infrastructures are also affected. Infrastructures damaged in disaster need long time to be reconstructed.

Poor people are the most vulnerable to disasters due to lack of assets and capacity necessary to cope with. Affected people lose virtually all their possessions. Thus poverty level increases after major disasters. In order to make development process equitable (to both poor and rich) disaster risk reduction projects must be included in development agenda to address the need of vulnerable

communities.

Risk and vulnerability

Numbers of assessment and studies have been carried out on risk and vulnerability of well as on adaptation capacity of Bangladesh to climate change where most studies show that climate change will enhance the frequency and intensity of the recurrent hazards.

Recently, Bangladesh has been mentioned as the fourth vulnerable country to extreme events resulting from climate change by Germanwatch in their Global Climate Risk Index 2013. According to the report, Bangladesh had experienced maximum number of extreme events in world during the period of 1992-2011. Bangladesh has experienced 50 terrible cyclonic storms and tidal surges since 1584 that have taken a

toll of 672,000 people (Source: Disaster Dictionary-MoDMR).

According to

In world Risk Report published by UIU and Nature Conservancy, Bangladesh is in the 5th position of a 15-country list that are at highest risk of disaster driven by climate change where the risk index is constructed based on exposure, vulnerability, susceptibility, coping capacities and adaptive capacities of the people.

Extreme poverty put Bangladesh in the high vulnerability. Almost half of the population of the country (49.60%) have to survive on less than USD 1.25 per head a day, so interaction of high exposure and high vulnerability bears a risk for Bangladesh (World Risk Report 2012 and Global Assessment Report 2009).

Coastal ecosystems and communities of Bangladesh are going to be most seriously affected by climate change, with sea level rise and increased intensity and frequency of storms and extreme weather events. Bangladesh is a country with a high population concentration in low-lying coastal areas that presents a high level of risk for its population to

hazards. Coastal ecosystem such as coral reef and mangrove degradation has posed enhanced risk of higher damage due to higher wind and tidal velocity along the coastline of the country.

Capacity gaps

Exposure of Bangladesh to hazards is rising at an alarming rate due to climate change impact. Though the natural hazards cannot be prevented, but the risks and vulnerability can be reduced through increasing the capacity of community with preparedness. However, without appropriate and comprehensive plan and latest technologies it will be impossible to develop an effective response mechanism.

Bangladesh continues its effort to enhance capacity of the vulnerable communities, especially women and persons with disabilities through their active participation. Elected local government representatives at Union and Upazilla levels are key actors for all field level DRR activities where resources are allocated at the national level through district administration. But in this highly populous country with multiple hazards affecting the communities round the year, the volume of allocated resources is not sufficient to support the initiatives.

Often, dearth of coordination in fund allocation (between government and non-government agencies) reduces optimization of available resources.

Other major constraints and challenges which have been identified are as follow:

Hazard maps are not updated and do not incorporate climate change dimension
Lack of integration between DRR and CCA which also link knowledge gap in its interface.
Mainstreaming of DRR and climate change intervention with national development programme is needed and should be promoted in all development projects.
Lack of coordination between other ministries and Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF).
Lack of adequate regulatory framework.
Limited capacity of local level

institutions /organisations. Complex bureaucratic procedure delays implementation of programmes. There is no system of evaluating effectiveness and success of DRR and CCA projects implemented by government and NGOs with public and international funding. Poverty and lack of community capacity to cope and adapt to climatic hazards. Sub-national regional focus is absent in disaster management regime of Bangladesh. There is a need for spatial focus in every region of the country.

Recent developments

Government of Bangladesh is implementing the National Plan for Disaster Management for 2010-2015, a long desired document based on the global and regional commitment of the government, and its vision on disaster management. Government approved the National Disaster Management Act 2012, and with a view to paying due attention to disaster issues, the government has already established a new ministry and department to deal with the disaster issues solely in line with the new DM Act.

Concluding remarks

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to global climate change impacts. Though affected by various natural hazards, the country has earned a good capacity to cope with them, in recent times, however, might not effectively respond to changing nature of hazards under climate change regime. Though government's capacity is well proven in disaster management, it may not perform its duty in an efficient manner during the spell of a changing pattern of disasters. For preparing for the upcoming natural disasters we need to enhance the capacities of communities vulnerable to disasters, local level institutions and grassroots community based institutions so that they can respond to and cope with future disasters.

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