

Views from the Communities

Rethinking capacity development for disaster risk reduction: lessons from bottom up

We want to request that if we are to rethink future capacities for risk reduction, they must be built bottom up, from the local to global and from micro to macro levels. And in this process, both global entities such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) (now UNDRR) have a key role to play.

We detail out this request by drawing lessons from All India Disaster Mitigation Institute's (AIDMI) past two decades of experience in and around India, including the past five years in the Asia Pacific region. The following are some of the AIDMI works presented for our purpose:

We do not, even for a moment, argue that AIDMI lessons are the only lessons that must lead the future programmes or this rethinking process. Lessons from the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre in Thailand or the Asian Disaster Reduction Centre in Japan or even more recent but equally vibrant Asian Disaster Risk Reduction Network based in Malaysia must be added and included in these lessons from India. But in our mind, Indian experience remains important to India and to the Asia Pacific region for its scale diversity and depth.

We can make a long list of lessons covering the width and depth of capacity development issues and disaster risk reduction needs. But we will resist. What we detail here are the five key lessons that we think will shape our work better at local and global levels.

First, we must move away from assessing capacity of an organization based on its skills and professional competence to churn out clear and coherent proposals or project cycle management. We must move towards the capacity to make a difference in levels of disaster risks. Repeatedly, donors pledge their money on the UN systems and established international non governmental organisations (INGOs) fearing any other way to go ahead. The AIDMI has benefited from this top down formal system, and now we must go beyond to include local civil society in this process of capacity development. In other words, we must invest and finance capacities at the grassroots, where it matters the most.

Second, we must not focus on building *our* capacity to reduce *their* risks or *our* capacity to build *their* capacity to reduce risks. We have done this too long, and we know the results: positive but inadequate. We must make money available for *them* to build *their* capacity to reduce risks. This was a clear message at the Forum 2006, Incentives for Risk Reduction, ProVention Consortium, Bangkok, February 2006. Should not those at risk know more about how they wish to come out of the risk? At least to start with? Capacities often mean being able to reduce our own risks.

Third, we must value innovations, innovations that come out from the communities, from the field staff and from the smaller community based organisations (CBOs) and non



governmental organisations (NGOs), to reduce disaster risks. Some of the innovations are as follows: Innovation made by the affected schoolteacher in her classroom education; innovation tried by the vegetable vendor in her war torn city and innovation contemplated in a family farm by the house wife during a drought year. These innovations are many in number and are also effective. We must value these innovations with technical, legal and financial resources. The ISDR and the UNDP must direct these resources, directly and indirectly. Recent ISDR supported event, Micro Finance for Tsunami Recovery in Delhi, October 2005, showed many examples of such work. Upscaling, replicating, multiplication and outreach are useful and must go on, but never step on or replace or starve innovations that thousands are doing in their own lives, in their own way, in their own unions or cooperatives or federations.

Fourth, we must be committed to build capacity where democratic processes, religious tolerance, free press and the regulated corporate sector are at play. However good the local trainings developed by the UNDP or the World Bank after an earthquake in community-based disaster risk reduction may be, but if these trainees do not respond when minority communities are being killed in the name of “reaction,” the capacity development is of little use. Capacity development is a political process. Capacity development is always in a context. Let us well define this context now. Seismic safety cannot be traded with safety to live in perpetual fear as a minority community anywhere.

Fifth, and last, may be importantly, we must value autonomous opinions. Opinions that are originally evolved, freely expressed and transparently spread. We must avoid “trends” and “buzz words” to reach out to do real thing on the ground. For example, who will monitor progress of global effort? Will it be the same evaluations and reviews or will it be through social audit or independent appreciative inquiry by civil society organizations and community groups where minorities have a say? We must listen to the complaints, understand objections and pay attention to protests. This is difficult, but possible.

All of the above is easy to say. The AIDMI realizes this as it is itself struggling with such issues for its future and its future planning. You will see these efforts in the form of newsletters, documents, cases studies and awareness materials. Most of it is in the local language and tailor-made for specific risk and specific at risk community. We share it with this global meeting here in Geneva so that you may add to it, check it and to take it not a step or two but a leap ahead in reduced risks for all. Risk is embedded in the structures of our institutions. We, through our institutions, have agreed to keep certain people at risk in our society. We think that building capacity of and for some of the individuals to reduce risk will make him or her safe, but in that way, we will never reduce disaster risks or be safe.

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