

## Empowering Communities in Risk Management: Evaluating Localized Approaches to Disaster Preparedness in South Asia

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### Introduction

Over the past two decades, more than half of all South Asians—approximately 750 million people—have been affected by one or more climate-related disasters. Indeed, South Asia is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, experiencing an alarming increase in the frequency and severity of events such as floods, cyclones, and earthquakes due to climate change and environmental degradation. As an example, 2024 floods in Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Nepal, and Pakistan displaced millions and wrought widespread destruction. The Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID-2024) indicates that disaster-related incidents in South Asia resulted in 3.6 million internal displacements<sup>2</sup>.

Given this context, the aim of this paper is to explore how empowering local communities enhances resilience and effectiveness in disaster preparedness. By focusing on community engagement and capacity building, this paper seeks to demonstrate that local knowledge and participation are essential for developing sustainable disaster risk management strategies that can adapt to the unique challenges faced by South Asian communities.



### The Need for Community Empowerment

Community empowerment in disaster risk management is defined as a capacity development process where local members actively determine their own goals and strategies. This approach

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<sup>2</sup> '2024 Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID)', IDMC - Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2024/>.

facilitates a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members, enabling them to engage more effectively in risk reduction efforts. Empowering communities involves enhancing their ability to identify risks, mobilize resources, and implement solutions tailored to their unique contexts<sup>3</sup>.

The significance of local engagement in effective disaster management cannot be overstated. Essential elements such as participation, empowerment, and ownership collectively contribute to a more robust response to disasters. Indeed, collaborative partnerships among communities, government agencies, and NGOs facilitate the sharing of resources and improve information dissemination. When community voices are integrated into decision-making processes, the relevance and effectiveness of interventions are greatly enhanced<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, empowerment allows individuals to take initiative, while a strong sense of ownership encourages sustained community efforts in disaster preparedness and recovery. Such community-based approaches that prioritize local stakeholder involvement ultimately lead to increased resilience and adaptability.

Sustainable disaster management emerges as a critical component at both individual and community levels, directly influencing the reduction of losses and the mitigation of disaster impacts. Achieving sustainability involves integrated planning and resource allocation that address immediate needs while considering long-term consequences. The interconnection between disaster management and sustainable development underscores the risks associated with ineffective management, which can exacerbate vulnerabilities while well-planned interventions can foster resilience<sup>5</sup>. Community-driven, ecosystem-based approaches serve not only to protect communities but also to enhance their adaptive capacities, emphasizing the necessity of sustainability in preparing for future risks.

## **Barriers to Effective Community Engagement**

- Cultural and Social Barriers

Cultural norms, social structures, communal identities and local customs can significantly hinder community participation. Cultural expectations often shape individual behaviors and collective actions during crises. These dynamics lead to a reluctance among marginalized individuals to voice their concerns, fearing social repercussions or being disregarded by dominant community members. In South Asian communities, traditional hierarchies and gender roles often dictate who can participate in decision-making processes. Women and lower caste individuals frequently face exclusion due to entrenched societal norms that prioritize the voices

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<sup>3</sup> Rajeev M.m, 'Sustainability and Community Empowerment in Disaster Management', *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice (CEASE PUBLICATION)* 2, no. 6 (December 2014): 207–12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13189/ijrh.2014.020601>.

<sup>4</sup> B. Pandey and K. Okazaki, 'Community Based Disaster Management : Empowering Communities to Cope with Disaster Risks', 2005

<sup>5</sup> Damithri Chathamani Lansakara et al., 'The Potential for Community-Driven Ecosystem-Based Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia: A Literature Review', *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal* 33, no. 2 (26 December 2023): 78–97, <https://doi.org/10.1108/dpm-06-2023-0128>

of certain groups over others<sup>6</sup>. This exclusion not only limits the diversity of perspectives in community discussions but also perpetuates cycles of disenfranchisement and poverty.

- Economic and Political Challenges

Additionally, economic constraints further limit community engagement. In many South Asian regions, poverty restricts individuals' ability to participate in community initiatives, as they must prioritize immediate survival over long-term planning or engagement<sup>7</sup>. The inability to access resources, such as transportation or funds for participation, creates a significant barrier to effective engagement.



Additionally, the lack of political support exacerbates these challenges. Community-led efforts in disaster risk management often struggle without adequate backing, resulting in underfunded and poorly implemented initiatives. This lack of support stifles local initiatives and reinforces existing inequalities, making it difficult for vulnerable groups to advocate for their needs effectively.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique contexts and needs of marginalized groups, fostering an inclusive environment for all community members.

## **Cases of successful community initiatives**

- Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, community initiatives have emerged as critical components of disaster management, particularly through the establishment of village disaster committees<sup>8</sup>. These committees play a proactive role in educating community members about disaster preparedness and response. They serve as vital links between local populations and governmental organizations, facilitating information flow and mobilizing resources during emergencies. As

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<sup>6</sup> Gaithri A. Fernando, 'Bloodied but Unbowed: Resilience Examined in a South Asian Community', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 82, no. 3 (2012): 367–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2012.01163.x>.

<sup>7</sup> Ambar Narayan, Tara Vishwanath, and N. Roberto Zaghera, 'Risk Management in South Asia: A Poverty Focused Approach', The World Bank, November 2001), <https://doi.org/10.11588/XAREP.00003791>.

<sup>8</sup> Umma Habiba, Rajib Shaw, and Md. Anwarul Abedin, 'Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction Approaches in Bangladesh', in *Disaster Risk Reduction Approaches in Bangladesh*, 2013, 259–79, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-54252-0\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-54252-0_12)

noted, these committees utilize local knowledge and resources to address climate risks, organizing awareness campaigns and training sessions that empower residents to recognize hazards and implement preventive measures<sup>9</sup>. This grassroots engagement not only enhances community resilience but also fosters a culture of preparedness and collaboration.

Moreover, a people-centered approach to disaster risk reduction is crucial. Effective community-based disaster management relies on local participation and the integration of traditional knowledge with modern practices<sup>10</sup>. Through these localized efforts, Bangladesh exemplifies how community-driven strategies can enhance resilience and mitigate the impacts of climate-related threats, ultimately leading to more sustainable disaster management practices and ensuring that communities are better equipped to handle disasters.

- Nepal

Early Warning Systems (EWS) are frameworks designed to provide timely alerts about potential disasters, enabling communities to prepare and respond effectively. In Nepal, community-led EWS have been incorporated with local knowledge, enabling communities to enhance disaster preparedness and respond proactively to risks, particularly in flood-prone areas such as the Lower Karnali River Basin<sup>11</sup>.



Source: *Dialogue Earth*

These communities possess valuable insights and traditional practices that can significantly improve the effectiveness of EWS. For instance, community members utilize ecological indicators, such as the behavior of animals and changes in weather patterns, to predict flooding events. The involvement of local actors is essential in the development and implementation of

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<sup>9</sup> Estiaque Bari, A. K. Enamul Haque, and Zakir Hossain Khan, ‘Local Strategies to Build Climate Resilient Communities in Bangladesh’, in *Climate Change and Community Resilience: Insights from South Asia*, , 175–90, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0680-9\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0680-9_12)

<sup>10</sup> M. Abul Kalam Azad et al., ‘Community-Based Disaster Management and Its Salient Features: A Policy Approach to People-Centred Risk Reduction in Bangladesh’, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Rural Development* 29, no. 2 (December 2019): 135–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1018529119898036>.

<sup>11</sup> Rabin Sharma, ‘Community Based Flood Risk Management: Local Knowledge and Actor’s Involvement Approach from Lower Karnali River Basin of Nepal’, *Journal of Geoscience and Environment Protection* 9, no. 6 (4 June 2021): 35–65, <https://doi.org/10.4236/GEP.2021.96003>.

these systems. Indeed, the construction of strong relationships between community members, local governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has made EWS more effective. The establishment of communication channels allows for timely dissemination of warnings, utilizing both modern technology and traditional methods<sup>12</sup>. This dual approach ensures that information reaches all community members, regardless of their literacy levels or access to technology, contributing to long-term community resilience. As communities shift from a mindset of merely combating floods to one of coexisting with them, their adaptive capacities are significantly strengthened.

Another successful model in Nepal is the Women's Empowerment Centres (WECs), which integrate women into disaster risk reduction efforts<sup>13</sup>. This empowerment enables women to take active roles in disaster management initiatives within their communities. Indeed, WECs facilitate various training programs that equip women with skills in disaster preparedness, risk assessment, and response strategies. As a result, women are increasingly leading community efforts to develop and implement disaster management plans, increasing representation in decision-making roles. This approach not only strengthens the capacity of communities to respond to disasters but also fosters a more inclusive decision-making process, ensuring that the voices of women are heard and valued in disaster management discussions.

## **Empowerment Strategies in Action**

Successful models of capacity building often include local training programs that not only educate community members on disaster risk reduction (DRR) but also empower them to take proactive roles in their communities<sup>14</sup>. These workshops focus on equipping participants with essential skills and knowledge, helping them understand risks and develop effective response strategies<sup>15</sup>. By fostering local expertise, communities become better prepared to handle disasters, thus enhancing overall resilience.

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<sup>12</sup> Sharma.

<sup>13</sup> Rajesh Dhungel and Ram Nath Ojha, 'Women's Empowerment for Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Response in Nepal', *Gender & Development* 20, no. 2 (1 July 2012): 309–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2012.687220>.

<sup>14</sup> 'Optimizing Disaster Preparedness: A Paradigm Shift Towards Cutting-Edge Capacity Building in DRR', *American Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.21694/2378-7031.23017>

<sup>15</sup> Asharose, Izuru Saizen, and Praveen Sasi, 'Awareness Workshop as an Effective Tool and Approach for Education in Disaster Risk Reduction: A Case Study from Tamil Nadu, India', *Sustainability* 7, no. 7 (9 July 2015): 8965–84, <https://doi.org/10.3390/SU7078965>.



Source: Asia Pacific Alliance For Disaster Management

Moreover, engaging communities through practical exercises, such as simulation drills, is another effective capacity-building strategy. These drills provide hands-on experience, allowing participants to practice emergency response procedures in a controlled environment<sup>16</sup>. Such activities not only build confidence among community members but also strengthen teamwork and communication, which are critical during actual disaster scenarios.

Furthermore, technology plays a crucial role in enhancing disaster preparedness. Mobile applications that provide real-time updates and information can significantly improve community awareness and response capabilities<sup>17</sup>. These apps often include features such as alerts for impending disasters, safety tips, and resources for emergency contacts. By facilitating immediate access to vital information, mobile technology empowers individuals to make informed decisions during crises. In addition, social media platforms serve as powerful tools for sharing information and coordinating community responses. They enable rapid dissemination of updates, allowing communities to stay informed about potential threats and safety measures<sup>18</sup>. Social media also fosters community solidarity by promoting collective action and facilitating communication among residents, local authorities, and organizations involved in disaster management.

## Recommendations & Best Practices

A critical factor contributing to effective community engagement is inclusivity. It is essential to ensure that all community members, particularly marginalized groups, are included in decision-making processes. By actively seeking the input of diverse voices, communities can develop more comprehensive and effective strategies that reflect the needs and priorities of

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<sup>16</sup> Bih Chuan Lin and Chun Hung Lee, 'Assessing the Efficacy of Adaptive Capacity-Building Strategies in Earthquake-Prone Communities', *Geomatics, Natural Hazards and Risk* 15, no. 1 (31 December 2024): 2380908, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19475705.2024.2380908>.

<sup>17</sup> M Siva Nagaraju et al., 'Mobile Application for Disaster Safety Management', *2024 10th International Conference on Advanced Computing and Communication Systems (ICACCS)*, 14 March 2024, 1008–13, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICACCS60874.2024.10717114>.

<sup>18</sup> Aleksandrina V. Mavrodieva and Rajib Shaw, 'Social Media in Disaster Management', in *Media and Disaster Risk Reduction: Advances, Challenges and Potentials*, 2021, 55–73, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0285-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0285-6_4).

everyone<sup>19</sup>. This inclusivity not only enhances the relevance of disaster preparedness plans but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment among community members.

As the example of EWS in Nepal demonstrates, building partnerships among communities, NGOs, and government agencies is vital for successful engagement. Collaborative efforts enable the pooling of resources, knowledge, and expertise, which enhance the overall effectiveness of disaster risk management initiatives<sup>20</sup>. By working together, stakeholders can address challenges more efficiently and create a unified approach to disaster preparedness that benefits the entire community.

Also, communities in Bangladesh and Nepal have demonstrated remarkable adaptability in modifying their approaches to suit local contexts. This flexibility is crucial in disaster risk management, as it allows communities to respond dynamically to changing conditions and emerging threats. For instance, they have tailored training programs to align with their specific cultural, social, and environmental contexts, ensuring that strategies are both relevant and practical. Such adaptability not only improves preparedness but also strengthens resilience in the face of adversity.

## **Conclusion**

The empowerment of local communities is essential for enhancing disaster risk management in South Asia. By leveraging local knowledge and fostering active participation, communities can develop tailored strategies that effectively address their unique challenges. This approach not only enhances resilience but also ensures that disaster preparedness efforts are relevant and sustainable. In addition, promoting inclusivity and collaboration among diverse stakeholders strengthens the overall effectiveness of these initiatives. As demonstrated through successful examples in Bangladesh and Nepal, community-driven strategies can lead to innovative solutions that mitigate the impacts of climate-related disasters.

As we move forward, it is vital to encourage ongoing dialogue among stakeholders to share insights and best practices. By embedding disaster risk management within broader development frameworks, communities can cultivate a safer and more resilient future for all their members.

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<sup>19</sup> Marcie Roth, 'A Resilient Community Is One That Includes and Protects Everyone', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 74, no. 2 (4 March 2018): 91–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2018.1436808>.

<sup>20</sup> Justine Chen et al., 'Public–Private Partnerships for the Development of Disaster Resilient Communities', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 21, no. 3 (September 2013): 130–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12021>.