

Disaster Management

Read the Story....

The Southern coast of India was hit by giant tsunami waves on 26th December, 2004. The poorest and the most underserved, who were mainly from the Jlinching community, had to bear the brunt. But the people of Samiyarpettai, a small village in the coastal state of Tamil Nadu, India were one of those blessed communities who were saved. The villages close to Samiyarpettai had five times higher death toll. But how was it possible to save so many lives in Samiyarpettai ?

Government of Tamil Nadu with support from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had initiated the Disaster Risk Management Programme. The main objective of the programme was to enhance the capacity of the local community by providing them training on First Aid, Search & Rescue, early warning etc. The community was also guided by the local administration and NGOs to prepare a Village Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan. Since the community was self sufficient, they were able to respond effectively within a short period of time to save the precious lives of their near and dear ones.

The short story mentioned above clearly reflects the importance and need for community planning for any hazard that is likely to occur in an area. During the immediately after a disaster, it is most often the neighbours or people of the community who respond first. They are normally the 'first responders' before the affected people can seek any support from the local authorities or any Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The first few hours before and after a disaster are critical and precious to save lives and reduce further injuries. Often, external help may take time to reach the



disaster site. It is in this situation that well trained community members play a vital role and are considered as life saving assets. Further, communities play a vital role in risk reduction, without whose education and involvement, a disaster management could not be complete.

In earlier previous chapters you have read about mitigation measures that can be taken for various hazards. But to effectively mitigate hazards that are prevalent in a particular locality, there is a need for the community to join hands and take up initiatives along with the government.

The Government of India strongly advocates the building of community capacities in various aspects of disaster response, and urges communities to develop disaster management plans to prevent, mitigate and prepare better to combat various hazards. Students and teachers as educated members of the society play a crucial role in guiding and facilitating the process of planning in communities, to reduce disaster risks.

Why should the community be at the heart of any disaster management initiative ?

- 1) First Responder :** Since the community is at the site of the disaster, it is the first one to respond to it.
- 2) Source of maximum information :** When a disaster occurs in an area, no one will have better or more comprehensive and 'up to date' information on the people living there and its resources than the inhabitants of that area.
- 3) Local, coping mechanisms :** Most disasters are recurrent; hence there is always a traditionally established coping mechanism that is handed down over the generations. This would ideally be the most immediate response measure for the local environment through it could be improved through technical backing.
- 4) Self-help is in self interest :** It would be the natural instinct of the community to respond quickly on such occasions since over-dependence on external resources may be time-consuming and even ineffective.

Let us read a story to find out that how involvement of the community helps in reducing its vulnerability and being better prepared to face any disaster.

The story of a learning community

A 15 year old boy called Bharat lived in a village called Sukhpar. Bharat's grandfather, Ramji was a much respected man in Sukhpar and surrounding villages. One day he told Bharat that the Block Development Officer (BDO) (head of an administrative unit at the

sub district level) had invited him for a meeting on what they called disaster management'. Out of sheer curiosity, Bharat decided to accompany his grandfather, the Sarpanch and the Talati (Secretary of the Village Panchayat) to the meeting.

What happened in the meeting at the Office of the Block Development Officer ?

At the meeting, he found that in addition to the government functionaries, there were young volunteers few years older than him, explaining how their regions were vulnerable to earthquakes, floods and cyclones. They had maps that showed the movement of earlier cyclones that had hit a neighbouring area which was 15 kilometers away from his village. Looking at the vulnerability of the area, the Block Development offices asked the village Sarpanches of each village of his Block to prepare a ***Village Disaster Management Plan***. Being motivated on seeing the volunteers who were approximately his age, Bharat said to his grandfather that he would like to work as a volunteer and involve his friends and teachers in this process. The Block Development Officer explained to the members present in the meeting the steps to be followed in preparing a plan for their village.

After attending the meeting, Bharat and his grandfather were very eager to take up this initiative as they did feel that their village was affected by frequent floods and cyclones which resulted in a huge loss of life, property and livelihood and it took a long time for the villagers of Sukhpar to bring back life to normalcy.

To help his grandfather organize the village meeting, Bharat first discussed the importance of having a plan for their community with his school mates and decided to take the responsibility of informing each and every household of the village to be present at the meeting. Ramji was very happy to see his grandson take so much interest and work.

How did the school support in this initiative ?

Ramji and the Sarpanch of the village took the responsibility of organizing the meeting in the primary school located in their village. The Principal of the school and the teachers took the initiative to help Ramji and the Sarpanch in organizing the meeting. They announced in the classes that the parents of all the students should be present in the meeting to discuss about the Disaster Management Plan. The village priest Pandit Ramdas and the Maulana of the mosque, Abdul Razak too motivated the villagers to participate in the meeting as it was very important to look into their own safety. Other key persons like the doctor at the Primary Health Center (PHC), the Anganwadi Worker of the village, the leader of the Women's Self Help Group (SHG), the postmaster and others were also informed about the meeting.



The villagers of Sukhpar, met in the primary school in the evening when the men were back from work and the women of the households were also relatively free. As this initiative was the first of its kind in that area, the Block Development Officer (BDO) also participated in the village meeting to guide the villagers for preparing the Village Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan. He was of the opinion that the villagers should take a lead in the development of the village plan as they are better aware of the local scenario, the vulnerabilities that they were prone to the resources available and the best local resources available to cope with the situations.

On the day of the village meeting, Ramji being an old man in his late 70's, shared with the villagers the impact of various disasters that had affected the villagers and how he had seen his community members suffering because of those frequent disasters. Listening to him the villagers realised that there were ways and means to reduce the impact of these disasters. Syamu a young teenage boy got up and shared his experience of how he and his friends had guarded the river embankment the whole night during the previous year's flood by using sand bags so as to protect the embankment from breaching.

In the meeting the Block Development Officer (BDO) asked the villagers to form the Village Disaster Management Committee (VDMC). This committee would guide and support the community members in formulating the Village Disaster Management Plan. The Sarpanch of the village stood up and said "Sir, I would like to be the Chairperson of

the committee”. As soon as he volunteered, other members of the villagers like the school Principal, the doctor, the SHG group leader and few senior respected members of the villagers like Ramji too agreed to be a part of this committee. The BDO was taken aback on seeing the enthusiasm of the villagers to have a safe village.

Activity I : From the above discussion, can you list out the members of the Village Disaster Management Committee (VDMC) ? If you are staying in an urban area and it has a Resident Welfare Association (RWA), then discuss with your teacher who all can be members of this committee and list them out.

Role of Village Disaster Management Committee :

A villager then asked the BDO “But Sir, what will be the role of this committee?” The BDO informed him that the main responsibility would be to create awareness amongst the community members so as to reduce the impact of any hazard and also guide the community in the preparation of the Village Disaster Management Plan. “But then”, said Seema in young college girl “but then to reduce the impact of a disaster we also need to have skilled people who are trained in First Aid and Search and Rescue”. “Yes, said Ramji.” We need to enhance our skills to be able to respond better in case a disaster strikes”.

Ramji asked BDO “Sir in this case what are we expected to do ?” The BDO said that there was a need to form Village Disaster Management Teams (VDMTs). “But what would the Disaster Management Team members do ? asked a villager. “This team should have volunteers who can be trained in basic functional areas that are critically required in that situation.” Seema then said again, “In my college we have been trained in basic First Aid. Can we be a part of this team then ?” The PHC doctor was very happy to know that there was a young girl in the village who knew First Aid. He enthusiastically agreed, “Yes, you can” and the BDO also reconfirmed saying “Why not Seema, you can”. The tea stall ‘Kaka’ proudly shared with the BDO “She is my daughter. I have taken pains to get her educated in the college and now I am on a look out for a good groom for her after she completes her higher education.” The BDO just smiled and said, “Kaka your daughter is very talented, you should motivate her so that she is able to achieve many milestones in her life.”

There was a bit of serious discussion within the villagers as to what were the different Disaster Management Teams that were likely to be formed in Sukhpar village. Looking at the villagers, the BDO said “Since Sukhpar is frequently affected by floods and cyclones, we need to focus on these two hazards first.” Kaka who was sitting in one corner said, “Sarpanch ji we are all half literates, what critical skills can we hope to acquire ?”

“I what people who can swim well” said the Sarpanch, “and those who have a good physique to any their fellow villagers. Our Doctor Sahab would need help in the PHC to ensure that he can concentrate on critical cases while First Aid can be handled by others. Seema who is already trained and our ANM sister can be of great help to him. Then if the telephone and electricity don’t work we will perhaps have to rely on Badal’s radio for information. Poor child, he is always being rebuked for his fascination for the instrument.”

Then the group talked, discussed, conversed, pondered, fought and did everything possible that a group can do to come up with a set of names for each of the following teams :

- Early warning and communication team
- Evacuation and Temporary Shelter Management team
- Search and Rescue team
- Health and First Aid team
- Relief Co-ordination team
- Water and Sanitation team

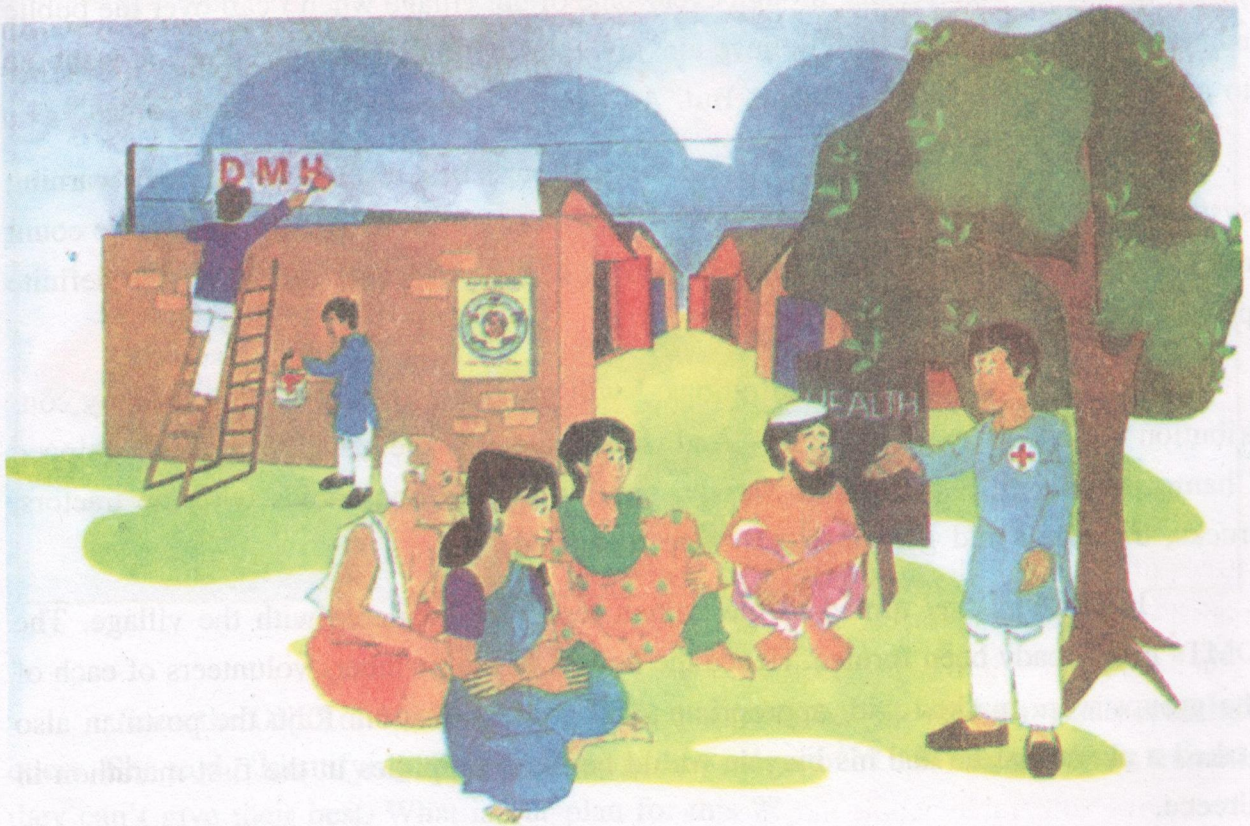
Based on the skills required, the villagers decided on the vounteers to be a part of in each of the teams.

It's time to act now!!

After about 2-3 days, Bharat and his friends got together all the active representatives of Sukhpar village to decide on the volunteers for the different Disaster Management Teams that were formed in the primary school meeting. Ramji who was sitting in one corner and watching his grandson closely said, “Children, before deciding on the members of the Disaster Management Teams you need to first know the vulnerability of your village. Let us draw a map and then locate areas which are vulnerable and the households which have vulnerable people like the old, sick and ailing, small children etc.” On asking for volunteers, Gauri a young girl who had a beautiful hand at rangoli, came forward to draw the map of her village on the veranda of the school with the help of those present. The sea-side was taken as a prominent natural feature of Sukhpar. Then Gauri drew the village boundary and important locations like the PHC, police station and the cooperative bank were marked on the rangoli. Bansi wanted the village market place to be drawn with care and his grocery shop shown prominently (which was of course played down). The

wells and ponds were marked and in their reference the houses followed, as best and as many as possible.

When the mapping of the village was complete, Bharat stepped up and said, “Now we shall see who threatens our beautiful village, our Sukhpar.” Dharam Singh, the village pahalwan, retorted aggressively, “Just name him and we shall send him where he belongs”. “Yes,” said Bharat, “you will have to send him back to the sea”. Dharam Singh laughed and said, “Ha, ha, do we fear the pirates in this age ?” “Worse”, said Bharat, “we fear the cyclone that lives in the sea. And we are afraid of the quake that comes from under the earth” “And scared of the gas that the RK Chemical plant can spread,” said Ahmed pointing to the grewy chimney in the distance.



Communities being trained in various disaster risk management techniques

"If we are to name all those that threaten us please add the state highway to the north of the village. Every year some vehicle or the other either hits one of us or hits another vehicle there." said Raju, the village postman. "Next," said Bharat, "we need to see, which are the households that have members who need attention on priority basis in any emergency situation in the village. "All the houses that had aged inmates, infants / small children, expectant / lactating mothers and handicapped residents were marked with a V for 'vulnerable' as also the houses near the sea and next to the highway.

"Now", said Gauri, "do I keep drawing my village with all the possible threats and liabilities ? I want to show how strong my Sukhpar is, in spite of the dangers that surround it like Abhimanyu in the chakravihu." "Yes," said Maulana Abdul Razak, "I may be 70 years old but my voice floats through every lane of the village when I call over the public address system in the mosque. Believe me, my voice will not quiver the day you want me to announce an impending cyclone. But, Ay Khuda, I hope that day never comes."

"We will mark the mosque as one of Sukhpar's best resource as an early warning system." said Bharat. "Can we identify our other strengths in the village ?" "Please count my school compound as a safe haven if people need to evacuate and stay for a definite period," said the school Principal.

"Let me know if you need rations. I will provide as much as I can. It's my contribution to my village." said Bansi. "And we thought only the kankad was free," quipped Champadevi. Everyone laughed. Slowly, one by one the households with the tractors, trucks, trapaulins and generator sets were identified.

In the end they turned to the human resources available with the village. The DMTs had already been formed. Hence the houses of the members/volunteers of each of the groups were marked with appropriate symbol identification. Raju the postman also staked a claim that he and his bicycle would be like Philipidies in the first marathon in Greece.

Gauri smiled with joy at Bharat as he drew out a replica of her rangoli on a chart paper for future reference. She had completed drawing a strong and self-reliant Sukhpar.

Capacity Building



Soon the DMC of Sukhpar had their first meeting and Shielaji was ready with her query. She said, “Identifying the teams is fine but unless our DMT members are trained, they can’t give their best. What is our plan for this ?”

Ramji again came to the rescue, “Sheilabehan, we have already spoken to the government and they will support us in this. The panchayat and the DMC will have to coordinate with other villages that are taking similar initiatives and identify resource persons for training the teams.”

In the next meeting Ramji came back with a list. We in consultation with the block administration have identified the following institutions for helping us in our sector wise trainings.

- Early warning and communication: Army base in our district HQ
- Evacuation and Temporary Shelter Management: District Police department
- Search and Rescue: Fire brigade in our district Head Quarter
- Health and First Aid: A doctor from St. John's Hospital
- Relief Co-ordination: The local NSS chapter
- Water and Sanitation: A Wat-San engineer is being sent by the district panchayat.

“Apart from this, we also need to teach our masons to build houses that are earthquake/cyclones resistant.” said the Sarpanch “Also this technique they call retrofitting; some of our dilapidated structures can do with abit of that. Remember the EDO sahib was saying that day he could arrange for some master masons.”

“Yes and when I went to the district head quarter; I saw these pipes fitted in a few of the houses. On enquiring they said that it was a system of channels to catch the rain water on the terrace and use it for household purposes. They call it roof rain-water harvesting. I thought if we could do the same, it could alleviate the water scarcity we face each year during summers. If we could harness the limited rainwater in our traditional reservoirs for our fields in the drought years, why not the same for our homes ? “One by one all the trainings were completed and over six months Sukhpar became a totally different village. Not in appearance because there was not much change apart from what one could see in the few constructions that were on, but in spirit; it was a much more confident community.

The Plan Development

One ought never to turn one's back on a threatened danger and try to run away from it. If you do that, you will double the danger. But if you meet it promptly and without flinching, you will reduce the danger by half.

-Sir Winston Churchill

Tryout of the Plan

One morning Bharat walked up the hill and entered the mosque. He met the Maulvi and said, "Remember Maulana *Sahib*, what you said about your voice in the village lanes ? The time has come when Sukhpar needs that voice." Then, he looked out towards the sea.

The old man didn't say a word. His eyelids didn't bat and his wrinkles didn't twitch. He went over to the mike and announced. "In the name of Allah, rush to the school. The pirate is coming. There is a cyclone warning." His voice was strong as he spoke to the people, stronger than when he spoke to God everyday.

Ramji himself was taken aback. But every man and woman performed his or her duty. The evacuation team brought the aged and the handicapped first. The few telephones present were not working. The postman rushed on his bicycle towards the Block headquarters for help. The Principal arranged for the logistics in his school. The PHC doctor started attending to some of the aged who complained of loss of breath. Bansi opened the flood gates to his godown for the DMT members. Some people who were injured in the rush never had to bother the doctor for the basic First Aid they required.

Two hours later when Bharat entered the school hall and called for their attention, two thousand eyes looked at him. Not a single one wept. Those that did were a few infants.

Bharat spoke, "The enemy has gone. To never return again."

There was a sigh and prayers all around.

"But how do you know the cyclone will never come back", asked Bansi.

"Whoever spoke of the cyclone ? The enemy was our ignorance and complacency to disaster preparedness."

Not a sole moved. The wireman who had sabotaged the telephone lines for a good cause was the only one who silently patted Bharat for the successful mock-drill.

Dear students, the story mentioned above clearly indicates the importance of preparatin of a Village Disaster Management Plan and the steps involved in it. As class IX students who are the same age as Bharat, you can plan to help your community to be better prepared and respond effectively during disasters.

Web Resources :

You may refer to the following websites for more information.

www.undp.org.in : Website of UNDP India

<http://www.ndmindia.nic.in/> Website of National Disaster Management Division.

<http://ndma.gov.in/wps/portal/NDMA> : Website of National Disaster Management Authority, Government of India.

Exercise

1. Identify the sequence of events took 'place in Sukhpar and their significance in disaster risk management ?
2. How is the new Sukhpar different from the one before the communities met ?
3. What qualities in Bharat made him different from others in the village ? Is it possible to develop such qualities among your community ? Explore.
4. What were the areas covered under the DMTs ?
5. What were the two construction-related mitigation techniques referred to in the story ?
6. What were the contents of the Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan ?