

The Collective Role of Environmental and Humanitarian Agencies in Disaster Risk Reduction

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Abstract. This paper presents a case on a project to connect Environmental Management with Disaster Risk Reduction jointly carried out by a group of technical, environmental and humanitarian agencies. It also introduces the emerging concept of Humanitarian – Environmental Partnerships and the role of such partnerships in Disaster Risk Reduction at the community Level

Keywords. Disaster Risk Reduction, Environmental Management, Humanitarian Partnerships, Community Awareness

1. Introduction

Disaster management can be defined as the effective organization, direction and utilization of available counter-disaster resources. Government, Non-governmental, humanitarian and community based organizations play a vital role in the disaster management process in any country. The traditional role of humanitarian organization was to provide immediate humanitarian aid after the onset of a disaster and the government mostly carried out hazard reduction measures with the support of several technical organizations. However the modern view is that the Non-Governmental Organizations and Humanitarian Agencies also have a vital role to play in pre-disaster periods especially with regard to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).

2. Disasters and Environment

Another development in the Disaster Management sector in the recent years is the identification of the importance of proper environmental management to reduce risk of disasters. Disaster Risk is a concept which could be very concisely expressed by the formula “Risk = Hazard x Vulnerability”. Environmental factors can increase both the Hazards as well as Vulnerability of a Community. Improper environmental management induces manmade hazards. For example most of the slope failures recorded in Sri Lanka are due to improper soil

excavation practices used in construction. Poor management of the environment could also lead to an increase of natural hazards such as the case of increasing flash floods in the suburbs of Colombo caused by poor management of flood detention areas or wetlands. Vulnerability of a given community to a disaster may also increase with discrepancies in management of its host environment. For example removal of coastal vegetation may increase the vulnerability of a coastal community to Tsunamis or tidal waves. Therefore environmental concerns hold a paramount importance in DRR, especially in the developing countries where either the legal framework for environmental management is weak or the existing legal provisions are not properly enforced. Different organizations in Sri Lanka have been trying to connect DRR with environmental management during the past decade. National Building Research Organization (NBRO) is carrying out many environmental programs through its environmental division and the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) has taken several initiatives through its Natural Resources Management division to address the flood and landslide disasters. These organizations are centrally located and have both the authority and expertise to provide the much needed linking between DRR and Environmental Management. However the necessary action to achieve DRR through proper environmental management has to be taken at the community level. Being agencies of the central government and having mainly an advisory or regulatory mandate these organizations lack the necessary community outreach to operate at the community level.

An essential link that can fill this gap is the involvement of Humanitarian Agencies in DRR. Many humanitarian agencies such as Red Cross Movement have taken up DRR as integral part in their disaster management programs. These organizations have wide community outreach and expertise in community level operations and mobilization. However the main difficulty faced

here is that most humanitarian organizations do not have the proper interface to directly deal with national level technical organizations such as NBRO or CEA. There are many Environmental Organizations which maintain good relationships with both national technical organizations as well as humanitarian agencies. This article presents a case study where a partnership of National Environmental NGO - Environmental Foundation Ltd., National level Technical Organization – NBRO, and a Humanitarian Organization - Red Cross Movement, embark on a project to develop a training module for community level landslide risk reduction through proper environmental management and other active intervention methods.

3. Humanitarian – Environmental Partnerships

Humanitarian - Environmental Partnership between American Red Cross and World Wildlife Fund was initiated in the aftermath of the Tsunami 2004 to support building strong and resilient communities grounded in healthy ecosystems and was termed the “Green Recovery Program”. As a part of this partnership Environmental Foundation Ltd. joined hands with WWF as the local environmental partner in Sri Lanka. American Red Cross and Sri Lanka Red Cross have a long standing partnership on Disaster Preparedness (DP). It is operating in 11 districts through Sri Lanka Red Cross DP teams at branch level, with financial and technical support from American Red Cross. The activities range from structural mitigation to awareness raising programs. Initial inputs of to the Green Recovery Program to the DP teams were given on mitigating Crocodile attacks in the river Nilwala, Cleaning of debris in Negambo Lagoon and mitigating monkey threats in Matara. At this stage the input was mainly in terms of technical and scientific support on assessing the risk and designing the mitigation measures. A more active involvement of the humanitarian environmental partnership in Disaster Risk Reduction was seen during the year 2009 through carrying-out a comprehensive household waste management program in the 47 Tsunami Resettlement Sites and Affected Villages in Matara district. The project contributed largely to reduce the

haphazard solid waste dumping in the target areas and reducing the incidents of flash floods and vector related epidemics such as Dengue and Chikungunya during the rainy season that followed. Another initiative of the partnership was to design a series of posters and booklets on venomous snakes and snake bites in Sri Lanka. Snake bites can be categorized as a major hazard in the dry zone, therefore this was an effort reduce the risk of bites by improving awareness. The project is ongoing; the awareness material will be disseminated through a series of workshops, schools and hospitals.

4. A Case on Bridging the Knowledge Gap

Stimulated by the results of the above project, the Disaster Preparedness Project of American Red Cross and Sri Lanka Red Cross requested more comprehensive support from the partnership on their landslide risk reduction program. After the initial discussions with the Red Cross DP program it was identified that that awareness on proper environmental management at the community level is crucial for the successes of Disaster Risk Reduction interventions of the DP program. The challenge was to transfer this knowledge to the community level utilizing the field staff of the DP program. Therefore a project was initiated to develop a training module that can be used by the field staff of humanitarian organizations for community level awareness on Landslide Risk Reduction. NBRO was taken in as the technical partner for the program, owing to their long standing excellence in the Disaster Management Sector in Sri Lanka. The project included the development of curricular for the module and also designing the initial training programs for the field level staff. As an integral part of the project a comprehensive TOOL KIT that supports the community program was also developed. The TOOL KIT includes a guidebook for community awareness program, session material, audio-visual tools, maps and accessories such as slope measuring unit, compass, magnifying glass, ruler, crack measuring kit etc. The TOOL KIT is a self contained pack which can be used by the field officer to carry-out a community awareness program on disaster risk reduction under any condition. Both module and the TOOL KIT

was reviewed by a panel of experts and currently being field tested. The method of field testing is to carry out actual community awareness programs using the Module and the TOOL KIT and getting the feedback of the trainees and the potential trainers. Once the design of the Module and The TOOL KIT is finalized, it can be used for the awareness programs by the field level officers of any Humanitarian Organization after following an initial training program. It is being considered to develop similar modules for community awareness building in other types of disasters such as floods.

5. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Since the project is still ongoing it is difficult to arrive at conclusive recommendations at this stage. However the experience up to now strongly confirms the effectiveness of building partnerships among organizations of diverse expertise in connecting DRR with environmental management. The experiences of the partnership in the past few years highlight the importance of not only the collective action but also the proper documentation of guidelines for integrating environment and DRR.