



MEDIA INTERVENTION FOR NATURAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

The role of media in natural disaster management is primarily examined in this paper which is based on extensive review of literature. Disaster management has to be a multi-disciplinary and pro-active approach. Besides various measures for putting in place institutional and policy framework, disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness and initiatives are normally taken by the Central and State Governments, the community and civil society. The Government of India has enacted the Disaster Management Act, 2005. The Government of India also brought about a paradigm shift in the approach to natural disaster management. The print, electronic, new, and social and extension media systems have great impact on the people. Media also have the capacity to facilitate effective natural disaster management in urban and rural areas. The suggestive, informative and analytical role of the media must form a key component of disaster education. The communications media are required to enlist the active participation of professionals in the process of natural disaster management. The media can play a multi-faceted role in times of natural disaster management. The media can prepare grounds for effective management of natural disasters. Media can also function as the watch dogs of public interest during rehabilitation of aggrieved persons on account of natural disasters. The champions of media ethics have also emphasized the need for judicious and responsible media coverage of natural disasters. Therefore, it is essential to have a vision backed up by appropriate research action on media intervention for natural disaster management in the new millennium.

Preamble

The print, electronic, new, social and extension media systems have great impact on the people. Media also have the capacity to facilitate effective natural disaster management in urban and rural areas. The suggestive, informative and analytical role of the media must form a key component of disaster education. It is the most potent way of educating the community on disaster prevention, mitigation and rehabilitation. These tasks can be carried out on the basis of the dual role of media related with imparting information and analyzing disasters discerningly. The effects of disasters need to be examined not only in technical mind scientific terms, but also in humanitarian, social and economic terms. The role of media in natural disaster management is primarily examined in this paper which is based on extensive review of literature.

Natural Disaster Management in India

Effective natural disaster management saves lives. Procedures set in place before a catastrophe occurs ensure a speedier and more effective response. A preventive measure, such as strengthening the infrastructure of buildings in earthquake regions, minimizes the risk of injuries and helps people to resume normal life more quickly. Governments and some large corporations in developed countries designate aid money for natural disasters before they happen. They also liaise with the governments of affected regions and aid workers on the ground when a disaster occurs to determine the extent of medical aid and supplies needed. Aid workers are trained to assess the scale of the disaster. Non-government overseas aid workers may already be based in the region and have a good understanding of the local.

Drabek (1979:01) observes: "Disaster management has to be a multi-disciplinary and pro-active approach. Besides various measures for putting in place institutional and policy framework, disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness and initiatives are normally taken by the Central and State Governments, the community and civil society. The non-government organizations and media also have a key role to play in achieving the goal of moving together, towards a safer community". The message being put across is that, in order to move towards safer and sustainable national development, development projects should be sensitive towards disaster mitigation. The process of natural disaster management basically includes the disaster phase, response phase, recovery phase, risk reduction phase and preparedness phase. National Institute of Disaster Management (2009:05) noted the 4 stages of natural disaster management namely – mitigation, b) response, c) preparedness and d) recovery.

Disaster Management Act, 2005

National Disaster Management Division (2004:04) reports: "India is experiencing series of natural disasters because of its unique geo-climatic conditions. About 60% of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of various intensities; over 40 million



hectares is prone to floods; about 8% of the total area is prone to cyclones and 68% of the area is susceptible to drought. There has been a steady increase in the number of natural disasters on account of implementation of anti-ecological development projects, population growth, urbanization, industrialization and other processes. The recurrence of hazards like flood, drought, storms, landslides, tsunami, earthquake, and epidemics have long term impact on people and environment”.

The Government of India has enacted the Disaster Management Act, 2005. The salient features of the act are:

- 1 Establishment of National Disaster Management Authority headed by the Prime Minister.
- 2 Establishment of State and District Disaster Management Authority
- 3 Preparation of National, State and District Disaster Management Plan.
- 4 Guidelines for Minimum Standard of relief.
- 5 Central and State Govt. to take measures as it deems necessary for the purpose of Disaster Management.
- 6 Fixing of responsibilities of Ministries and Depts. Central and State Govt.
- 7 Establishment of National Institute of Disaster Management for Human Resource Development at National level.
- 8 Provision of Punishment and Penalties for non-compliance.

India is traditionally vulnerable to natural disasters on account of its unique geo-climatic conditions. Floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and landslides have been recurrent phenomena. There are several causes for the occurrence of natural disasters in India. Scholars have rightly argued that the process of development has cost the nature and people very dearly. The planners of national development have not given a serious thought to sustainable development which basically includes conscious prevention of natural disasters which adversely affect the national economy. During 1990 – 2010 the country witnessed series of natural disasters which have cost the lives of the people immeasurably. Consequently, the Government of India has brought about a paradigm shift in the approach to natural disaster management.

Sinha and Verma (2006:07) notes: “The advocates of distributive justice and environment protection have strongly stated that development cannot be sustainable unless disaster mitigation is built into the development process. Another corner stone of the approach is that mitigation has to be multi-disciplinary spanning across all sectors of development. The new policy also emanates from the belief that investments in mitigation are much more cost effective than expenditure on relief and rehabilitation”. As a matter of fact, disaster management occupies an important place in this country’s policy framework as it is the poor and the under-privileged who are worst victims of natural disasters. The Government of India has designed a scientific approach to natural disaster management.

Institutional and Policy Mechanisms

The institutional and policy mechanisms for carrying out response, relief and rehabilitation have been well-established since Independence. These mechanisms have proved to be robust and effective in so far as response, relief and rehabilitation are concerned. At the national level, the Ministry of Home Affairs is the nodal Ministry for all matters concerning disaster management. The Central Relief Commissioner (CRC) in the Ministry of Home Affairs is the nodal officer to coordinate relief operations in times of natural disasters.

The CRC receives information relating to forecasting/warning of a natural calamity from India Meteorological Department (IMD) or from Central Water Commission of Ministry of Water Resources on a continuing basis. There are several ministries and other agencies which are actively involved in the process of natural disaster management in India. The National Crisis Management Committee consists of the cabinet secretary and other senior bureaucrats who provide directions to various government bodies regarding the specific action required for effective natural disaster management in the country.

The activities of the control room include collection and transmission of information concerning natural calamity and relief, keeping close contact with governments of the affected states, interaction with other central ministries/departments/organizations in connection with relief, maintaining records containing all relevant information relating to action points and contact points in central ministries etc., keeping up-to-date details of all concerned officers at the central and state levels.

National Contingency Action Plan

A National Contingency Action Plan (CAP) has been formulated by the Government of India to identify the initiatives required to be taken by various Central Ministries/Departments in the wake of natural calamities. It also sets down the procedure and determines the focal points in the administrative machinery. Each state government has relief manuals/codes



which identify that role of each officer in the State for managing the natural disasters. These are reviewed and updated periodically based on the experience of managing the disasters and the need of the State.

The policy and the funding mechanism for provision of relief assistance to those affected by natural calamities are clearly laid down. The Government of India contributes 75% of the corpus of the Calamity Relief Fund while the state governments contribute remaining 25% of the funds to provide relief assistance in times of need. The National Emergency Management Authority has a core permanent secretariat with three divisions – one for Disaster Prevention, Mitigation and Rehabilitation, the other for Preparedness and the third for Human Resource Development.

The states also have Disaster Management Authorities under the Chief Minister with Ministers of relevant Departments. At the district level, the District Magistrate who is the chief coordinator will be the focal point for coordinating all activities relating to prevention, mitigation and preparedness apart from his existing responsibilities pertaining to response and relief. The District Disaster Management Committees are primarily responsible for the management of natural disasters at the district level. Similarly, there are block level disaster management committees across the country to come to the rescue of the people in times of need. Each village will have a disaster management plan. The disaster management teams at the village level consists of members of voluntary organizations like Nehru Yuvak Kendra and other non-governmental organizations as well as able bodied volunteers from the village.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Disaster Management (2010:02) remarks: “The countrywide networks are created from village to national level to address the issue of natural disaster management and take appropriate measures for the protection of people and nature. The regional level acts provide for adequate powers for authorities coordinating mitigation, preparedness and response as well as for mitigation /prevention measures required to be undertaken”. In India, an early warning system has been designed with the active involvement of Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) which is mandated to monitor and give warnings regarding Tropical Cyclone (TC).

Venkatachary and Gupta (1998:08) state: “Satellite communication technologies and telecommunication channels are also used to observe the indifferent circumstances which cause natural disasters. Radars have been used to observe TCs since long. Surveillance of the spiral rain bands and the eye of the TC is an important function of the coastal radars. The meteorological satellite has made a tremendous impact on the analysis of cyclones. All developing cloud clusters are routinely observed through satellite cloud imagery and those showing signs of organization are closely monitored for signs of intensification. The goal of any warning system is to maximize the number of people who take appropriate and timely action for the safety of life and property. The use of 97 point-to-point tele printer links connecting different field offices”. Cyclone warnings are communicated to crisis managers and other concerned organizations by high priority telegrams, telex, telephones and police wireless.

The country has also developed flood forecasting and warning system which is used for alerting the likely damage centers well in advance of the actual arrival of floods. The people are alerted and enable to move to safer places along with movable properties. At present there are 166 flood forecasting stations on various rivers in the country which includes 134 level forecasting and 32 inflow forecasting stations. The Flood Forecasting Network covers the 14 States and one Union Territory in addition to NCT of Delhi. On an average, 6000 forecasts at various places in the country are issued during the monsoon season every year.

Yamamichi (2011:09) comments: “The international agencies such as UNDP, USAID and European Union are also actively involved as facilitators of natural disaster management in the country. Elected representatives, officials, social activists and others are also engaged in building awareness among the people and enlisting the active participation of various stakeholders in natural disaster management. The Central Government has undertaken series of preparedness programmes through training and equipping specialist search and rescue teams consisting of personnel including doctors, paramedics, structural engineers etc”.

The States have also been advised to set up their own specialist teams for responding to disasters. The State Governments are given necessary financial assistance for training their trainers at the national institutes. A web-enabled centralized data base for the India Disaster Resource Network has been operationalized. The network ensures quick access to resources to minimize response time in emergencies. The States are persuaded to set up control rooms/emergency operations centers at various levels. These facilities are extended to the people on round the clock basis across the country. Communication strategies are also designed to educate and organize the various stakeholders of natural disaster management. The



Geographical Information System (GIS) data base is an effective tool for emergency responders to access information in terms of crucial parameters for the disaster affected areas.

Kalam (1998:03) the former President of India has given a vision that facilitates effective natural disaster management in the country on the basis of better management techniques for disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness, relief-rehabilitation and reconstruction. These are accurate forecasting system, appropriate technology deployment, fast response action and capacity building. Several disciplines are integrated and multi-faceted efforts are made to achieve the goal of natural disaster management on sound footing of knowledge, experience and expertise. Several stakeholders of natural disaster management are actively involved in the country. Adequate funds are also provided for implementation of measures for mitigating the risks of natural disasters. The media and non-government organizations are also actively involved in the process of natural disaster management in the country.

Media Support for Natural Disaster Management

The print, electronic, new, social and extension media systems have great impact on the people. Media also have the capacity to facilitate effective natural disaster management in urban and rural areas. The suggestive, informative and analytical role of the media must form a key component of disaster education. It is the most potent way of educating the community on disaster prevention, mitigation and rehabilitation. These tasks can be carried out on the basis of the dual role of media related with imparting information and analyzing disasters discerningly. The effects of disasters need to be examined not only in technical mind scientific terms, but also in humanitarian, social and economic terms. The media can play an important part in this direction; writes Shearer (1991:06).

The print media are capable of providing in depth analysis about the occurrence of natural disasters. They can also sensitize the policy makers and others about the ways and means of natural disaster management. The electronic media have emerged as a major component of disaster management. The new information and communication technologies have also facilitated greater dissemination of information relating to natural disasters. The social media have facilitated active social mobilization. The extension media are capable of organizing the people at the grassroots level in times of natural disasters management. These media are required to enlist the active participation of professionals in the process of natural disaster management. The involvement of professional meteorologists or training of media experts in providing weather-related information would definitely make an impact on how meteorological information is presented.

Scholars have also noted the areas of media intervention in times of natural disaster management. The media can educate the people about the hazard; prevention and self- help during the disaster. The media are also capable of facilitating meaningful rehabilitation oriented activities by providing, accurate and unbiased coverage, post disaster impacts and needs. The media can guide the people in preparing resource disaster calendar, resource mapping and reparation of community contingency plan. The media professionals can also critically examine the factors associated with natural disaster management and bring about enlightened consciousness. The media can also suggest long term suggestions in the form of structured measure like enactment of certain legislation, adoption of code of conduct, implementation of natural disaster management programme, appraisal of performance and other related measures. The media can play a multi-faceted role in times of natural disaster management but media for such disaster situations needs to be institutionalized and made purposeful, accurate, efficient and effective.

The media can provide early information about the likelihood of natural disasters. In particular, the electronic and online media can play a crucial role in facilitating early warning to the people concerned. The media can prepare grounds for effective management of natural disasters. Media can also function as the watch dogs of public interest during rehabilitation of aggrieved persons on account of natural disasters. The pressure of media in a democratic set up is tremendous and it should be used in a responsible and constructive manner for the benefit of the society. Resources such as search and rescue team equipment, relief material and money are essentially required during disaster and subsequent rehabilitation. The government agencies are required to enlist the active participation of media during various stages of natural disaster management. Generally media has a responsive image in the public eye which could be utilized effectively to generate resources to help disaster management efforts.

The media can also monitor the disaster management process and bridge the communication gap between the authorities and people. The media can also help in establishing contacts, identifying the needy spots and focusing attention on them. In addition, media can help by assisting the authorities, voluntary organizations and volunteers in reaching informing and assuring the affected ones of the assistance and measures taken for their relief. The media can also facilitate better law and order situation in times of natural disasters. They can also assist the law and order machinery in restoring peace and harmony



in the affected community. The media can persuade the various stakeholders including philanthropists to mobilize resources for effective management of natural disasters. The media are also capable of convincing the people for greater participation in the process of natural disaster management by highlighting the contributions, providing tax-reliefs and quick and efficient mechanisms of donations.

The media can also fill the vacuum in times of failure of official communication network. The managers of natural disaster management can obtain the support of media in making various announcements, releasing the list of casualty, loss of lives, and future course of action. The media can provide meaningful support for the relief arrangements and coping mechanisms in the affected areas. Scholars have also provided certain norms and guidelines for ethically sound and professionally constructive media services in times of natural disaster management. The policy makers and people have great expectations from media during the natural disasters. They expect the media to play a constructive role by being 'partners' instead of critics.

The media professionals also need suitable training and orientation for systematic management of natural disasters. The professionals should be fully aware of nature and type of disaster so that they are able to cover in an educative and informative manner. Media professionals must be trained not to expose themselves to the risks involved in covering a disaster. They should be taught how to be friendly and be part of the system in helping people in distress. Large-scale death and devastation can have unsettling effect on the reporter as well as the viewers. They should be trained how to overcome from trauma and distress of such situation. Media people are also expected to be sympathetic to the people, who under shock and pain because of the disaster and not to use them as a 'showpiece'.

Practically, correct and reliable information disseminated through the media is an important instrument for balancing the possible effects of incorrect, misleading or even willfully distorted information. Media are also required to provide reliable, timely, relevant and adequate information to the various stakeholders of natural disaster management. This would boost the morale of the authorities and people in times of disaster. It would also create an atmosphere conducive to collective response for sharing the humanitarian challenges created by disasters. Media institutions have also accorded high priority for the coverage of national disasters which are known for tremendous human interest value. The responsibility of media in covering disaster events, recovery and mitigation initiatives is noted by the stakeholders of natural disaster management.

The media professionals are also responsible for the protection of public interest as the angel guardians in times of peace and crisis. The role of media such as the print, electronic, new and social media in informing the people and the authorities during emergencies is critical. Timely communication about impending disasters can help the community for effective management of natural disasters. Timely media intervention for natural disaster management would educate, warn and empower people to take practical steps to protect themselves from natural disasters. Media should also follow the ethical guidelines and sensitize the various stakeholders of natural disaster management.

The champions of media ethics have also emphasized the need for judicious and responsible media coverage of natural disasters. The professionals are also required to understand their professional obligations while reporting natural disasters. Media can play a crucial role in creating awareness about the natural disasters and offer post disaster recovery and reconstruction activities. The media should also understand the significance of facilitating the relief works on the basis of proper identification of relief requirements and other measures that benefit the society. There is also a vital need for redefining the role of media and re-examining the performance of media in natural disaster management in order to prepare grounds for responsible media intervention in times of natural disasters. Media coverage can be enriched on the basis of a sound database on various aspects of natural disaster management. The resource inventories of governmental and non-governmental systems including personnel and operations facilitate effective mobilization and optimization of response measures. The National Disaster Knowledge Network, tuned to the felt needs of a multitude of users like disaster managers, decision makers, community etc., must be developed as the network of networks to cover natural, manmade and biological disasters in all their varied dimensions, according to the proceedings of the national seminar on natural disaster management.

Conclusion

Media institutions are called upon to educate, organize, motivate and empower people to take practical steps to protect themselves from natural hazards. The role of media, both print and electronic, in informing the people and the authorities during emergencies thus, becomes critical in the present times. Media can also play a vital role in public awareness and preparedness through educating the public about disasters; warning of hazards; gathering and transmitting information about affected areas; alerting government officials, helping relief organizations and the public towards specific needs; and even in facilitating discussions about disaster preparedness and response. The media should be sensitive to the needs of the public in



affected areas and should avoid misinforming and broadcasting unconfirmed reports that may lead to despair and panic. Therefore, it is essential to have a vision backed up by appropriate research action on media intervention for natural disaster management in the new millennium.

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