

# DISASTER RISK IN SOUTH ASIA

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South Asia has 1.7 billion people, of which more than 70 per cent live in poverty. Despite having tremendous natural resource base such as water, minerals, forest, productive fertile land and industrious people, this region remains underdeveloped primarily due to political instability, poor leadership, inability to utilize natural resources at optimum level and frequent disasters.

All the member states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are highly prone to hydro-meteorological and geological hazards such as floods, landslides, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes, and tsunami among others. Economic vulnerability analysis shows that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh suffer the largest losses, which is due to large exposure and the high level of hazards. When expressing the relative economic vulnerability in terms of economic loss as a function of GDP, Nepal ranks first followed by Bangladesh, Afghanistan,

Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Poverty, exposed population and lack of preparedness can be attributed to the vulnerability to the disasters caused by natural hazards in the region. Bangladesh and India have the highest Multiple Mortality Index (MMMI) whereas the Maldives and Bhutan have the least. Drought affects India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Nepal and Sri Lanka. Floods regularly plague Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Cyclones hit Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. Landslides occur in mountainous regions of India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. The Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are subject to coastal erosion. Similarly, due to poor health education, awareness and health facilities, this region is also equally susceptible to epidemics. As per the recent issue of the World Disaster Report, the region has the highest affected to killed ratio in the world.

‘Flooding’ has been most frequent, highly damaging and widespread natural disaster in the region. The 2008 floods of Koshi River in Nepal and India, Pakistan and India floods in 2009, 2010 and 2014 have killed thousands of people and displaced more than three million and damage caused was worth billions of dollars. Disaster risk of floods has been concentrated in certain countries. For instance, Bangladesh, India and China alone occupy 75 per cent of the total mortalities due to floods in the world. Nepal is among the top ten countries in terms of MMRI for landslides. Landslides do not constitute the major cause of deaths during disaster in

South Asia. However, the ratio of death and injuries and displacement is quite high in landslide disaster events. Drought has been a silent killer and has the highest impact on livelihoods and the number of people affected among the key natural hazards. Almost all the SAARC countries are prone to drought. Earthquake is one of the major devastating hazards in the countries of South Asia. Most earthquakes in South Asia are tectonic in origin.

Bangladesh is by far the most vulnerable country in South Asia followed by India and Pakistan. Over the past 30 years, almost 200,000 people have lost their lives due to disasters and natural hazards. Urbanization, environmental degradation and lack of strong governance are exacerbating the vulnerabilities of the countries in the region. South Asia has developed a regional road map for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and a framework for mainstreaming DRR in the development sectors in the region. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, separate ministries have been established and authorities have been delegated. However, in other countries focal desks at some key ministries have been formed and nodal organization set up.

Legislative framework and institutional capacity to manage hazards have been developed in all the SAARC countries. However, the capacities of these institutions are not the same in all countries. India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh are quite ahead in terms of capacities and networking.

In India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the National Development Plan encompasses the disaster management component. The eleventh five year plan of India has focused on mainstreaming of DRR in all development sectors and urged all ministries to integrate DRR into the sectoral planning.

However, there is no proper mechanism to scale up successful initiatives. Insignificant and unpredictable amount of resources are available for DRR component in each key sector. Coordination has also been a challenge at all levels. Formulation of appropriate and relevant policies, strategies and frameworks and their effective implementation are the prerequisites of an efficient and effective disaster management system in a country. After the 2005 Kobe conference, many efforts have been initiated in line with the resilient building of the state in the SAARC region.

However, there exists a huge gap in its implementation. For this, a sound disaster risk management system together with the strong coordination among the disaster risk management actors in the countries should prevail to augment the capacity building of the community and build their resilience.

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