

Integrating resilience in South Asia

Mi Zhou and Dorien Braam

Communities can strengthen their resilience by integrating disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and poverty reduction measures.

The complexity of the drivers that displace communities increases the risks associated with future natural hazards, while exacerbating their existing vulnerabilities. Communities can reduce their vulnerability to displacement by better preparing for disasters and climate change; if displacement does occur, more resilient communities are able to reduce the risks associated with displacement by a more efficient restoration of their essential structures and functions. What makes a community resilient differs from place to place, considering the geography, climate, economy, politics, people and so on. Put simply: the more resilient a community, the less the risk and impact of displacement.

There is growing consensus that resilience measures need to integrate disaster risk reduction (DRR), climate change adaptation (CCA) and poverty reduction (PR). Across South Asia, these areas of action are usually compartmentalised and separately tasked to different institutions, or in segregated departments within institutions, whereas for communities exposed to climate change risks, the conceptual distinctions between DRR, CCA and PR are academic. In addition, it is confusing for communities in multi-risk environments to engage with different organisations working separately with different agendas. Working in 'silos' within these domains can lead to contradictory or counterproductive interventions, and duplication of efforts.

Many disaster management agencies in South Asia were established or re-structured after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami but are generally primarily administrative bodies and often lack the authority and status to influence planning and development agendas. Most national and sub-national disaster agencies have to persuade line

ministries to incorporate effective DRR strategies into their day-to-day functioning and provide funding. A lack of resources and influence leads the disaster management agencies to have a limited view of their own tasks, and disaster management effectively becomes a form of disaster response. Such disaster management agencies should be strengthened, as they have the potential to integrate DRR – to avoid repeating past mistakes – and CCA – to anticipate projected effects of climate change and mitigate them.

Community resilience strategies

Communities affected by disasters often mitigate the risks of displacement through migration. Selected members of the family go to urban centres or overseas – in circular movements or temporarily – to diversify their asset base beyond that which is derived from disaster-affected land or agriculture.

Communities vary in levels of risk awareness and resilience initiatives. In many cases, there are traditional practices and knowledge that can help mitigate the risks, even if communities do not link these to climate change. In Afghanistan, for example, communities with previous experience of flooding have early warning systems based on the water sharing mechanisms where a *mirab* (water master) warns downstream villages of impending floods. By contrast, refugee returnees had no awareness of flash flooding, had no emergency response strategies and suffered loss of lives and food stores.

While community-based solutions are likely to have local ownership and communities must be actively involved in the identification of needs, vulnerabilities and solutions, new technologies can be introduced to augment existing knowledge. The *mirab* system, for example, can be supplemented or adapted

May 2015

through dissemination of technical knowledge and expertise to improve water resource management, particularly during droughts.

Many community resilience strategies are based on securing existing assets and diversifying them. Similarly, governments

should aim to diversify their risk financing strategies and create cost-sharing mechanisms.

Mi Zhou m.zhou@praxis-labs.com and Dorien Braam d.braam@praxis-labs.com are Directors and Principal Consultants of Praxis Labs.
www.praxis-labs.com