

# Local Leadership for Disaster Resilience

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Profiles from Asia and the Pacific



**UNDRR**

UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction



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## Foreword

The global frameworks that make up the post-2015 agenda were developed at the global level, adopted at the national level, but will ultimately succeed or fail based on how they are implemented at the local level.

This is especially true of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, as disasters are most acutely felt at the community level. Indeed, the majority of disasters are local-level events characterized by their low-impact but high-frequency. These events may not be large enough to garner international attention, but they do chip away at the well-being of communities and inhibit their development.

The urgency by which governments at all levels must invest in disaster prevention by addressing underlying risk drivers is growing by the day. Climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of disasters in Asia-Pacific, which are impacting vulnerable communities at an alarming rate. Moreover, the ongoing crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that national and local authorities must plan for the possibility of different types of disasters, including those caused by biological hazards, such as pandemics, which may occur in tandem with more common disasters.

Building the adequate governance, coordination and financing mechanisms to guard against disasters is not easy and requires strong and committed leadership. What this publication demonstrates is that there is no shortage of men and women who are willing to rise to the occasion to protect their communities when confronted by the risk of disasters.

These local leaders, who range from mayors and village chiefs to entrepreneurs in urban slums, understand their communities better than anyone and are committed to them over the long term. However, these leaders, may lack the capacity and resources to fully implement their visions, forcing them to operate with insufficient external support. It is incumbent on national governments and international organizations to seek out and support these leaders to maximize collective outcomes.

In this regard, we thank the Asian Local Leaders Forum for Disaster Resilience (ALL4DR) and the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) for producing this publication and for their work over the years in support of emerging local leaders.

**Loretta Hieber Girardet**  
**Chief, UNDRR Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific**



## Preface

Local leadership emerged as one of the most prominent themes in the run-up to the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015. In the conference, participants made a strong case for greater decentralisation in disaster risk governance efforts, and the need to enhance capacity at local levels. The conference led to the formulation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 with the goal of: *The substantial reduction of disaster risks and losses in lives, livelihoods, and, health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities, and, countries.*

The framework puts a great emphasis on the need for action at local levels to achieve its set of targets by 2030. In its guiding principles, the framework calls for a coordination mechanism within and across sectors and with relevant stakeholders at all levels. Further, it recognises that risks have local and specific characteristics. These must be understood to determine measures to reduce them.

An empowered local leadership is best positioned to ensure the frameworks' effective implementation on the ground. Local leaders can integrate the societal understanding of risks, which are critical for effective disaster risk management at the grassroot and local levels. National governments, international organisations, and other actors would maximise their gains if their policies and programmes explicitly recognise and enable local leaders to be the drivers for lasting change in their communities.

Our obsession with structures, processes, and tools means the vital role of local leaders often gets overlooked. This publication aims to recognise and champion it. Through the testimonies of selected local leaders from across the Asia-Pacific region, it delves into eight unique areas of intervention that strongly justify the need to invest in local leadership for building sustainable and resilient societies, and what must be done to create an enabling environment to foster it. This publication is just the first step towards building a policy level discourse. Further research is needed to identify pathways and tools for enabling local leadership in national policies and programmes.

In the midst of the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic, the need for strong local leadership has been further underscored. Experiences of members of the civil society network – the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) – highlight the role frontline workers play as leaders in their own communities. The pandemic has revealed new emerging challenges for local leaders of tomorrow – of having the ability to take prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery actions simultaneously and in real-time as the disaster threatens to spread uncontrollably; of having to pro-actively counter mis-information and stigma while educating communities on right actions; and finally, of being able to get communities to realise and take action on their own as the state sometimes lacks the capacity to reach everyone.

As a leader of my own neighbourhood community comprising 800 families, I have realised how insurmountable it is to practice DRR actions without self-awareness and understanding among citizens, and as all the leaders showcased here – it all comes down to seizing opportunities and ensuring we do not “waste a good crisis”.

**Manu Gupta**

**Co-Founder SEEDS, Member of Executive Committee, ADRRN**

## List of Acronyms

<b>ADRRN</b>	Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network
<b>ALL4DR</b>	Asian Local Leader Forum for Disaster Resilience
<b>AMCDRR</b>	Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction
<b>DEPP</b>	Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme
<b>DRR</b>	Disaster Risk Reduction
<b>FEDO</b>	Feminist Dalit Organisation
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SEEDS</b>	Sustainable Environment and Ecological Development Society
<b>SME</b>	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
<b>TUM</b>	The Unspoken Ministry
<b>UNDRR</b>	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

## Introduction:

### The comparative advantage of local leadership

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*Local, being local, and localisation are fundamental to disaster resilience. Our guiding principle is as local as possible, as international as necessary.*

H.E. Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Former Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Australia, at the ALL4DR event at AMCDRR 2018

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Photo from the launch event of the Asian Local Leaders Forum for Disaster Resilience (ALL4DR) as a pre-conference event of the AMCDRR 2016 held in New Delhi, India.

Local leadership is at the heart of building sustainable and resilient societies.

Global frameworks are integral in setting a tone and direction for change. National governments and allied institutions take the lead in the development of policies and plans to implement large-scale programmes for the achievement of these intended targets. However, it is local leadership that is uniquely positioned to drive the process from the bottom up, which is where the real challenges lie.

Disaster risks are growing more intense, complex, and unpredictable. Scientific research shows that climate change is exacerbating this trend and that we are living in the era of a 'new normal'. Over the last 20 years, some 90 percent of major recorded disaster events were weather-related. Urban flooding is also becoming more frequent and widespread. Loss of human lives may be decreasing, but the economic impact, particularly in terms of impact on



informal economies and uninsured losses, are on the rise. Disasters are negatively impacting the overall development of the most vulnerable communities.

This growing unpredictability and intensity of extreme events, in the midst of increasingly complex socio-economic dynamics fuelled by growing inequalities, call for a new approach to resilience building and planning. This is a challenge that cannot be addressed by formal institutions alone.

With a deep understanding of their contexts, local leaders are a vital cog in the wheel of resilience building. They have a unique ability to reach excluded communities who lack access or fall outside the gambit of large-scale programming. Local leaders often possess the capacity to innovate based on local micro conditions. It is their scope to view issues from a wider lens without the constraints of fixed institutional mandates. Local leaders understand the challenges of local communities better than others. Capable local leaders are able to surmount these challenges with scarce resources and in difficult conditions. They continuously engage with their communities to educate, empower, and build skills that contribute to long-term community resilience. These roles give local leaders a significant comparative advantage in driving overall change.

When disasters strike, local frontline leaders would act whether or not there is national or international support. Their actions leverage existing social capital in saving lives, supporting rebuilding, preparing, and preventing potential future disasters. Local leaders are the first to reach a disaster site, providing immediate life-saving assistance. They work in parallel to support and enable smooth relief operations. Once all the international actors leave, they are the ones who continue to work. Local actors are swift and fast to respond because they are close to the site of the disaster and affected communities.<sup>1</sup> They have access, knowledge, and resources that no international actor can attain. This is true in situations of fragility as well as in remote areas with access challenges.

They also have a strong understanding of local systems, circumstances, politics, and culture. Put together, this means a strong position to link preparedness, response, and long-term recovery.

Ultimately, the role of local leadership is critical to achieving the post-2015 agendas<sup>2</sup> including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030,<sup>3</sup> the Sustainable Development Goals,<sup>4</sup> the Paris Agreement on Climate Change,<sup>5</sup> the New Urban Agenda,<sup>6</sup> and the Agenda for Humanity - World Humanitarian Summit.<sup>7,8</sup>

Local leaders also have a direct role in helping achieve Target E of the Sendai Framework, which aims to 'Substantially increase the number of countries with national, and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020', and are among the most influential drivers in achieving the SDGs.

This is not just a theory. There are countless success stories across Asia-Pacific and the local champions behind them and this publication aims to highlight a few of them.

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## Asian Local Leaders Forum for Disaster Reduction (ALL4DR)

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*It is about recognizing the everyday leaders that live among us who make changes through small deeds but with profound impacts. They are the leaders we need to build to strengthen the community's resilience to disasters.*

- H.E. Willem Rampangilei, Former Chief, Ministry of the National Disaster Management Authority, Indonesia, at the Asian Local Leaders Forum for Disaster Resilience, 2018

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A forum to recognise, enhance, and connect the power of local leadership to put localisation into action! The Asian Local Leaders Forum for Disaster Resilience (ALL4DR) was established in 2016 during the Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (AMCDRR), hosted by the Government of India in the capital New Delhi. The forum was launched by the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) in partnership with UNDRR. The special event brought local and national leaders to a common stage and was attended by dignitaries from across the region. With local leaders from all walks of society sharing their experiences, the event served as a 'mock-up' dialogue that needs to happen in every nation.

The second ALL4DR was held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, during AMCDRR 2018. This effort to identify and honour local champions from across Asia-Pacific has been able to make a strong case for the significance of local leadership when applied to challenging contexts.

The Asian Local Leaders Forum for Disaster Resilience is a culmination of two region-wide citizens' campaigns that started before the 2015 World Conference on DRR. The first campaign – 'Road to Sendai' - reached seven million people in 55 countries. The campaign's original objective was to gather people's expectations for the new DRR framework that would succeed the Hyogo Framework of Action. However, people who joined the campaign also urged governments to turn their focus towards more action at the local level.

The second campaign – 'Sendai Spring' reached out to 300 organisations through national consultations in nine Asian countries. Looking at the global frameworks holistically, it further reinforced the message that communities do not perceive or experience risks in isolation. Problems on the ground are multi-faceted and interlinked, failing to fit neatly into sectoral boxes and driven by plans and processes. A critical point that underscored all discussions was that the essence of resilience building can be best achieved at the local level by empowering communities and their leaders.

ALL4DR was formally included in the Asia Regional Plan for implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-30), which was formulated during AMCDRR 2016 in New Delhi, India. <sup>1</sup>

## Who is a local leader?

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*Being a leader in a local context is often far more challenging than at the national level. It's not a job, but a vocation.*

- Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Disaster Risk Reduction at an ALL4DR event in 2018

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Local leaders referred here are individuals driving change. While the term 'local leader' has been debated around the world, the consensus emerging from the ALL4DR campaign in Asia-Pacific defines local leaders as individuals at a sub-national level who have been working directly with citizens as elected/appointed/informal representatives over a sustained period. These leaders care deeply about helping their community and have the ability to influence it. Their values and traits are what contribute to them making the most significant impacts and to achieving disaster resilience goals.

The essence of local leaders' potential lies in their ability to rise above personal concerns and their ability to influence the perceptions and behaviours of others, inspiring them to take action for societal change. It is their vision, efforts, and inspiration that drives change at scale.

These leaders can emerge at all levels, including at the provincial or city levels, leaders from local businesses, NGOs and citizen volunteers, and particularly youth and women leaders. In this publication, we see glimpses of these examples from mayors to an innovative slum dweller. They each nurture change and create positive impacts in the quest for disaster resilience.

For the team behind the ALL4DR forum, these leaders are drivers of change. Committed and passionate local leadership has always been critical to successful risk reduction. As the nature of disaster risk rapidly evolves, it is clear that such vibrant local leaders are the foundation for any successful initiative.

Each local leadership story is unique, with leaders of varying levels of influence, context-specific triggering factors, and ways of working. Their spheres of influence may range from their neighbourhood, village/district, and state to even the national or international community. Their ways of working differ based on their background and socio-economic, political and cultural nuances.

Despite all these differences, there are underlying qualities that remain common among local leaders working towards disaster resilience:

- 1. A sense of purpose:** Local leaders drive the resilience agenda through their leadership style by adopting a clear sense of purpose. At times, this involves undertaking risks, going against the tide, or balancing differing opinions of community members, as they challenge the status quo. Their qualities include the ability to question themselves when required while being steadfast in their commitment.
- 2. Lead by action:** While teams may support the execution of their decisions, a local leader has a reputation for following through with their promises. Their milestones are significant, with journeys that inspire others.

3. **Persistence:** One of the most essential qualities of an effective local leader is their ability to continue pushing forward despite the odds and challenges. Their deep commitment and their collaboration with their communities through difficult times brings about a camaraderie that formal institutions often lack. It is this sense of persistence that allows for long term transformations in the community.
4. **Passion:** The most effective local leaders have a passion for their cause, which is either fuelled by their own experiences or is an inherent commitment to improve the circumstances of those around them. Their passion is unaffected by the fact that, in many cases, this investment would not bring them a direct financial or status benefit.
5. **Ability to bring people together and gain their respect:** Effective local leaders are able to create the space and access for other people to collaborate for a common good. Through their personal commitment, they have been able to gain the trust and respect of the communities. In contrast to an autocratic approach, it is this ability to stick to their sense of purpose, yet find ways to gain the cooperation of others, often in very tough divisive scenarios, that sets them apart.

This publication is an endeavour to build on ongoing efforts in Asia to recognize and build a strong case for involving local leaders in the implementation of global frameworks such as the Sendai Framework. It aims to create linkages between the wisdom of local experiences and national and regional approaches to disaster resilience.



*The Asian Local Leaders' Forum for Disaster Resilience (ALL4DR) was launched in New Delhi on November 2nd, 2016.*

The authors hope that this publication inspires governments and international agencies to enable many more local leaders to contribute to the achievement of the Sendai Framework's goal of preventing new and reducing existing disaster risks in their communities.

We are grateful to the following local leaders from across Asia, whose inspiring work has shaped and enriched this publication:

1. **Naveen Patnaik**, Chief Minister of Odisha State, India, whose 'zero casualty' goal has made him a global DRR champion.
2. **Abigail S. Binay**, Mayor of Makati City, the Philippines, who has transformed people's indifference to disasters into an attitude of pro-activeness.
3. **Alam Gir**, a leading member of the local citizen forum, which is changing the way DRR is perceived and practiced through self-organised citizen action in East Delhi, India.
4. **Madelaine Alfelor-Gazmen**, Mayor of Iriga City, the Philippines, a 2016 ALL4DR awardee who is a strong advocate of promoting disaster resilience through bridging the emergency–development gap.
5. **Tasaruru (Tatu) Whitely**, now the leader of Vanuatu's largest protected area network, is a 2018 ALL4DR awardee who started with a passion for protecting the environment and has expanded to enhancing coping capacities to disasters that are becoming chronic.
6. **Mohammed Rafi**, a slum dweller in Korail, Dhaka, Bangladesh, who is addressing local risks by using indigenous innovations in his home and neighbourhood.
7. **Renu Sijapati** from Nepal, who works to ensure that no one gets left behind as she passionately pursues the empowerment of marginalized women.
8. **Deicy Silvia Wenas**, Founder/Director of The Unspoken Ministry (TUM), Indonesia, a 2018 an ALL4DR awardee, who has sought to affect change for the deaf and has worked with the government to change disaster management protocols for the deaf community.
9. **Ken'ichi Kurosawa**, a Tohoku Tsunami survivor in Japan, who became a symbol of hope for the entire community of Ishinomaki, Japan.
10. **Namita Thapa Magar**, a Nepal earthquake survivor, whose service to fellow community members affected by the disaster inspired many more like her.



## Local Leadership in Action

Local leadership is one of the most understated factors in building resilient societies. The eight examples in this publication illustrate how local leaders uniquely contribute towards this goal. Local leadership is not always taken into consideration in 'formal' governance mechanisms, yet it can be effective and at times can achieve lasting results far more efficiently.

***In a world of evolving vulnerabilities  
As the nature of risks change, intensify and grow  
There is a role for leadership within communities  
And the seeds of hope that that they sow***

***Some became a leader without realising it  
Stepping up when they saw the problem hit  
Some led when the path was rough  
Persevering even when things got tough***

***They're the champions leading local responses  
They're survivors who continue spreading hope  
They're the locals who are truly building resilience  
Innovating ways for their communities to cope***

***Across Asia-Pacific, countless local leaders are stepping up for change.  
Each of these stories is unique and each has its basis to occur  
But as a famous quote states  
If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more,  
you are a leader.***

***Ms. Vijayalakshmi Viswanathan***

## I. Saving lives: The zero-casualty goal

In the cyclone-prone Indian province of Odisha, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik boldly declared just before a major cyclone hit the state in 2013 that he would like to see zero casualties from the impending disaster. The state had not long ago borne the brunt of a devastating cyclone in 1999 that claimed more than ten thousand lives. To make such a statement for a region that suffers from endemic poverty and has poor infrastructure was a huge political risk. He, nevertheless, announced his goal. Not only did the state succeed in saving thousands of lives, but it also set an international best practice, and now is a model for other states in India. In May 2019, when Cyclone Fani made landfall in Odisha, loss of life was minimal despite the severity of the storm. As a result, the world celebrated the success of the state's zero-casualty pursuit, led by its Chief Minister.



*Naveen Patnaik, the Chief Minister of Odisha, India, set an ambitious goal through his 'zero-casualty' policy.*

Another example is Kabita Balami, a peer educator in Nepal. After the devastating 2015 earthquake, she would walk 7-8 hours a day to reach an impacted village to provide health services. The lack of transportation, manpower, coordination, and delays in relief supplies made it even more challenging. Despite being scared sometimes, she stayed determined and preserved; touched by the warm reception she always received and the criticality of her work. Her efforts helped many to survive and she continues to play an active role in enhancing the village's preparedness. Responding to the author, Kabita shared an important message: "Youth and young people of our country should embrace the power of giving to others and doing well for our nation."

However, local leaders are not just in the realm of first responders. They also take advance actions to prevent disasters from happening or to keep secondary impacts at bay. Their continuous efforts may rarely make the news but are critical to making communities safer.

## II. Improving disaster preparedness: From apathy to proactive action

It is now widely acknowledged that the success of disaster preparedness and response is dependent on the robustness of the community's preparedness. While technologies for observation, monitoring and communication have vastly improved early warning systems, they are still sometimes unable to provide accurate or detailed information to enable local action. For instance, when exactly rain may hit a local area.

There could also be delays and gaps in communication or in providing impact-based warning messages to vulnerable and exposed communities, including recommendations on appropriate behaviours and actions. Local authorities may hesitate or lack the authority to respond proactively to early warning messages they receive from national authorities. In such situations, the weakest link becomes decision making at the last mile.

People's capacity to respond and take appropriate action varies as well. Their unwillingness to evacuate, for example, is often due to fear of leaving behind their homes and assets, or due to their inability to move elderly people, persons with disabilities, pets and unwillingness to relocate to an unknown territory. Public apathy also could drive indifference to the repeated warnings by authorities.

Developing high levels of community preparedness requires strong local leadership that can overcome resistance from citizens who have never experienced disasters in their lifetime. It requires sustained investments in building local awareness and capacity using multiple strategies and periodically putting them to the test.

In the case of Abigail S. Binay, Mayor of the city of Makati in the Philippines, she says: "We often have to overcome the apathy of most of our residents in taking a proactive stance against disasters. This behaviour may come from having no first-hand experience with a major disaster or from a lack of understanding of its long-term impact on our city's sustainability and development".

To convince citizens, the Mayor initiated public dialogues involving scientists and disaster experts. Frequent meetings were organized at regular intervals to discuss primary concerns, including immediate risks and hazards. Children in public schools were provided with emergency go-bags and hardhats as safety precautions in the event of a disaster. The Mayor's sustained efforts led to the gradual acceptance of disaster risk management practices by the communities.



*Makati Mayor Abigail Binay (left) at a public event in March 2020.*

Local leaders are vital to connecting and communicating with their communities in ways that are locally appropriate. With wisdom gained over time, a sense of cultural nuances, and often backed by the power of youth action, they are improving disaster preparedness in highly effective ways.

### III. Ensuring disasters don't happen: Reducing underlying vulnerabilities

Government and institutional structures make distinctions between development and emergencies. As a result, line departments and institutions working on basic health, education, agriculture development and infrastructure do not consider comprehensive disaster risk management approaches in their plans and investments. When a disaster strikes, the impact on communities is exacerbated, leading to unwanted suffering and undermining years of investments in development. Local leaders are often best placed to look at the broader issues around risks and the secondary impacts of disasters like disruption to local economies, social structures and natural ecosystems. Leadership in DRR also means ensuring basic human rights, access to critical services and creating an atmosphere of safety and security.

Strengthening service delivery systems is becoming increasingly critical to reducing risks, particularly in the urban context. Local leaders who can work on such issues, with a focus on the long-term, can help advance this goal. One example is Mayor Madelaine Alfelor-Gazmen from Iriga City in the Philippines, who understands that resilience building is a long process.



*Mayor Madelaine Alfelor-Gazmen at the ALL4DR event at the AMCDRR 2016 in New Delhi, India.*

“There needs to be a paradigm shift in the way we approach DRR. Mainstreaming it in the policy framing process is the need of the hour. For we are the frontline workers, and with our experiences we are in a continuous learning process”. The Mayor’s Iriga City faces massive environmental challenges. In addition to facing 8 to 10 typhoons a year, the area is also vulnerable to perennial flooding along the central business district. Unsustainable land-use practices and illegal tree cutting by upland farmers mean increased landslide risk along Mount Iriga, which is one of the active volcanoes in the Philippines. These vulnerabilities have a severe impact on the lives of local residents.

Using a variety of techniques, Mayor Madeline has made disaster risk reduction a cornerstone of her leadership. She has involved youth volunteers, faith-based organisations, schools and local entities in massive environmental awareness programmes for reforestation along Mount Iriga. The area of Mount Iriga has been granted a protected landscape status as the unique rock formation and waterfalls of the mountain are a source of class ‘AA’ water for the



whole area. To protect the land, the Mayor passed a variety of environmental ordinances, including prohibiting the use of plastics and styrofoam, and issued executive orders to strengthen environmental laws, such as the creation of a task force on river protection.

Leaders like Mayor Madeline can bridge the development–emergency gap in creative ways by establishing common objectives and actions at the local level. Supporting local institutions and leveraging legislative powers, can lead to visible results for communities.

In other communities, residents are translating personal tragedies into self-organised citizen action and are reducing underlying risks within their own neighbourhoods



*Alam Gir shares his experience at the ALL4DR event at the AMCDRR 2016 in New Delhi, India.*

Alam Gir is a small business owner who grew up in Rani Garden, a slum area of the East Delhi district in India. His family survived on daily earnings from informal bakeries, and he experienced how a single illness or disaster wipe out their savings. He was spurred to civic action by a fire in his neighbourhood that destroyed his house.

Today, he is a leading member of the Purvi Dilli Aapda Prehari – a citizen’s platform that is at the forefront of reducing risk within the community. The platform is enhancing community ties with the local line departments and is working to make their community safer. The platform also runs advocacy and awareness campaigns and works to improve access to government services. This extends to his own profession, where he has sought to improve the safety of small-scale bakeries, so they can be licensed and recognized by local authorities.

Recalling the fire to his own house, he said it “shook me from within. I couldn’t sleep that night. I felt I had to do something.” That incident inspired Alam to take action to safeguard his community. He started small, by supporting his immediate neighbourhood, and gradually, more people joined him. This has helped them gain the attention of city officials for their disaster risk management practices.

This initiative bridged socioeconomic and political divides to foster a sense that managing risk is a collective responsibility. Organised local citizen action driven by motivated informal leaders are often able to cut across formal systems of governance, rules, and procedures. As a result, many cities around the world are accelerating towards greater resilience because of organised civic action.



## IV. Supporting local coping mechanisms and capacities for chronic disasters

Where risks prevail, communities develop coping mechanisms to deal with chronic disasters. Some of these coping mechanisms are quite innovative. For instance, in preparation for monsoon season flooding, some communities in South Asia have built homes on stilts with raised floors. They keep dried fuel rods that can be easily carried during an evacuation and operate community grain banks. However, chronic disasters do not always occur in the same form.



*Tasaruru (Tatu) Whitely, a leader from Vanuatu, was recognized as a 'local champion' at the AMCDRR 2018 in Mongolia.*

For coastal regions, islands, and the most ecologically vulnerable areas across Asia-Pacific, the very interactions between humans and nature itself need to follow a more holistic approach. As a result, coping capacities must go beyond guarding against specific vulnerabilities or symptomatic outcomes towards broader adaptation measures.

Local leaders once again play a vital role as these measures require dedication to show progress over an extended period of time. Tasaruru (Tatu) Whitely, a leader in the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu, describes his village as a place that has no electricity, supermarket, or airport. The population depends on the coral reefs and small gardens for their food, the rain for drinking water and their form of government is an island chief. Tatu gets emotional as he speaks, "The sea and the sky have always brought us life, but now they bring us death".

After being selected as Paramount Chief by his community, one of his first actions was to help set up an environmental network with other villages. The network promotes the planting of coral reefs, establishes conservation areas, works on coastal rehabilitation, and educates youth, children, and other chiefs. Though he does not phrase it in these terms, his actions were actually a form of ecosystem based DRR.

For island communities in the Pacific, every day is a struggle for survival. As Tatu puts it, "We, in the Pacific Islands, are now suffering disaster after disaster. Cyclone after drought after volcanic eruption. With population growth, declining natural resources, loss of our traditional knowledge and new development goals, how can my people possibly ever get back to our way of life?"

The network, therefore, covers all areas of daily living. "Solar dryers for food preservation, new farming techniques for droughts and salty soils, basic education on climate risks, composting toilets for groundwater protection, and sustainable green economic activities like tourism payments for ecosystem services."

The lesson is that local leaders cannot always work within defined deliverables and timelines. They need to problem-solve as a function of their daily duties to address underlying vulnerabilities and thus mitigate the impact of chronic risks.

## V. Promoting innovation, thinking differently to reduce local risks

Asia-Pacific is the most disaster-prone region in the world. As the nature and intensity of risks rapidly evolve, there is a consensus that the same solutions will not work for future risks. Locally relevant and customisable solutions are critical. Thinking differently and finding solutions that go beyond traditional aid models are essential. In these cases, local leadership plays a critical role.

Within at-risk communities, local leaders are developing micro-innovations. Through social enterprising or advocacy, they are helping their communities to cope with incredible levels of ingenuity. Hundreds of such micro-level leaders are hidden under the radar, with ideas that have the potential to be sustainable and scalable. One such leader is Mohammad Rafi from Bangladesh. He is a unique innovator who found a way to beat the heat and provide extra nutrition in one go.



*Mohammad Rafi's with one of his green walls in the Korail slum.*

He lives in Korail, the largest urban slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Like many other slum-dwellers, he migrated to Dhaka for work several years ago. Cultivating bitter melon as he used to in his village, seemed like a distant memory until he found a way to adapt his farming skills. The creepers are planted in a row, spreading up to the roof on a trellis of string and wire. Droppings from the pigeons on the roof serve as a fertilizer. The plants grow very well in the sun, and at the same time, cast shade on the tin roofs which keeps homes cool and comfortable. Standing in the tiny courtyard of his house, one can feel a significant change in temperature. The heat caused by the weather and aggravated manifold due to the tin construction, a thermal conductor, suddenly eases a little bit.

Mohammad Rafi is a leader in developing an innovative 'green wall'. People around his neighbourhood visit his house to see and replicate the model. He was the inspiration behind one of the innovations of the DEPP Innovation Lab in Bangladesh, which is funded by the UK-based Start-Network. Due to its success, the model is being replicated in other parts of the country.

Among communities, there are many quiet leaders with the spark for entrepreneurship. They can transform chronic problems that a community confronts into low-cost and effective solutions that communities can 'buy' from them. Replicating such good practices is relatively simple. The entrepreneurs know their 'markets', and the people can fund these solutions themselves. Such practices exist around the world but are seldom recognised, let alone integrated as part of more extensive adaptation measures. These solutions offer immense potential for large scale informal communities in urban areas that struggle to survive each day.

## VI. Ensuring that no one is left behind

Local leaders are best positioned to identify the groups at risk of being left behind during a disaster and to calibrate actions based on their needs. The impact of disasters on marginalised groups is usually devastating. The most sensitive public interventions may still exclude unrecognised groups within communities. The types of challenges vary from region to region, from class and societal pressures to religious differences, sexual orientation, and living with disabilities. Yet the need remains the same – the need for a leader to recognise, address and truly empower the most vulnerable groups.

There are examples of such leaders, like Renu Sijapati, a founding member of the Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) in Nepal. She is originally from the far western part of Nepal, where discrimination based on gender and caste was extreme, and it was a struggle even to receive an education. FEDO has been working to empower women from marginalised groups, including to help them access basic services. FEDO works with more than 2000 active women's groups in which 50,000 women are directly involved. Renu Sijapati's work has brought awareness about these oppressive social practices of discrimination against certain groups in gaining jobs, education, etc. One of their recent achievements is the involvement of 6,567 women from marginalised 'Dalit' groups in local level elections in 2019.

Leaving no one behind is also about communicating effectively to ensure often marginalised communities are reached. Local leaders understand such needs better than others and know how to generate attention to ensure that all sections of the community get the message.

In disaster situations, marginalised communities face obstacles not just from the authorities and service providers but even from the rest of the community. In Indonesia, Deicy Wenas, Founder of the Unspoken Ministry in Indonesia, which advocates for people with hearing disabilities, faced similar challenges. Her research showed that 99.94% of the respondents with hearing disabilities could not access the early warning alerts issued by the authorities. She realized that the government needed to drastically improve its methods and means to provide early warnings. With 2.5 million people with hearing disabilities in Indonesia, spread across 17,508 islands, her task of reaching out to all is indeed huge.



*Deicy Wenas, Founder of The Unspoken Ministry (TUM) in Indonesia*

In Indonesia, people with hearing disabilities are struggling for their linguistic rights. Currently, in the Indonesian system, sign vocabulary is taken from the American sign language. As she puts it, "Language is based on the local culture. When the language is forced on a group of people, it will be hard to accept. So deaf people have their own language which has evolved from their culture. In every city, there are several variations in the vocabulary. In such a scenario, it is really challenging for the national government to create a DRR awareness course for the deaf." Her greatest achievement so far is a collaboration with the government's National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) to initiate a national congress on sign language for DRR and to begin standardising DRR sign language across the country.

Knowledge and information on DRR need to reach and be understandable to everyone. This is critical because it can save lives. Local leaders play an important role in ensuring that everyone receives information in a manner that they can accept, process and act upon.

## VII. Sparking hope at the time of despair

Catastrophic events can have devastating effects on communities. In many cases, communities are never able to fully recover. Yet, in such circumstances, bold initiatives by individuals can alter the course of recovery. They can help communities bounce back by positively contributing to the well-being of others while taking care of their own families.

The story of Kenichi Kurosawa from Tohoku, Japan, is one such example. On the day of the Tohoku earthquake in March 2011, he was away from home for business. On his way home, he faced the tsunami wave and had to fight for his life. He survived the night by clinging to a tree. Returning home from the displacement centre, he noticed everyone was in a state of despair, looking for their family members. Seeing all this, he asked himself what he could do as a survivor. Together with his friends, they created a large sign using salvaged plywood and paint that read "Ganbaro! Ishinomaki" or 'Pull Together Ishinomaki'. He says, "I thought some might say - It's not time to be doing that - but, instead, people stopped by the sign, offered prayers and conveyed words of appreciation." Kenichi and his friends gained the trust of people through engaging in dialogues and at times through sharing tears.

Subsequently, they started the "sunflower initiative" as a way to encourage people to recover from the disaster. "I had planted some seedlings around the sign and while watering them one day, we found stray sunflowers blooming on their own around the area. The seeds must have been deposited by the tsunami. They brought a symbol of hope when we needed it most. The sunflower seeds were also packed up 10 to a bag and given to people as a token of gratitude and appreciation. The gallant sunflowers are being named by generation. Currently, the eighth generation of the sunflower seeds is making its way around the world. Now, people from places I don't even know about come to visit the disaster areas to offer their thoughts and prayers. Some people even come to Ishinomaki."

Such a small endeavour by Kenichi and friends is helping to keep the memory of the disaster alive as well as increase disaster prevention awareness around the world. The area around his house has been deemed unsafe for relocation, but the ruins will be used to create a tsunami recovery memorial park. Kenichi is working together with local community members to ensure the successful completion of this park.

The year 2021 will mark the tenth anniversary of the disaster. Kenichi says, "I am working to ensure that the next generation will actively work to keep the memory of the disaster alive and advance disaster preparedness for the future. I will do my best as a leader and coordinator in the community to preserve the legacy of our work."

In the wake of a disaster, it is the visible destruction that is first addressed. The fallen homes, the devastated ecosystem, the critical infrastructure, and the need for immediate food and water. Yet, one of the most precious commodities that can be destroyed but goes unseen is hope. It is the local leaders emerging in the aftermath of a disaster who are often the purveyors of this hope for the immediate survivors and for their communities at large.



*Kenichi Kurosawa helped restore hope in his disaster-stricken community.*



## VIII. Working alongside disaster communities long after the disaster

For survivors of a disaster, the reconstruction process can be long-drawn. Often, they are overlooked as attention turns to immediate rebuilding needs and priorities. However, the opportunity to build back better towards resilient societies may be undermined as a result.

Local leaders can uniquely contribute by helping communities build their resilience in the aftermath of a disaster. From clearing land for a fresh start to gaining a sense of purpose in the recovery process, this has been a cornerstone of the owner-driven reconstruction approach.

In the case of Nepal, after the catastrophic 2015, 7.6 magnitude earthquake, lives and buildings alike were shattered; affecting an estimated 8 million people. Half a million homes were destroyed. For most of the population, this was the first major earthquake they had experienced in their lifetime. Despite awareness about the country's high seismic vulnerability, the extent of the destruction across the country came as a shock. The brunt of this shock fell disproportionately on women and children. In more remote villages, the men often migrate for work, leaving the women to take care of the households and the small step-farming livelihoods.

In the village of Machchhegaun, Namita Thapa Magar emerged as one of the best examples of such a local leader. She sat in the front in the very first transitional housing orientation workshop organised by SEEDS. With not much in terms of educational qualifications, Namita had not been able to find a suitable job and supported her family through odd part-time jobs before the earthquake hit. She saw the disaster as an opportunity to help her community and gain skills in the process.



*Namita lead by example – helping her own village and others rebuild after the 2015 disaster.*

In her late 20s, she was one of the first volunteers to supervise the construction of transitional houses for earthquake-affected families in her village. She also travelled to faraway villages to supervise other construction projects. While there, she would discuss her earthquake experience and life in an all-women household. It was a challenge to convince her mother to let her go at first but thinks her experience has been a good example for girls in the community. It was also an opportunity for her to help others and to heal. She was so dedicated to the communities she was serving that work became her top priority. Even after she lost her mother while in the field, she returned to work sooner after the death ceremonies.

She became affectionately known as 'Namita Didi (elder sister)' in her community and everybody respected and admired her. As a result of these qualities and her performance, she was promoted to a senior trainer and then an assistant supervisor.



## Local Leadership – What Works, What Doesn't

As evident from the stories in this publication, each local leadership story is unique, and so are circumstances around it. The stories depict how these leaders have grown during the process and became increasingly relevant and effective in serving their constituencies. Their journeys and experiences show a few common patterns for what works and what doesn't when it comes to effective local leadership in DRR:

1. While local leaders may implement DRR measures to address community needs, they may not be aware of the existence of a **system-level disaster management framework**. In almost every case of local leadership documented here, actions were spontaneous with a tenuous connection to existing national/international systems. If local leaders can be integrated into disaster management plans and protocols, their efforts could benefit from aligning with larger efforts at the national or international level.
2. Local leaders **adapt to the changing needs** of their constituencies thus ensuring optimal utilization of the available resources. Like in the case of Mayor Madelaine in the Philippines, they understand where the vulnerabilities lie and can initiate actions to address them. Further, as evident in cases of Renu Sijapati in Nepal and Deicy Wenas in Indonesia, these actions can be well thought out and inclusive to ensure no one is left behind.
3. Leaders are often **persuasive public speakers** and are able to articulate issues, challenges and needs with courage and conviction. Kenichi Kurosawa in Japan and Mayor Abigail's in the Philippines both helped change their communities' attitudes from apathy and indifference to that of self-awareness and collaborative action.
4. In cases of Mohammad Rafi in Bangladesh and Alam Gir in India, their **strong grassroots efforts** and innovative actions were sensitive to the needs and challenges of their communities. However, both efforts could have benefited from better integration locally into existing formal systems – legal frameworks, governance arrangements, politics and power dynamics.
5. Tenacious efforts by local leaders can ensure that needs are addressed, and impacts are achieved. In cases where disaster response systems do not exist or where disasters are chronic like in the Pacific island of Vanuatu, leaders like Tasaruru Whitley can form a local alliance of like-minded leaders to **leverage resources and coping capacities** beyond their own communities.
6. Local leaders, at times, **may lack access to the technical know-how** and an understanding of the intricacies of humanitarian action, which in turn, limits their ability to handle situations in emergencies. Awareness of international frameworks and their translation into action remains a challenge.
7. Local leaders are often 'alone' on the frontlines, taking the risk of a possible failure of their actions. In the area of disaster risk management, these risks are high as it could mean an end to their political career or community status. Naveen Patnaik in India is a case in point. Without a **suitable political or institutional support** framework, such leadership is unlikely to last.

8. Nearly every successful leader has **emerged from his or her own local community**. They may have been victims themselves or have suffered indirectly from disasters in their own lives. These events add to their credibility and make them more effective in championing change.
9. All local leaders displayed **common personality traits**, such as being principled, acting with integrity, being self-aware of their limits, displaying self-confidence, and approaching problems with energy, and enthusiasm. Through these traits, they were able to galvanize support for their ideas and became role-models for their communities.



*Capacity building for local leaders can empower them to build the disaster resilience of their communities and safeguard development gains achieved under the 2030 sustainable development agenda (ALL4DR workshop in Nepal, 2017).*

## Renewing our commitment to local leadership

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*As a vast country, India understands in a true sense how we have to empower the local level. Here one Member of Parliament represents roughly 2.5 million people. If you can't create local resilience, then you can't materialise change. That's the secret.*

– H.E. Mr. Kiren Rijiju, Former Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Government of India

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Local leaders are a valuable partner in all DRR activities. As disasters become increasingly unpredictable, flexibility is key. Increasing variability means micro-level information and action will be required more than ever. At no time has the pivotal role of local leadership ever held more value. Local leaders have a tremendous ability to bridge the gap between their communities and national/sub-national officials and to devise better ways to deploy resources for disaster risk management. Involving them in planning allows for better preparedness of communities, which ultimately results in more resilient communities. Yet, local leaders face considerable challenges in their work, persevering even in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties, ranging from a lack of funds to indifference in their communities.

Local leadership and local action deserve acknowledgement and enhanced support from national governments, international organisations, civil society organisations, businesses, and academia. All actors can play a role in creating an enabling environment for local leadership to flourish, with a focus on the following key areas:

1. **Belief in local leaders:** National governments must believe in their local leaders and seek to create harmony and balance between local, national, and international interventions.
2. **Enabling policies:** International organizations and national governments need to mandate and pursue a 'whole of society' approach that enables local leaders to be heard and to influence formal systems of governance for building disaster resilience. Governments can support the development of 'local-level DRR strategies' that identify local priorities and recognize the essential role played by local leaders.
3. **Financial resources:** Resources should be made available and accessible to local leaders, with the flexibility to use them for long-term resilience-building efforts, and not just preparedness and recovery efforts.
4. **Recognition:** Acknowledge and support local leaders' efforts to impact their communities. Promote forums at national and regional levels that recognise, support, and bring together local leaders.
5. **Partnership with academia:** Building on existing knowledge and innovating new solutions are strong drivers for local leadership, and these can be supported through continuous collaboration with local universities and institutions.

6. **Capacity support:** Provide support to further strengthen and build leadership skills. This includes supporting local leaders incubate local solutions, access relevant networks, and enhance their advocacy abilities.
7. **Collaborate and partner with a local organisation:** International organizations and national governments that want to impact change at the local level stand to benefit from collaborating with local organizations and leaders. Such collaborations can enhance synergies and would enable them to design external response strategies that are in sync with the efforts of local organizations.
8. **Enable alliance-building:** Create opportunities for peer-learning among local leaders to strengthen their capacity for scaling up their solutions and for influencing national and sub-national policies and legislations.

Moreover, it is important for international and national actors to build on the experiences of local organisations. This includes documenting the different ways in which they can influence the global humanitarian response architecture and global frameworks for disaster risk reduction.

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