



Institutionalising Disaster Risk Reduction in Schools: Lessons for South Asia



From an Effort to Turn Local Tsunami Recovery into Regional Disaster Risk Reduction for the Poor



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PREFACE

Institutionalising Disaster Risk Reduction in Schools

South Asia is a global disaster hub. According to the IFRC (World Disaster Report 2008) out of all people reported to be killed due to natural hazards in the world during 2007, 46 per cent were from South Asia. This signifies the vulnerability of the people of the South Asian region in terms of natural hazards. Similarly, human-induced disasters are of an equally alarming scale in this region. In several countries, school children have been affected by different kinds of human-induced disasters.

Therefore, there is a great need for long term and sustainable programmes in the region to effectively reduce vulnerability. Past experience with several disasters throughout the world show that school children are a major vulnerable group, especially when hazards occur during school time. Be it the Gujarat earthquake in India or the Kashmir earthquake or the Sichuan earthquake in China, school children were killed or injured in large numbers.

Several countries in the region have initiated processes to include disaster risk reduction (DRR) components in school curricula. Similarly, a few colleges/universities have initiated processes to offer degree courses in DRR or disaster management. This is very important and useful for reducing the disaster vulnerability of students. However, the processes have moved at a snail's pace despite several wake-up calls in the region, and so far only a few schools are covered.

In addition to strengthening institutional capacity of schools, the capacity building of teachers, students and parents is also a very important aspect in reducing disaster risk. A few schools in Sri Lanka are in the process of developing school-level disaster management plans. Activities such as simulation drills and awareness raising are important elements of the plan. However, without regular practice, simulation, and drilling, these plans are just additional documents. Therefore, organising simulation drills and large-scale awareness activities remains very useful.

Beyond the inclusion of the DRR component in the curricula and the capacity building activities, the safer construction of schools or academic institutions is critical. Unfortunately, most of the schools and colleges built in the region are very vulnerable to many disasters, such as fires and earthquakes. Therefore, structural vulnerability assessments of existing school buildings is very important. Governments must enforce evaluations of all school buildings. Similarly, the government must mandate that the new school buildings are constructed in a way that is safe for children, teachers and other staff. However, these activities can only be successful if there is active participation of the school teachers, students, parents and education officials. ■

Man B. Thapa,
Disaster Risk Reduction Advisor, UNDP, Sri Lanka

Protecting and Educating Children in India: A Safer Schools Campaign

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to completely negate the impact of disasters upon people's lives. What is possible, however, is to minimise damages and hardship through preparedness and mitigation activities. Asia is geographically a disaster-prone continent, as can be seen by the large number of disastrous events occurring in recent years. Schools have been chronically affected, as most of them are located in vulnerable areas and unprepared to deal with disasters. The 2001 earthquake in Gujarat caused the death of 971 students and 31 teachers; thousands of students and teachers were killed, injured or affected in the 2004 South Asia tsunami; the 2005 Kashmir earthquake took the lives of 17,000 children in India and Pakistan; 40% of the victims of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar were children; and the Sichuan earthquake in China killed many students and destroyed a disproportionately high number of schools.

These are real numbers that continue to grow. The variety of disasters is great: earthquakes, floods, droughts, mudslides, cyclones, fires, and more. These events occur all over the world, and have been especially pronounced in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Given the major impact that can be inflicted by disasters, it is essential to prepare communities to face them, by promoting disaster awareness, preparedness and mitigation. And given the great vulnerability of children, it is important that disaster risk reduction activities target schools.

Several international organisations have addressed the need for promoting school-based DRR and have begun to establish a standard for doing so. The UN Hyogo



All photographs in this issue: AIDMI

Organised monthly emergency drills provide an opportunity to familiarise children with emergency procedures and instill an understanding of hazards.

Framework for Action specifically stresses the importance of including disaster risk reduction in school curricula. Similarly, the 2006-2007 biennial worldwide campaign entitled "Disaster Risk Reduction begins at school", launched by UN/ISDR and other UN agencies, aims to achieve global DRR objectives through complicity with Hyogo Framework priorities. Regional agendas such as the Delhi Declaration of the 2007 Asian Ministerial Conference, and the Bangkok Action Agenda resulting from the Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop on School Education and Disaster Risk Reduction, establish school-based DRR as a priority.

Following this framework, the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute has established a school safety campaign as one of its major initiatives. It began working informally with school safety issues at its inception in 1989, and later consolidated and organised this work as the Child's Right to Safer Schools Campaign in response to the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat. The Campaign is centered around local capacity building with a focus towards community based disaster

management. Education on disaster risk management is being provided to teachers, students, parents and other involved authorities in almost 400 schools across the country. It is within this context that AIDMI has carried out a school-based risk reduction programme in 15 of Gujarat's most vulnerable schools in the cities of Ahmedabad, Anand and Nadiad. The aim has been to provide both school staff and students with the necessary skills to prepare for and respond to potential disasters. Trainings are conducted for school teachers, principals, and task forces that include senior and active students. Subjects cover pertinent topics such as First Aid, early warning, evacuation and search and rescue.

The present issue of *southasiadisasters.net* highlights the impact of the project by sharing the perspectives of participant stakeholders: education administrators, school principals, schoolteachers, students and other experts. This analysis of school safety activities allows us to understand both what has been done in Gujarat schools, and what remains to be done. ■



Stakeholder Perspectives on School Safety and Needs



Administrating Education: The Public Officer

Harshadrai J. Solanki

Harshadrai J. Solanki is the administration officer of the higher secondary school board of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, responsible for five secondary and higher secondary schools in Ahmedabad City. When he initially came to know about the project, he thought it would be very useful as a vehicle to spread preparedness messages beyond the school's limits. After the 2001 earthquake, it became clear that the state was not prepared to handle major disasters, and that it was essential for schools to be highly prepared for future events.



According to Mr. Solanki, an initiative like this could increase the sensitivity and discipline of both teachers and students, as it would not only increase their awareness about potential disasters, but also teach them how to react when hazards strike. So far, the impact of the activities has been very positive, and children have been able to play leadership roles within their communities. This latter factor is essential in their development as it empowers them through the role they play as leaders of disaster management, and also through specific skills such as public speaking.

Mr. Solanki lauds the use of trainings. The complexity of the areas where these schools are located, in crowded industrial zones, makes the schools vulnerable; they need to benefit from disaster education in order to reduce risk. Also, the trainings are being conducted for children aged 8-14, at

an ideal time for them to internalise these messages. Follow-up should therefore be given every 4 to 6 months, for at least 2 years, to solidify understanding. Mr. Solanki asserts that representatives of all municipal schools in Ahmedabad should engage in these activities. Even private schools could be included, as in some cases their infrastructures are not sufficient for student safety. Overall, Mr. Solanki considers this project to be very significant, as it provides not only awareness, but also structure and discipline. A complete picture is created, offering teachers and students a comprehensive perception of disasters.

Overseeing Disaster Risk Reduction in Schools: The Principals

Riyaz Ahmed Ansari

Mr. Ansari is the Principal of the Rakhial Municipal Urdu Madhyamik School, where the Basics of Disaster Management activities have been implemented. He avers their usefulness in instructing people how to save themselves during disasters and the actions to undertake in school disaster situations. Practical exercises such as mock drills and demonstrations of fire extinguisher use are very important given their applications for all schools.



Mr. Ansari indicates two facets of the project's impact: children have learned valuable information, which they have been carrying to other people and other situations; and the school has increased its understanding of disaster preparedness, through knowledge intake and acquisition of such things as fire safety equipment.

This process of enriching stakeholder awareness is a key aspect that should also incorporate new technologies and innovations to be shared in disaster risk reduction. Mr. Ansari also points out that in order to ensure total preparedness, information related to safer school building construction must be provided and regulations must be implemented.

The school endeavors to maintain project sustainability by having its teachers give lectures on disasters for students, along with continued use of mock drills as a learning tool. In addition to sustainability, project replication is also important, as Ahmedabad has several crowded areas where many schools are located. With the implementation of disaster management activities, Mr. Ansari highlights two significant accomplishments: the established importance of increasing awareness among school staff and administration; and the implementation of school disaster management plans.

Rasik Patel

Mr. Patel, the Principal of the Asarwa Municipal Gujarati Madhyamik School, considers disaster preparedness to be a key area for investment. He identifies mental and psychological preparedness for children as an essential element of this, and believes that the disaster management activities play a very important role in this dimension: they are highly valuable in their ability to reduce fear of disaster by demystifying these phenomena and providing tools to properly address them. This knowledge of how to respond provides children comfort and improves their ability to respond



to disasters not only by giving them the appropriate tools, but also by building their confidence. He believes that attention to the psychosocial component should be given more emphasis in the future.

It was not only teachers that found project activities useful – children integrated in the school's DRR taskforce also indicated that the project should be ongoing. They said that being taskforce members makes them responsible for sustaining the project. But, Mr. Patel adds, the government should be making the biggest efforts, and should include such activities in its curriculum. Teachers should also play a major role as it is their willingness and interest that will ensure the sustainability of the programme. A major role for students on the taskforce is to spread the message to other students. Awareness should be perceived as a very important means, and considered an ongoing process.

Mr. Patel named some measures that could help to increase this awareness, such as exhibitions for the students, further awareness material regarding school safety and use of educational VCDs or DVDs. He also suggested that a newspaper column on school safety awareness be published regularly, along with a televised school safety awareness programme.

Instruction for Empowerment: The Teachers

Ishtiyaq Qadri

Ishtiyaq Qadri is a teacher at the Rakhial Municipal Urdu Madhyamik School. He believes that every citizen should possess proper knowledge regarding disasters and subsequent impact, because these events can significantly affect society. The project has had a very positive impact so far, as the students, who are also members of the taskforces,



have taken on responsibility for conducting disaster risk reduction activities in their own environments.

In order to ensure the sustainability of the project, Mr. Qadri believes that trained teachers should spread the message to other teachers and that the school administration should be very interested in the programme. The project should be taken to many other schools, as it includes essential activities such as fire demonstrations, which need to be taught in industrial areas such as the one where this school is located. He stressed that project success depends upon the willingness of trained persons to spread lessons to others.

As for the future, Mr. Qadri named a few useful actions. First, the dissemination of knowledge and understanding of disasters among citizens should be promoted by the government in its own curriculum. Also, given the current general lack of awareness, the governmental Disaster Management Plan should be kept in the public domain. Schools should organise visits to fire departments and hospitals on an ongoing basis. Given their importance, fire demonstrations and fire education should be day-long programmes, rather than only two hours. VCDs or DVDs should be made and distributed in schools in order to increase awareness. Also, students who are taskforce members should be encouraged to spread the message to other students and keep the message alive.

Anjum Munshi

Ms. Munshi is another teacher at the Rakhial Municipal Urdu Madhyamik School. She sees the value of this project especially for its preparedness elements, given the unexpected nature of disasters. She identified specific activities of importance such as developing



evacuation plans and identifying safer places. She named mental and psychological preparedness as a valuable element, as young students may not have the psychological strength to deal with extreme disasters.

Ms. Munshi also sees positive impact in the project's design to reach communities through children, guaranteeing in a certain way its own sustainability. However, she also observed that although schools will try to ensure the sustainability of the project, it would be helpful to have an outside body providing structure and oversight. Replication should take place not only in other schools, but also in other community venues and in slum areas.

Lessons learnt included practical tools such as preparing a disaster management plan – which Ms. Munshi stressed should be updated regularly – and identifying evacuation routes. But the essence of the project is in its emphasis on explaining to children why disaster preparedness is important and what they can do to be prepared at school. Only through these efforts will schools become safer spaces.

Learning and Implementing: The Students

Rajput Sanjay

Rajput Sanjay is a 10th standard student at Bapunagar Municipal Hindi Madhyamik School. He says that through school based disaster risk reduction activities, students had the chance learn about disaster from a scientific perspective. "We enjoyed the mock drill on earthquake because it has given us the practical experience of Dos and Don'ts during a disaster. While being a taskforce member of disaster management, I have started to explain about how to do search and rescue to my classmates and friends in society. We have also



prepared the calendar with other taskforce members to conduct school safety related activities in my school."

Mehul Rabari

Mehul Rabari is a 9th standard student at Asarwa Municipal Gujarati Madhyamik School. "I think it is very important for my school to learn about school safety because most of us are on the second floor. We have to be familiar with evacuation routes, which we have highlighted in our school map during the exercise on school and disaster management."



Ankit Prajapati

Ankit Prajapati is a 9th standard student at Shivam Vidyalaya (Ankit's mother works at the Asarwa Municipal Gujarati Madhyamik Shala school, and he attended the training with her). "I enjoyed a lot the training of Emergency Medical Response. I could learn what to do in case of snake or dog bite and how to stop continuous bleeding. This is useful because these happen often in our school and in our *chawl*. I think this should also be included in our text book on Physical Education. Now I am able to teach other students about what I have learnt on school level disaster management."



Nirma Katara

Nirma Katara is a 9th standard student at Municipal Girls' High School. "After the disaster management programme in our school, we had vacations and went to our native village. There is a big and wide well in our village. During my stay in the village, one day one boy fell into the well. As he was screaming from there, other villagers came to know that he was in the well. His parents were crying. As soon as I came to know about the mishap, I rushed near the



well and asked people not to shout, and to calm themselves. I asked that whomever among them could swim should come forward. Two to three persons came. I told them to bring thick rope. We used the rope to bring the boy out from the well. Thus, we could save him and I could put my learnings into practice."

External Evaluation: The Experts

Rajesh Kumar Kaushik

Mr. Rajesh Kumar Kaushik works as Humanitarian Response Coordinator with Oxfam Community Aid Abroad and has been involved with the Basics of Disaster Management project since the beginning. His approval of this project is based on the belief that disaster risk awareness should be integrated into school curricula, whether national or international. He considers the project and its activities to be very useful as they represent a means of input for societies in general. India might be said to be a country of vulnerabilities, with children comprising one of the most vulnerable groups. Such conditions must be addressed and dealing with risk through mitigation is a valuable way of doing it.



Mr. Rajesh approves of how the project brings safety issues to the awareness of students, who then develop their own skills on disaster management and are able to pass them to other levels of society. He says that this should therefore be a bilateral process, as both teachers and students learn from each other. The aim of the project is to turn children into active citizens of their country; this project is effective for utilising their adaptive abilities and empowering them with skills and knowledge for disaster mitigation.

Mr. Rajesh believes this project should be replicated, not only in other parts

of the country, but also across borders. Sustainability should be ensured, not only through upgrading the project's activities, but also by involving all concerned stakeholders. If teachers and parents have more interaction, schools can better understand the children's backgrounds, and parents can better understand school roles. In order to create a complete picture, parents would provide information such as the kind of security children live in, household risks, and the degree of participation of each nuclear family.

This is an innovative aspect, and Mr. Rajesh believes that by involving all stakeholders in the same process, the second Millennium Development Goal—achieving universal primary education by 2015—will be achieved. School level disaster management is a challenging and complex process that is only possible through political commitment and community participation. And investing in building children's capacities is the best starting point.

Sadhnaben Adhikary

Sadhnaben Adhikary is a Placement Coordinator at the Department of Social Work, S.P. University and an evaluator of the present project. When considering its implementation, Ms. Sadhnaben emphasised the importance of basing the project on community participation. Involving the students not only as receivers but also as implementers is considered to be an added value. Future activities should always endeavor to provide children with skills and confidence, so that they have a sense of ownership and are able to take control of their own actions. Raising children's self-confidence is, as a result, a key investment to be undertaken by this project, as it is the only way to truly guarantee its success.



Ms. Sadhnaben believes that because the project introduces new topics to schools, its impact has already been positive and overall reactions are good. However, further emphasis should be placed on training, as this is key for empowering children. Coordination is another positive aspect that attributes success to the project. The project should be sure to empower not only children, but also teachers and other school staff. State departments should be involved, along with other experts such as fire officers and doctors. A multi-stakeholder approach is therefore needed, for which coordination is essential.

Ms. Sadhnaben also says that it is important not only to ensure sustainability, which is promoted through the empowerment of different stakeholders, but also to upgrade the effects of the project. Further actions should identify what kind of assignments are imperative and address them in a proper way so that it is possible to shape them into a new policy. Nevertheless, the project activities have been successful so far, especially considering that the project is in its initial stage. The main principles have been properly addressed and the focus should now be on follow-up.

Dr. Ranendu Ghosh

Dr. Ghosh is a senior scientist with the Space Application Research Centre, Indian Space Research Organisation,



and is another expert responsible for the evaluation of the project. He is also the regional coordinator of Village Resource Centre programme. From his perspective the project has made a positive start, and further steps should be undertaken in order to guarantee its success. Emphasis should be put on its operationalisation, so that practices are automatic and fully internalised by both the students and the school staff. One valuable aspect of the project has been the empowerment of children. They have demonstrated enthusiasm, and have been proactive about asserting a role for themselves within their communities. Furthermore, they have demonstrated a clear understanding of basic disaster response.

Dr. Ghosh notes that a lot has to be done beyond the scope of this project regarding school structures, such as emergency exits and earthquake retrofitting. This would have to be initiated by the municipal corporation itself.

According to Dr. Ghosh, the project has focused on the right principles,

such as student participation and empowerment. The project is also based on orientation for school staff, which should continue to receive high investment from the project.

Dr. Ghosh considers it very important to involve students in every project activity. Wherever possible, children should be involved in creation and implementation of activities. This will not only increase student empowerment, but will also help children better understand the concept and implications of disaster management. Dr. Ghosh considers it essential to have a curriculum for disaster risk mitigation issues, so that both teachers and students have a structure for learning about and reviewing these issues. This curriculum should include crosscutting issues such as climate change, which is closely linked with disaster risk; children are at the ideal age to be receiving these messages.

Given the importance of school safety, especially in a state that lost around 900 children on the 2001 earthquake, Dr. Ghosh believes it would be useful to establish a School Safety Day. Awareness activities such as these are necessary for ensuring that school safety issues reach all elements of society. ■

| These perspectives emphasise the following priorities and actions for the Safer Schools Campaign: | |
|---|--|
| Further involvement of the students | As children play a key role, they can be involved in the project by helping to produce awareness and promotional material. |
| Direct inclusion of parents | Parents have an important influence on children's education, as well as in promoting safety. They should be in close contact with teachers. |
| More disaster mitigation | Disaster mitigation should receive more focus in school safety efforts. This helps children reduce disaster impact instead of only responding to emergencies. |
| School Safety Day | Establishing a School Safety Day is considered a useful step in promoting awareness about school safety. |
| More involvement from the government and public | School safety is a multi-stakeholder concern. Government curricula should address this issue and the media may be engaged for disseminating related information to the public. |
| Follow-up of disaster management plans | Given the complexity of actors and subjects, it will be helpful to have a stakeholder with agreed responsibility for this process. |

Working Together for the Elimination of Child Labour

The complexity of problems that Indian children face on a daily basis goes far beyond disaster risk. India, a country in which children comprise 40% of the population, faces several child-related risks that are all too common in countries with high poverty rates. These include issues such as high infant mortality rates, child malnutrition, lack of education, HIV/AIDS, commercial and sexual exploitation and child labour.

Child labour is one issue that has drawn attention from a variety of stakeholders worldwide, as it exists in all regions, and in developing and developed countries alike. Although the incidence of child labour worldwide declined significantly from 1950 to 2000, overpopulation and poverty have prevented its total disappearance. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), there are around 190.7 million child labourers in the world, of which half are in South and East Asia. In India alone, 12.6 million children serve as labourers. Along with the high rates of neo-natal deaths (around 35%) and child malnutrition (40%), this conveys a very challenging scenario for Indian children.

Several instruments have been created for achieving the elimination



Unfortunately, in the age of the “Right to Education”, many children do labor in order to increase family income.

Source: <http://cache.daylife.com/imageserve/08g5P15M03oU/610x.jpg>

of child labour, at both the international and national levels. Among the most significant have been the nine ILO Conventions, of which six were ratified by India. Similarly, the Indian Constitution includes various provisions in addition to special laws that aim to eliminate child labour.

As the elimination of child labour is a multi-stakeholder concern, many different policies have been established. The National Child

Labour policy was approved in 1987, in which the government included eliminating child labour in hazardous sectors as part of the 10th Five Year Plan. Hazardous sectors include construction, foundries, mines, and other occupations and processes that negatively affect child health and psyche. Education policies to combat child labour are also included in this plan, ensuring special education for child labourers. Formal and non-formal schooling is provided for a maximum period of three years, after which students are expected to reach a level equivalent to the 5th standard. If children are capable of advancement before the completion of three years, they are encouraged to do so. A choice of vocational training is offered to those who wish to take up skill-based work after the initial training at special schools. In addition, these children are provided with a package of welfare inputs, such as supplementary nutrition and health-care.

Selected Laws Promoting the Status of Children in India:

- 1986 Child Labour Act (Prohibition and Regulation)
- 1992 Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods Act
- 1994 Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act (Regular and Prevention of Misuse)
- 1996 Persons with Disabilities Act (Equal Protection of Rights and Full Participation)
- 2000 Juvenile Justice Act (Care and Protection)

The special concern for reducing child labour is also observable at the state level. As one example, the government of Gujarat established a programme that aims to have all children below the age of fourteen years in school by 2010—in compliance with the 2nd Millennium Development Goal—with follow-up and monitoring evaluation occurring in the following two years. The structure of the programme entails:

1. Identification of child labour;
2. Release and rescue of child labourers through an established task force;
3. Educational rehabilitation of children, which is focused on children in the age group 5–14, and those who are out of school, those who drop out of school or were rescued from labour;
4. Various measures to improve quality of education;
5. Focus on migrant children;
6. Focus on child labourers with special needs;
7. Income generation alternatives for parents;
8. Awareness and social mobilisation, which aims to engage communities in prevention, rehabilitation and monitoring through a variety of activities;
9. Child labour monitoring, also comprising evaluation methods by different actors; and
10. Training, capacity building and research.

Multiple state departments will be responsible for implementation of the 10 steps, such as the state Labour Department and the state Education Department. Other organisations also have a role in this programme: NGOs are an example, which carry out a variety of activities such as assisting in the release and rescue operations of the Task Forces and taking care of rescued children until they are recovered. The action plan is monitored by a constituted

Fire Safety Norms for Schools

Do's

- Evacuation drills should be practised once a month for all teachers and students.
- Schools should have an alternate escape staircase.
- RCC roof with one hour of fire resistance.
- Two doors for classroom and opened when occupied.
- Smoke cum heat detectors installed in the centrally air condition building.
- Electric supply to each room should Multiple Circuit Breaker (MCB).
- Laboratories in the building should have one unit of DCP extinguisher of five kg capacity and two units of carbon dioxide extinguishers of 4.5 kilogram of capacity.
- Kitchen/pantry for school should be in a separate room.
- School buildings higher than 15 metres must observe fire protection norms for high-rise buildings.
- Trained school staff to use suitable extinguishers.
- Fire service ladders should be able to reach the building from two sides.

Committee and legal enforcement. As another educational mechanism for combating child labour, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan scheme was created to bring children from backward communities into the educational mainstream. Twenty-five districts of Gujarat are being covered by this scheme, with a total of 6,592 alternative schools covering 128,980 children.

It is important to note that the implementation of this programme utilises an integrated approach to fulfill child rights. Several areas are comprised, such as health, development and quality education. Given the complexity of the issue, protection against exploitation, abuse, discrimination and neglect must also be addressed. The approach requires meaningful participation, not only from the various

institutional departments, but also from the communities themselves. This way, development can be achieved at the rural, tribal and urban levels. Fulfillment of child rights objectives will therefore require specific steps: community awareness, as the Gujarat State Action Plan for the elimination of child labour promotes; the social and economic empowerment of women's groups; the improvement of health and nutrition indicators for mothers and children; and the strengthening of the protective environment for children. Quality education is also a key area; for this, school enrollment campaigns have been undertaken, teacher training and school curricula have been improved, and school resource centers have been supported.

While significant efforts have been made, there is still much to do at both the national and state levels. What the existing projects and campaigns have proved, and what is important to retain, is that the only way to eliminate child labour is to combine multi-stakeholder efforts in an integrated approach. ■

Basic rights of the children

- Right to survival
- Right to development
- Right to protection
- Right to participation

– UNICEF

Do Safe Schools Interest Insurers?

Appreciating risk is a well-developed skill among India's growing retinue of investors and businesses, including the insurance sector. Yet such risks relate to near-term issues – such as returns on stocks and mutual funds – and are not sufficiently concerned with a critical lifelong investment: the safety of our own children in their schools.

Unsafe schools are a reality. This has been seen many times in the last decade, at great and tragic cost. The Kumbhakonam fire tragedy in 2004 took 92 young lives; the 2001 Gujarat earthquake killed hundreds of children – over 400 in a single incident; the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir killed over 17,000 children in India and Pakistan, crushing them to death under their school buildings. Despite the opportunity for using schools as safe facilities for public shelter following disasters, school buildings are instead a liability, and the worst place to concentrate our children.

A recent school safety audit of 54 schools in six hazard-prone states of India revealed serious shortcomings in school safety and preparedness. The audit was implemented among school teachers and administrators, in coordination with the respective local government authorities. It uses a range of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information on school resilience. In many ways this is a mitigation measure.

The audit targeted schools in disaster-prone areas: flood affected areas of Assam, Rajasthan and Maharashtra; earthquake affected areas of Gujarat and Jammu and Kashmir; and tsunami-affected areas of Tamil Nadu. In each of these locations the audit assessed staff understanding of hazard safety, structural safety, preparedness plans,

and the impact of existing mitigation measures. The influence of non-school actors – government, NGOs and private businesses – on school safety was also reviewed.

Although comprehensive analysis of findings is pending, the following five points have emerged clearly:

First, processes and methods that reduce disaster risks – such as design of seismically safe buildings – are not sufficiently considered even after the area served by the school has faced a major disaster. School buildings are often structurally unsafe.

Preventive Measures

School authorities:

- Set up a chain of command, and define staff roles and responsibilities (first aid, roll call, search and rescue, among others.)
- Form safety clubs in schools.
- In large schools, decentralise first aid equipment, student lists, and instructions for managing electricity and water, among others.
- Be aware of your area's lines of communication, disaster planning, emergency channels.
- Designate an outdoor evacuation assembly area.

Teacher:

- Hold classroom discussions.
- Practice drills.
- Hold hazard hunts and eliminate hazards wherever possible.
- Prepare class lists and identification tags with name, parents' names, teacher's name and address.

School disaster management team:

- Form and train a search and rescue unit.
- Form and train an evacuation and temporary shelter team.
- Form and train a First Aid team.

Source: *Times of India*, July 14, 2008.

Second, the focus of reconstruction after any disaster has been on newer and bigger buildings, and not on safer school buildings. Size matters. Safety does not.

Third, the schools that are safer have not yet shared their experiences with schools that need to be rebuilt. Schools are temples of learning but school-to-school learning on safety is not occurring.

Fourth, the teachers in the surveyed schools have high levels of interest in making schools safe, but they do not know where to access basic, useful information. Current constraints in time and resources inhibit this access.

Fifth, where school safety activities are promoted by NGOs, the government, or the corporate sector, follow-up is often lacking. This almost guarantees that the high cost initial effort will have diminishing returns.

In short, not enough is done to mitigate risk faced by children at school.

What can be done? How can government and civil society be best utilised to leverage results? One interesting solution shines out. Insurance companies should inspire their policy holders to demand certificates of school safety from their respective education authorities. Authorities should certify if the school is safe and prepared reasonable risks. Once such a demand is built, schools and governments are bound to act. The insurance sector has the resources and the weight to take the lead. As in politics or economics, demand rules: let policy holders create a demand for protecting children at school. ■

Mihir R. Bhatt, Honorary Director,
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Inclusion of Disaster Management in School Curricula: Lessons for South Asia

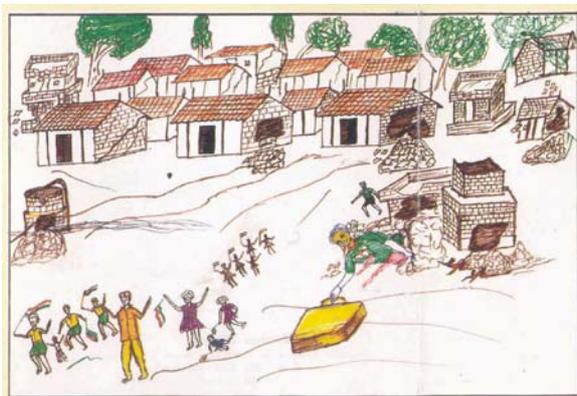
South Asia is one of the most significantly affected regions in the world by natural hazards such as earthquakes, cyclones, floods, landslides, and others. Many interventions have been taken up by respective governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies across this region during past decades to reduce vulnerabilities to hazards, minimise casualties, and minimise damage to property.

In times of interdependent economies, where the effects of hazards in one area affect the economies of other area, a collective effort to transfer technology and knowledge helps in reducing the vulnerabilities of communities.

School safety is an important initiative and schools as institutions of social change will play a crucial role in reducing vulnerabilities to natural hazards across this region.

When we look at institutionalising the disaster risk reduction in schools, we need to consider the following:

- A large number of the members of the social system accept that risk reduction is necessary.



A drawing by Earthquake 2001 affected student from Surendranagar district of Gujarat.

- Many of those who accept it should take it seriously. In psychological terms, they have internalised it.
- Risk reduction is sanctioned. This means that certain members of the system are expected to be guided by risk reduction practices in appropriate circumstances.

Disaster management planning with participation of school authorities, children, parents and other stakeholders should be taken up. Planning will facilitate hazard and vulnerability analyses and help develop resources within their community to respond to an emergencies.

Formation of task forces helps to minimise vulnerabilities and casualties. Related training for these teams include skills for different aspects of response such as first aid, search and rescue, fire fighting, early warning, and others. Information can be disseminated appropriately among different classes of students through painting competitions and debates and ex tempore speaking on aspects of disaster management.

Additionally, several strategies may help strengthen preparedness of communities to various hazards. These include evacuation planning and visible displays of entry and exit routes, evacuation drills, and practicing "drop, cover, and hold" exercises (in earthquake-prone areas).

Including disaster management in the school curriculum, including disaster management training in annual staff training, and the participation of all stakeholders will help hazard-prone South Asia reduce its vulnerability in the coming years. ■

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KEY CONCLUSION

Understanding and Mitigating Disasters at the Community Level through School Safety

Any accident or disaster that kills a child at school is a hard blow for parents and families. This is true whether the disaster is a major storm, a huge earthquake, or a fire. It is no wonder that governments, communities, NGOs, and families seek to do everything practicable to keep kids as safe as possible.

This report rightly notes that better construction practices are necessary to make schools safer – this was learned in Gujarat in 2001, and, most recently, in China in 2008. But this report also rightly notes that neither schools nor communities as a whole can simply engineer our way out of disaster vulnerability. We must assess vulnerability in many ways, and we then must plan and prepare for potential disasters. The failure to plan is particularly tragic when disasters like storms and tsunamis, provide at least some warning. Drills are a key part of these plans. Experience in North America and

Europe shows that emergency drills work when they are repeated and become part of the school routine. This report shows how such practices, embraced by all stakeholders, can work to promote safer schools. Particularly impressive is the experience of the students. Students are often overlooked as potential



A practical exercise to extinguish fire is being conducted in a training in Rajasthan.

stakeholders, but they have significant influence on how parents, families, and communities prepare for disaster. Children often lead communities in innovations, and disaster preparedness is no exception.

This report shows that it is important to understand and mitigate disasters at the community level, with the participation of the widest range of stakeholders. These communities must also rely on local knowledge and local resources to mitigate the effects of disasters. Given the value of schools and of children in the community, the schools are an apt place to effect these efforts, and All India Disaster Mitigation Institute is to be commended for undertaking its efforts to promote community resilience. ■

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