



GLOBAL PLATFORM FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION
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Regional Achievements and Challenges in Implementing the
Hyogo Framework for Action

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Excellencies
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

I commend the UNISDR Secretariat for organizing the first session on regional achievements and challenges in the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action.

The imperative of disaster risk reduction in the SAARC region was recognized by the Heads of State and Government of the Member States during the Third SAARC Summit in 1987. The Leaders noted with concern that South Asia was afflicted with a number of natural disasters that severely undermined the development process and prospects of Member States. The Leaders had resolved to intensify regional cooperation in the area of disaster risk reduction and management.

The widespread devastation and considerable loss of lives caused by the *Tsunami* in 2004 and the earthquake in 2005 in the region provided an immediate sense of urgency in recent years to strengthen and redouble regional endeavours under SAARC in the area of disaster risk reduction. The Malè Declaration on a collective response to large scale natural disasters was adopted by a Special Session of the SAARC Environment Ministers held in Malè in June 2005.

Pursuant to the Malè Declaration, a Comprehensive Regional Framework for Action (2006-2015) was adopted in 2006 to address the specific needs of disaster risk reduction and management in South Asia. The Framework is aligned with the Hyogo Framework of Action (2005-2015).

Another important outcome of the Malé Declaration was the establishment of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) in New Delhi in October 2006. The SDMC provides policy advice and facilitates capacity building, research, training, system development, expertise promotion and exchange of information for effective disaster risk reduction and management. The mandate of the Center has also been expanded to include the development of a Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism for the region.

Today, SAARC remains engaged at various levels to promote cooperation among Member States in the areas of risk reduction, response and recovery. Periodic meetings at the Ministerial-level and the Technical Committee on Environment and Forestry continue to address various issues related to disasters. In addition, the SAARC Disaster Management Centre has been set up as the focal SAARC agency responsible for disaster risk reduction and response. The Center has four Divisions namely: (i) Water and Climate Related Disasters; (ii) Geologically Related Disasters; (iii) Biological and other Man-made Disasters; and (iv) Policy Planning and other Related Issues. A Disaster Response Division is also in the process of being established. The Center works closely with National Focal Points in all Member States in advancing the SAARC agenda for cooperation in disaster risk reduction and management.

The Hyogo Framework had underscored the critical role and importance of regional organizations, but a lot remains to be done in utilizing the potential role these organizations can play in reducing the risks of natural disasters.

Natural disasters, as we all know, do not always respect national boundaries. Most of the disasters have strong regional and sub-regional characters. Therefore, meaningful regional cooperation can effectively augment global and national initiatives for disaster risk reduction.

In this context, I would like to briefly highlight the challenges faced by South Asia. Six out of eight member states of SAARC are located, partly or fully, on the Himalayas and its associated ranges, which are still adjusting to tectonic movements. This had triggered some of the worst earthquakes of history. The probability of even more disastrous earthquakes has increased over time.

The Himalayas have the largest deposits of glaciers outside the poles, which are melting fast as a result of global climate change. The immediate consequence has been the increasing incidence of flash floods, glacial lake outburst floods and riverine floods. The long term impact of this phenomenon presents a serious threat to the perennial river systems of the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra that sustained life and civilizations in South Asia for millennia.

South Asia has a long coastline of more than fifteen thousand kilometres which face cyclonic storms, storm surge and inundation regularly. Rising sea levels now threaten the survival of many low lying coastal and deltaic regions.

These hazards of nature have been compounded by multiple layers of vulnerabilities. South Asia supports 23% of the world population, with less than 2% of global income. This has resulted in acute vulnerability due to conditions of poverty and deprivation among nearly 500 million people.

South Asia also has the largest concentration of mega and million plus cities which are growing at a high average rate of 4.5%. Building practices and settlement patterns in most of these cities have made them vulnerable to disasters.

However, there is a paradigm shift taking place in South Asia, slowly but definitely, from post disaster relief and rehabilitation towards a more holistic management of disasters, in which the five priorities of Hyogo Framework of Action are acting as the prime drivers of change. Every country of the region has now a well defined National Disaster Management Framework and at the regional level we have the SAARC Comprehensive Disaster Management Framework which is firmly aligned with the HFA.

Local communities, particularly in the rural areas, have been involved in disaster preparedness, as never before, with appreciable results, as demonstrated in drastic reductions in deaths and casualties in the recent disasters. Countries have also significantly enhanced their capacities for preparedness and response.

All the countries of the region have set up dedicated institutions for disaster management at all levels. At the regional level, a SAARC Disaster Management Centre has been set up in New Delhi, India, while three other regional Centres – the SAARC Meteorological Research Centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh; and the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre in Male, Maldives – are engaged in addressing diverse issues related to disaster risk reduction.

Although the SAARC Disaster Management Centre was set up just two and half years back, it has been able to develop the basic standards and protocols of regional cooperation on disaster management in the region. A draft Regional Agreement on Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism has been developed for adoption of the Member countries.

SAARC Road Maps have been developed on specific themes of disaster risk reduction through a participatory process. These include:

- Coastal and Marine Risk Reduction
- Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction in Development
- Integration of Climate Change Adaptation with DRR
- Community Based Disaster Risk Management
- Applications of Science and Technology for DRR

Road Maps on regional cooperation for earthquake and flood risk assessment and mitigation are also in the process of being developed.

Based on these road maps a number of projects have been taken up for implementation. The most important is the development of a Digital Vulnerability Atlas of South Asia which would integrate available information on physical hazards and social and economic vulnerabilities in multiple layered GIS enabled maps, that would provide a useful tool to the member countries for assessing the local levels risks and take appropriate measures for mitigating the risks.

A Regional Protocol for Sharing of Tsunami and Cyclone Early Warning System is also being developed in collaboration with all the member countries of the region which would supplement the existing WMO and ESCAP panel in a much more comprehensive manner.

A collaborative arrangement is being worked out in consultation with International Space Charter for Sharing of Data Products from Earth Observation Satellites for Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia. Indian Space Research Organization would be supporting this initiative.

Region specific tool kits for Mainstreaming DRR in Development, Community Based Disaster Risk Management and Integration of Climate Change Adaptation with DRR are being developed, which would assist the Member Countries in the implementation of the agreed road maps on these issues.

A template for coastal and marine risk mitigation plan is being developed on the basis of which national plans will be harmonized and a regional coastal risk management plan will be developed.

Training and capacity building has remained an important component of regional cooperation. A number of training programmes on different aspects of risk reduction are being organized, utilizing the training infrastructure available in the region. These cross country learning experiences have enhanced the spirit of regional cooperation among the countries of the region.

The SAARC Disaster Management Centre has also taken up an ambitious Knowledge Networking project, supported by UNISDR, by which the implicit and explicit knowledge resources of the region shall be interlinked through a two way process:

- First, by unlocking the rich and diverse indigenous knowledge of the region through a process of documentation, validation and replication; and

- Second, by interlocking the knowledge based institutions of the region through South Asia Disaster Knowledge Network (SADKN).

These are some of the initiatives taken in the recent past to enhance regional cooperation on disaster risk reduction in South Asia. Probably these are very modest steps compared to the daunting challenges that we confront. However, we believe that the various initiatives that SAARC is taking will go a long way in realizing our common endeavour to have a safer and more disaster resilient world.

In this regard, I look forward to working with all our partners such as the UNISDR with whom SAARC has formalized its collaborative engagement with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2008. Likewise, we will also continue to engage with the UN and other organizations as we strive to make this world and our peoples safer and better prepared to deal with disasters. In doing so, it is equally important for the different regions and sub-regions of the world to interface with each other more closely and learn from each other's experience. The setting up of a network of regional organizations under the auspices of the UNISDR to promote South-South cooperation in the field of disaster management merits our serious consideration.

Disaster risk reduction and response remains a priority under the agenda of SAARC and Member States are committed and engaged in pursuing meaningful cooperation in this important area. As a region prone to many disasters, numerous initiatives are being pursued in earnest to reduce risks, enhance capacities and to develop mechanisms to respond effectively and efficiently to disasters. In this endeavour, we look forward to working closely with all our partners.

Thank you!