

international nature of economies and societies. This analysis was also hotly contested, but for me it represented a more accurate and positive view of the role of the women's movement in the hands of the next generation, and the way in which feminism (often through the discourse of gender) can *engage* with the forces that govern our social, economic, and political contexts. It is this engagement that I find is so essential to my own understanding of the interaction between feminist theory and GAD, and is so key to the path taken by journals such as *Development in Practice*, bridging the gaps between policy making and practice, and contributing to development knowledge and experience.

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## Beyond IDNDR: South Asian Agenda Regional Meeting for Asia—Risk Reduction and Society in the Twenty-first Century, Bangkok, 23–26 February 1999

*Mihir R. Bhatt*

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## Context

In early February 1999, some 70 leading South Asian individuals and organisations met in New Delhi at the Policy Forum

entitled 'Future of Mitigation, South Asian Disasters', to explore the agenda for action and research on this subject. The event was convened by Duryog Nivaran, a South Asian initiative in disaster mitigation, and the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) of India, and supported by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the British government. The government officials, NGO leaders, and media agencies who attended discussed over 40 basic documents, the most noteworthy among which were 'Defeating Disasters: Ideas for Action' and 'Seeing Disasters Differently: Visions and Suggestions' by Madhavi Malalgoda Ariyabandu of Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) in Sri Lanka. In addition, National Policy Briefs from high-ranking government officials and Media Policy Briefs from leading media personalities were presented and discussed. **Niel Maagaard** from UNDP's office in New Delhi inaugurated the event, and **José Félix Merladet** of the European Union chaired the concluding session.

DMI then produced a Summary Report, while ITDG documented the detailed discussions. It is hoped to publish a full report on the Forum, possibly with help from the National Disaster Management Division of the Indian government's Ministry of Agriculture, while ITDG and Oxfam GB are supporting some of the follow-up.

DMI's understanding of the main points raised in the Forum served as an agenda for the IDNDR-ESCAP Regional Meeting for Asia—'Risk Reduction and Society in the Twenty-first Century'—held 23–26 February 1999 in Bangkok.

## Recommendations

### *Reducing the vulnerability of the poor in communities*

It was recommended to initiate a regionwide programme for expanding concepts of risk and hazards to include the vulnerability of communities. The region has a wide range

of initiatives to reduce vulnerability and build grassroots capacity. The lessons learnt from these efforts need to be documented and directly linked with policy-making efforts in each country. Further, the views of the 'victims' in understanding their own vulnerability and capacity are valuable. These views must be strengthened with resources and information so that the reduction of vulnerability becomes a community-based approach in the region. The role of organisations such as Duryog Nivaran in this is crucial.

### *Building organised collective strength of victims*

The victims of natural disasters remain isolated from each other. Relief further isolates them from the non-victim communities. As a result, victims do not have a voice or influence either in decision making or in the recovery processes. Experience in the region shows that when the victims work together in a team or group, the impact is positive. The poor then have the opportunity to express what they want and how they want it. However, very few organisations, donors, or governments consider that getting the victims organised is an investment or a policy objective. Coastal, desert, or flood basin communities could be the initial target for such efforts. DMI recommends collecting evidence from the region in order to develop suitable policy and resource allocation measures. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could also set up a working group to provide policy inputs to its members.

### *Improving the quality and standard of relief performance*

Repeated allocation and use of relief assistance has not brought about regionwide improvements in the quality and standards of relief, either in the voluntary or the government sectors, though there are some notable exceptions. For instance, the Sphere

Project<sup>1</sup> has identified South Asia as its pilot project region and Oxfam (India) Trust is playing an active role in promoting improved quality of public and voluntary relief. It is recommended to establish long-term government–media–NGO coordination in monitoring and promoting this throughout the region.

### *Investing in building institutions that serve the victims*

Institution building is not a high priority for the governments of South Asian countries, though UNDP is promoting this concept at the national level by supporting government efforts in this area. How could such institutions include members beyond government agencies, as well as the voices of the actual victims? A single institution at the national level is not adequate. How could the number of such institutions be increased, both nationally and regionally, in our fast-growing civil societies? How could local communities become actively involved? It is recommended that UNDP invite governments and donors to make institution building a regional priority.

### *Reviewing public expenditure on relief*

Relief is viewed as charity and hence accountability for relief expenditure, public or private, is accorded low priority. Accounting for the costs associated with relief assistance, and making relief more responsive to the demands of the victims, is crucial. It is recommended first to review relief expenditure as an investment in regionwide mitigation through an intergovernmental mechanism; and second, to request the Ford Foundation, which has extensive experience in promoting budget analysis and policy priority in the region, to take a lead in finding ways to make relief more accountable.

### *Promoting risk auditing of infrastructure and urban investments*

South Asia is attracting record levels of investments, most of which are directly targeted towards building infrastructure. Such facilities are exposed to the risks of floods, droughts, and other natural emergencies and may themselves also contribute to disasters such as flooding. It is recommended that a regional programme be launched to develop and promote methods of risk auditing for major infrastructure development projects, especially from the point of view of the users, and possibly vulnerable communities, via the Disaster Mitigation Facility of the World Bank. This would include the banking and insurance sectors.

### *Making gender concerns central to the disaster mitigation cycle*

The impact of disasters is especially great on women both as household members and as individual workers. Since both their working and living conditions are greatly and repeatedly affected, their family and income-generating workloads increase after each event. Owing to social structures and lack of entitlements, women are the last to receive relief, if at all. Gender concerns should become central to all mitigation cycles in the region through a regional consortium of NGO networks.

### *Creating regional risk reduction funds*

Without building mitigation assets at the grassroots level, communities cannot be expected to play an active role in recovery. There are examples in the region where community-based risk-reduction funds have worked and grown. It is recommended that a regional fund be created to promote and support such community-based initiatives with the help of International Development Association (IDA)-12 replenishment money of the World Bank, in association with

South Asian Partnership in Trade Agreement (SAPTA).

### *Integrating hi-tech and community-based early warning systems*

Information technology and related mechanisms are growing fast in the region. However, their use in reducing risks is yet to be planned and achieved, especially so that the technology and information provide early and effective warning to vulnerable communities. It is recommended that a regional information technology programme be developed that provides a community-to-community early warning system and information on preparedness measures with the help of news agencies such as Associated Press or Reuters.

### *Integrating natural resource conservation with disaster mitigation*

The region is facing environmental crisis: coastal areas are becoming more fragile due to salinity ingress, cyclones, and rapid development of ports and related infrastructure; and flooding in major river basins is increasing desert areas and contracting forest reserves. It is recommended that disaster mitigation measures be integrated with regional natural resource management plans with the help of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) or the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)—India taking a lead in the region.

## Note

- 1 The humanitarian charter and minimum standards in disaster response or Sphere Project is a programme of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and Inter Action with Voice, ICRC, and ICVA among others. Based on the idea of the right of the victims to a minimum quality and standard of relief, it provides operational guidelines

for minimum standards in water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter, site planning, and health services (for full details see Book Shelf). DMI has produced the charter in Gujarati and promoted it in the region.

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