Vulnerability to Disasters: Are We Moving Ahead?

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Letter to Editor

DEAR EDITOR

Strong and effective emergency disaster management has been a felt need in all corners of world.[1] India is vulnerable to a variety of natural and man-made disasters.[2] Management of disasters require collaborative and systematically planned efforts of existing administrative set up, civil society, and its various institutions. Effective policies play a vital role in mitigating impact of disasters and reducing likely losses of life/property.

It has been observed that in times of disaster, apart from lack of resources, lack of coordination among various agencies, and an absence of role clarity amongst various stakeholders pose serious challenges. Each disaster highlights that government agencies are either not prepared or ill prepared for next crisis. It is, therefore, important to identify factors that make a critical difference in effective policy outcomes.

In a study to assess hospitals preparedness for disaster in Indore, it was observed that only one hospital had adequate infrastructure for management of disaster.[3] In another study to evaluate staff knowledge and perceptions in disaster preparedness, it was revealed that there were no specific national standards/guidelines through which individual hospitals can develop their capabilities in disaster preparedness.[4]

Active measures like inclusion of information about the do's/don'ts at times of disasters for school children in their curriculum can improve the existing scenario. Panchayati Raj Institutions should be thoroughly involved and states should not circumscribe their involvement. Also there is a need for development of village (rural)/town (urban) level contingency plan. This plan should identify potential hazards, who and what is at risk, identify evacuation routes, contingency fund for the use in distress situation, and building awareness regarding insurance for disasters at the community level.

Program managers should understand role of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in disaster management. Linkages should be established between NGOs and concerned government bodies (Planning Commission, National Disaster Management Authority [NDMA], state/district/local level bodies) enabling them to focus more on strengthening of predisaster preparedness/mitigation activities.

Disaster guidelines have to be user-friendly and must take into account concerns of vulnerable groups like women/child/geriatric population or person with disabilities. Need of the hour is to develop an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs so that need of every individual is addressed.

Ideas like promoting community-based participatory research[5] or clinical application of mobile technology to disaster medicine[6] can be of great help in areas like disaster scene management, remote monitoring of casualties, decision support applications, and field hospital information technology systems.

A paradigm shift has been observed at national level from the relief centric approach to holistic and integrated approach, with more emphasis on prevention, mitigation, and preparedness. But issues like promotion of public awareness regarding research findings,[7] poor communication of academic and scientific knowledge to communities, and up-gradation of all hospitals for tackling any kind of disaster needs to be taken care of if government wants to minimize human sufferings and loss of property.

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