Recovering from small-scale disasters in Assam: An environment justice perspective

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Abstract text

Introduction
The concept of resilience has earned its merit as the capacity of the communities to recover or 'bounce back' after an event (Twigg 2007). Arguably, there are limitations in addressing underlying vulnerabilities and power imbalances with resilience (Mitchell & Harris 2012). Small scale disasters do not warrant external action owing to the limited scale of the impact and media attention. They impact lives and livelihoods of those living in hazardous areas. Therefore environment justice from a rights-based perspective is used here to understand the plight of the vulnerable, and marginalized sections of the society using theories on learning and participation (Walker et al. 2006).

Methods
This paper seeks to answer, *"How do communities and institutions learn and recover from recurring disasters to build community resilience?"* using empirical evidence from Assam, in northeast India. The data was gathered over three consecutive visits after major floods in June 2012, a scoping study in January 2013 and again in September 2013. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with NGO staff and experts, humanitarian and government officials in Assam to understand disaster recovery practices and policies within agencies.

Context
Assam was selected as a case study due to history of recurring floods. In 2012, floods caused 43 breaches on embankments on Brahmaputra. Recurring flood waves in 2012 and 2013 affected the communities' access to basic services. 2.4 million people in 4,540 villages across 128 revenue circles in Assam were affected in the first phase of floods, displacing 543,088 people and leading to 126 deaths (ASDMA 2012).

Results
It emerged that various social groups in diverse geographical conditions had developed practices based on years of experience of living with floods and facing regular displacement. These practices minimised the losses, but did not guarantee speedy and holistic recovery from impact

of floods. The indigenous *Mishing* tribe in Upper Assam constructed their houses on stilts (*chang ghor*), while in Morigaon on the flood plains communities built temporary houses on raised plinths and shared homesteads to divide the investment and risk of losing land to erosion. The materials used were cheap and locally available for easy dismantling and relocating.

The state response was limited to repair and construction of new embankments which breached in the floods in 2013. The humanitarian assistance after 2012 floods, enabled marginalised communities to recover from floods by provision of basic shelter, livelihoods support, water and sanitation interventions. The agencies worked to support early recovery of vulnerable sections using models of cross-scalar learning across agencies under a consortia from October 2012 – May 2013. The agencies took context specific measures using participation and experiences of the local communities.

Conclusions

Enhancing the scope for participation in state and humanitarian response was one of the key gaps, and cross-scalar learning between different NGOs helped in facilitating recovery from floods. However erosion and subsequent floods were ignored. Therefore there is an urgent need for systematic learning processes incorporating participatory approaches that inform and guide government as well as humanitarian policies to understand recovery from small-scale disasters. These processes and learning can be achieved independent of the rural or urban recovery experiences.

***Keywords**: disaster recovery, small-scale disasters, cross-scalar learning, participation*

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Author's Biography

Sneha Krishnan is a PhD candidate from University College London, and a post-graduate Teaching Assistant on Masters course on Development and Planning. Her research focuses on disaster resilience and recovery practices and policies, especially in understanding changes in hygiene behaviour, water and sanitation practices. She has used the case studies of Assam floods and Cyclone Phailin in Odisha for her doctoral research on the above issues. Her interests lie on humanitarian and early recovery issues and challenges in programming, evaluation and evidence synthesis for institutional learning. She has been engaged variously as a researcher, practitioner and trainer in various aspects of humanitarian work engaged with organizations including RedR India, and consultancy projects with UNICEF India, Oxfam India and Save the Children India.