

COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS – AN UNIQUE EXPERIENCE IN POST DISASTER SCENARIO

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Abstract

In the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh, recurring disasters caused by cyclones result in loss of life, of productive agricultural resources and of human settlements. Community preparedness is seen as a suitable mitigation strategy, leading to the development of task forces, able to intervene both before and after disasters. Training members of the task forces – drawn from the villages in the exposed areas – includes emergency medical care, rescue and evacuation, and the organization of relief camps. Preparing contingency plans is important, together with ‘disaster drill’. The task forces are also able to contribute to other aspects of community development

Reconstruction; disaster mitigation; emergency housing; India

CASE STUDY: CYCLONIC STORM – 1996

Konaseema (Coastal Andhra Pradesh) is the most populous and prosperous region in Andhra Pradesh, South India. The stretch of the coastline is about 170kms and most of the area is vulnerable to cyclone and consequential heavy rains. A cyclonic storm started in the Bay of Bengal on 3rd Nov. 96 and continued on a westerly course and on 6th Nov 96 dramatically picked up speed and moved in a west north westerly direction and crossed the Andhra coast at about 10.30pm on the intervening night of 6th / 7th Nov 96. It was a severe category cyclonic storm and the phenomenally high core wind speed reached about 160 to 200 km/h. This cyclonic storm which hit the prosperous Konaseema region with a core of hurricane speed has left a trail of devastation, killing many human beings, cattle and livestock and destroying the various crops in an unprecedented manner. The killer hurricane devastated both central and eastern deltas of East Godavari district which is a rice bowl of Andhra Pradesh. About 45 lakh (4.5 million) coconut trees have been damaged causing loss of about Rs. 3500 cores (Ten lakhs is equal to one million. Hundred lakhs is equal to one core). The paddy crop in 175000 hectares has been damaged in addition to other commercial crops in 60,000 hectares. The banana and other plantations were razed to the ground. About 427000 houses have been damaged and 4000 people were killed. The total loss is estimated up to Rs.10,000 to Rs.15,000 cores on the whole. The Government announced this calamity as more than national and made an appeal to people, from all walks of life, all over the world, to help the victims.

The 6th November'1996 was a black day for East Godavari and West Godavari people, as the devastating cyclone hit the two districts in which massive destruction of crops, loss of life, cattle, livestock, housing took place. This was the first of its kind in the two districts. In fact the people of these two districts were not aware of the severity and effects of this devastating hurricane, as they had not experienced a homecare like this one before. In particular the damage was most critical in the "Konaseema" area in East Godavari District, which is famous for coconut gardens and paddy cultivation. Most of the paddy produced in this area of the state covers the requirement of food grains of Andhra People.

The devastating cyclone caused uprooting 90% of the coconut trees, and the remaining died in a week or two. The entire communication systems both in East Godavari and West Godavari districts were destroyed. Telephone and electric poles were uprooted and people of East and West Godavari districts were in the dark for 5 consecutive nights. As many as 250000 of houses collapsed, and 15,612 died in this deadly hurricane due to the collapse of their houses and to flooding. 32,502 animals also died. The growing crops, which were going to be harvested in a month or two were submerged by seawater which washed out 12,000 hectares of land. Most of the people in this area have one or two acres of coconut gardens and they periodically get income by selling the coconuts. This devastating cyclone washed out entire coconut gardens and financially ruined all these marginal coconut farmers. Those who were dependent on milk animals are also in panic situation as they have lost their animals, which were providing income to their respective families. As a matter of fact, even now, if they replace the plants again it will take another 5 to 7 years to yield an income for their livelihood. Most of the farmers are now looking for agricultural work in other lands for their livelihood. All thatched and mud brick houses collapsed and people sheltered under the trees.

Community Preparedness – Concept of Task Force

In the aftermath of the 1996 cyclone at Amalapuram, the Sanghamitra Service Society initiated a Community Preparedness Programme in the East Godavari District. The main objective of this programme is to establish Task Force Groups at village level expecting them to help their co-villagers in situations of disaster (Pre, during and post) and to mitigate its effects.

The Criteria followed in identifying the Task Force Members to undergo Disaster Preparedness Training includes,

- ❑ Community Acceptance
- ❑ Age group between 18-35
- ❑ Female Task Force Members not less than 25% in each group consisting of 30 Task Force Members.
- ❑ Committed to help their co-villagers.
- ❑ 5TH standard education qualified persons.
- ❑ Attitude towards village development.

Keeping in mind the problems encountered by people in past disasters, training modules have been developed in such a way that they are understandable to the participants. Seventy five percent of training modules are developed with demonstrations.

The following are the training modules

Module – 1: Emergency Medical Care

Natural disasters often increase morbidity and mortality. The regular channel of communication and life support services like medical facilities are jeopardized in the event of a disaster. People suffer from mental shock. Panic and confusion prevails. A prompt response must provide first aid and organise a tiered system of care to victims before they are moved to hospitals.

Emergency medical care is and should be an integral part of the overall Disaster Preparedness plan. The programme has as its primary objective the treatment of the wounded in the immediate aftermath of a cyclone and flood in order to reduce the number of deaths and disabilities and bring about recovery.

- ❑ Treatment of shock.
- ❑ Pressure points to stop bleeding.
- ❑ Treatment of snakebite & scorpion sting.
- ❑ Artificial respiration to drowning people.
- ❑ Use of bandages and splints to deal with fractures.
- ❑ Manual carriers.

Module – 2: Emergency Rescue and Evacuation

Emergency Rescue and Evacuation is the immediate responsibility of the group within a community or in the immediate aftermath of a cyclone, building collapse, flood etc. It is therefore necessary that a trained community know the best available means to achieve this, with locally available resources and financially within their reach.

This module has the following contents:

- ❑ Knots and their uses in disaster times.
- ❑ Searching methods.
- ❑ Construction of floating aids to rescue non-swimmers.
- ❑ Evacuation methods.
- ❑ Rope bridge construction.

Module – 3: Emergency Relief Camp Organisation

The evacuated people have to be temporarily sheltered and provided with food. The Task Force Members of a local community have the responsibility of organising the Relief Camp for the evacuees. To organise a Relief Camp in a systematic way, this module will help the Task Force Members, familiar with Relief Camp Management skills.

- ❑ Transportation of victims.
- ❑ Shelter arrangements.
- ❑ Dry ration vs. cooked food.
- ❑ Types of emergency meal centers.
- ❑ Trench latrines.
- ❑ Water purification methods.
- ❑ Kitchen sitting and layout.
- ❑ Disposal of kitchen waste.
- ❑ Food and water requirements.
- ❑ Storage of food possibilities.
- ❑ Basic principles of hygiene.
- ❑ Serving techniques including queuing.

Present Status of the Trained Groups in the village

After having gone through the above mentioned training, eighteen Task Force Groups in eighteen cyclone prone villages have been formed.

Module – 4: Contingency Plan Development

Trained Task Force Members are expected to share their responsibilities and actions in pre, during and post disaster situations. A contingency plan is an improvement plan developed by the Task Force Members along with the local community.

Incidentally, state and district level contingency plans exist in all states of India but these plans are developed by government officials and these plans envisage allocating sole responsibilities to these officials.

However the contingency plan developed by the people envisages the responsibilities and actions of each trained Task Force Member in pre-during and post disaster situations. In all of our 18 villages, Task Force Members along with local community have developed contingency plans.

Module – 5: Disaster Drill

To get more perfection on these skills and to become more familiar with the responsibilities and actions of each Task Force Member in disaster situations, Disaster Drill or Rehearsals are very necessary. In all of the eighteen villages these

drills are going on. And it is the responsibility of Task Force Groups to update the contingency plan according to changes made in the village from time to time.

Insurance

In view of impending disasters and the devastation they cause, we had elaborate discussions with Task Force Members in regard to providing insurance to houses, properties and livestock. Now the Task Force Members are taking much initiative in convincing the thatched house owners; so far as many as 233 thatched houses have been insured.

Task Force Member in Village Developmental Activities

A Disaster Preparedness Programme cannot be implemented in isolation. It should be integrated with ongoing development activities in the village.

In all of our target villages, the trained Task Force Members are involved in village development activities.

Yuva Sakthi Sanghas

The trained Task Force Members are now associated with Yuva Sakthi Sanghas promoted by the government of Andhra Pradesh. The main objective of this Programme is to make the rural youth self employed with the assistance given by the government.

Role of Task Force Members in Decision Making on Village Development Activities

Since all the Task Force Members are recognised by Mandal Development Officer(M.D.O.) and Mandal Revenue Officer(M.R.O.), these groups are given due importance in the decision making process on village developmental activities.

Disaster Relief Fund

Task Force Members and those who underwent Disaster Preparedness training have created the Disaster Relief Fund with the amount of food expenses given to them during their training period. It is a positive sign for development.

Apart from creating a fund for Disaster Relief, Task Force Members also respond to the problems being encountered by vulnerable groups in the village time to time.

Vasalathippa

Task Force Members at Vasalathippa village paid an amount of Rs. 2000/- from their Disaster Relief Fund for white washing the Elementary School Building.

Balusuthippa

- During the riots for territorial fishing rights, between Bhiravapalem and Balusuthippa villages, Task Force Members have distributed 10 bags of Rice to poor families in the village, worth of Rs. 10000/-
- Last winter, as many as 62 aged poor men and women (those who are not able-bodied to work) at Balusuthippa village have been provided with woollen blankets worth Rs.5000/- by village Task Force Members. The money is spent from the Disaster Relief Fund account.

Vasalathippa

Task Force Members of Vasalathippa village were successful in appointing the local person as an Anganwadi teacher for their village. In fact, the appointment was initially given to an outsider as an Anganwadi teacher at Vasalathippa village, denying the qualified persons in the village for the post.

All the Task Force Members have staged a Dharna before the Revenue Development Office (R.D.O.) at Amalapuram and succeeded in appointing a local person as Anganwadi teacher instead of an outsider.

Similarly the dealership of the ration shop at Vasalathippa village has been given to a local person instead of an outsider.

Family Level Preparedness

We would like to initiate this programme through our trained Task Force Members in each village. The following are the steps to safety of each family living in a cyclone prone area / village.

1. Find out what could happen to you.
2. Create a family level disaster plan.
3. Checklist while on Evacuation.
4. Practice and Maintain plan.
5. Neighbors helping neighbors.
6. Evacuation.
7. Emergency supplies.
8. Save your livestock, cattle and pets

This family – level preparedness is followed by developing contingency plans with the active participation of communities by utilising participatory rural appraisal tools. This involves:

- Presenting the contingency plans to the other stakeholders (government and others) both at mandal and district levels, for possible collaboration.
- Finalisation of contingency plans by the communities, which means:
 - PREPARATION OF ACTION PLAN.
 - IMPLEMENTATION.
 - FOLLOW-UP.
 - REVIEW.
 - REPLANNING.

CONCLUSION

Briefly, the villager-based approach to disaster relief and mitigation turns out to be an indispensable tool, not only for the immediate tasks associated with the natural disaster situations, but also as a means for improving the strength and resilience of the local communities. The villagers participate in the task forces, acquire needed skills that are immediately applicable in the disaster context. At the same time, community cohesion is improved, with benefits all round leading to betterment of the status of the villages and the social position of the villagers