

# Responding to earthquakes: People's participation in Reconstruction and Rehabilitation<sup>1</sup>

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*"Life, after disasters is what happens to people, while the state is busy making other plans".*

## Introduction

Cyclones, earthquakes and floods visit us year after year. They are a grim reminder of the lack of a disaster management policy and vulnerability reduction measures at the national and local level. Disasters erase in a few minutes, years of development gains disrupting the social, political and economic fabric of the affected communities. Where disasters strike, they hit the most vulnerable the hardest. Both the State and the numerous agencies become quite clueless, as to the direction to take and on what needs to be done. There is a kind of paralysis of institutions in society, within civil society groups and most importantly, between the civil society groups and the government. This was on stark display in the first few days of Gujarat earthquake. Rehabilitation of earthquake-affected communities is a challenging task. It calls for vision, innovation, resources and above all long-term commitment. Rebuilding lives and livelihoods along with life support systems like shelter, health care, schools, ration shops, water supply and sanitation, etc. may take years due to the scale of the disaster.

## Post disaster Response

Gujarat January 26<sup>th</sup> 2001: An earthquake of 8.0 magnitude on the Richter's scale with it's epicenter at Bhuj damaged over 6,20,000 households in villages, towns and cities spread across several districts.

The response was unprecedented. The media was full of reports of valor, sacrifice, tenacity, compassion and generosity from across the country and elsewhere.

Disaster is at the same time, really a big business. It is expected that a huge amount of aid (over Rs.10,575 crores will be finally spent in rehabilitation of people and infrastructure in Gujarat<sup>2</sup>) in the shortest possible time. The scenario is compounded by plethora of agencies - Government agencies, NGOs, religious organizations and the corporate sector. Each one of these doers/agencies comes with their beliefs, assessments and objectives (stated and unstated). Their resource base provides them the power to set the agenda. Affected communities are forced to deal with the

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<sup>1</sup> Prema Gopalan and Upmanyu Patil, Swayam Shikshan Prayog - SSP presented in the Seminar on "Organization and Infrastructure for Disaster Management", held in NIAS Bangalore on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Gujarat Earthquake Recovery Program : An Assessment Report WB and ADB March 14 2001

political dynamics of a very different kind, which surfaces artificially after a disaster. Additionally, massive disasters brings to fore, fault lines in institutional structures. There is breakdown within the administration and in civil society-state relations. These factors need to be considered while structuring a post disaster response.

### **State response**

On the whole, the state response in the wake of disasters has by and large been a replication of standardized packages for reconstruction of housing and infrastructure. Such an intervention process:

- Prevents active participation by community /women's groups
- Precludes a 'reality check' of what peoples' needs are in -shelter, employment, basic services etc. A failure *"to understand the economic and social realities facing disaster victims, leads to poorly designed aid efforts, which don't help protect people from the impact of future disasters"*.<sup>3</sup>
- Does not address region specific economic and social factors. Hence, programmes do not lead to recovery. *"Instead they end up rebuilding the risk of danger in future disasters by ignoring economic realities"*.<sup>4</sup>
- Repeats the usual tendency of centralized, uniform top-down planning and implementation seen in rural development programmes with all its evils in the emergency relief rehabilitation programmes.
- Absence of community participation /consultation/planning mechanisms.
- Allocates a disproportionately high investment on brick and mortar.
- Fails to build people's capacities to understand earthquake resistant technology
- Favors the domination of outsiders as disaster experts.
- Reinforces a client-patron type of relationship between the state and civil society groups
- Ignores people's local knowledge and skills and thus is bereft of an important resource which can sustain the programme beyond the crisis.
- Infuses massive volumes of resources into relief, shelter, basic services and infrastructure, with little or no investment in eliciting people's participation in assessment, planning and implementation.

### **Community Response**

It is well recorded, and the earthquake in Gujarat was no exception, that survivors (esp. collectives of women and local organizations), mobilized to launch post-disaster initiatives in the face of tardy governmental response. Neighborhood groups formed rescue teams and risked their lives to save people, carry the injured to hospitals, this

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<sup>3</sup> World Disasters Report, 2001, IFRC, Geneva

despite death and tragedy in own their families. At such times of crisis, people-based initiatives often precede state interventions.

Relief efforts are usually limited to providing *roti* and *kapda* leaving survivors to evolve employment and shelter alternatives on their own. The trauma faced by survivors is among the critical issues, which are sidelined. Growing impoverishment and complexities of everyday survival, force women and poor communities to cope with the crisis and therefore evolve "self help" responses which:

- Bridge the gap by women taking on increased burden on behalf of their families.
- Address practical needs such as rebuilding shelter, restoring livelihoods, getting children back to school.
- Help cope with ill health and trauma of children and family members.
- Mobilize credit and other resources instead of waiting for aid.
- Enable local communities to move from disaster management to development action (Enormous potential exists to turn a "disaster" into an opportunity for sustainable community development).

While these self-initiatives are at times lauded, they remain largely invisible. Despite the crucial contribution of local survivors and communities, to-date, policy makers are yet to accord any *formal recognition and support* to grassroots community based organizations (CBOs) and women's groups in post disaster programming.

### **Post-earthquake experience in Latur**

Experience of SSP<sup>5</sup> after earthquake in 1993, in Latur-Osmanabad (Maharashtra) shows that, an effective strategy is to support initiatives by empowering local communities. It *showed that listening to women pays*. Involving grassroots women's groups centrally in planning of housing and infrastructure, restoring livelihoods and essential services resulted in maximizing benefits for the poor communities.

This was achieved by transforming a state-led individual beneficiary program into a community-driven effort. Central to this redesigned strategy by SSP<sup>6</sup> was the Government decision to empower the local Mahila Mandals/women's groups in 500 villages to monitor progress of reconstruction of houses and public infrastructure. The success of this effort was largely due to the multiple roles played by women's groups as community facilitators to :

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<sup>5</sup> SSP, Swayam Shikshan Prayog Mumbai, a non-profit organization with extensive experience in working with rural poor communities on development concerns.

<sup>6</sup> SSP was appointed as Community Participation Consultant by the Government of Maharashtra in the Repair and Strengthening program covering over 2,00,000 households in 1300 villages in the Earthquake Rehabilitation programme from 1994 to 1998.

- Inform households of their entitlements compensation, housing assistance
- Monitor earthquake safety features of house construction
- Activate house owners to plan, design and build their houses
- Access basic services such as water, health, schools from the government
- Pool resources - hire masons, hire transport, purchase materials
- Initiate self-help through community contribution
- Compel Gram Panchayats to solve common concerns -water, transport etc.

Crucial to the success of this intervention was finally the community self-monitoring system, created by women's groups assisted by SSP. The macro spin-offs of this endeavor at the level of 2,00,000 earthquake affected households were several:

- Women's collectives were involved in designing houses suitable to their needs
- Increased awareness and use of earthquake resistant technology by homeowners
- House owners contributed actively to rebuilding of houses
- Resource allocations were monitored ensuring accountability of implementing agencies and government officials. And in effect,
- Rehabilitation was dovetailed with development needs of local communities.

After the completion of the earthquake rehabilitation project in 1998, SSP steered the women's groups and communities towards a broad based community development strategy.

### **People to People exchanges -From Latur to Gujarat**

The real lesson from Latur is the need to involve communities, particularly women, centrally in the planning of the repair and reconstruction effort and thereafter in the shaping of on going needs of development in their community.

In SSP's view, sharing of insights and skills by women's groups with previous experience of disasters, would act as the much-needed catalyst for community efforts in Gujarat. In the last six months, over 100 women leaders have traveled to Gujarat to meet with women and communities across the three districts.

The community-to-community exchanges are seen by SSP as a tool of horizontal learning. When women leaders go to Gujarat they are focused on what are the practical needs of people are and how they can be addressed. A process of dialogue ensues - what losses did you suffer after the quake? Was your house destroyed? What else did you lose? What about your children's education? And what about employment? Has it been affected? This manner of questioning led the affected communities to say, we have never met anyone who, like us, experienced the earthquake. It is the first time we have visitors who bring us useful information, and not relief materials, which are not needed by us. The subsequent visits by the SSP and Sakhi Federation teams and the

village based meetings which followed, resulted in setting the basis for confidence building between the two communities.

The Latur earthquake showed that crisis which offers an opportunity for social mobility of women and poor. Exchanges bring with them a new hope for affected women in Gujarat where the caste and religious barriers are predominant. The women in Gujarat were encouraged that ordinary women could come out, for the first time, and do something for their village. Women had defied tradition, by training as masons, supervising earthquake safe construction and playing public roles as community facilitators.

The other challenge agencies face -is how do you actually transfer information on a mass scale and get people to use information on earthquake safety and construct houses that are safe? There are several steps which people have to walk through. The government says, 'well, we have given all these booklets to people and they don't read them. We can't do anything, we have informed people.'

The creation of space for community/ women's groups to participate in the massive reconstruction effort is being neglected by policy makers. SSP seeks to demonstrate the value of participation by women's groups and communities, and is committed to lobbying for supportive policies to institutionalize this strategy in the present context. This is where the experience of Latur comes in very useful where a community self-monitoring system was in place, where women's groups led reconstruction and later development within their communities.

Relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation are actually the milestones. They should not be seen as disconnected periods after a disaster. They are pointers in the path to development. Six months after, we are at a stage where we are looking at rehabilitation but we are moving towards developing the capacities of women and communities to address crucial development needs together with rebuilding houses and habitats.

In the last six months, the highlights of the strategy are:

- Organizing community-to-community exchanges between Sakhi Federations in Latur -Osmanabad (with previous experience of disasters ) to directly mobilize and dialogue with women in affected communities Participatory needs assessment on shelter and basic services
- Rebuilding people's confidence through community awareness camps and meetings
- Building temporary shelters and providing employment through relief works
- Information campaign on entitlements and diffusion of earthquake safe technologies
- Organizing women's self help groups to address social issues, credit , helath and education

- Train and empower women's groups to facilitate community led management of reconstruction at village level.
- Creating dialogue forums between people and government
- Demonstration of low cost and region sensitive building options through community owned resource centres
- Building community resource centres for providing services in health, education, income generation and training
- Interaction with NGOs and government to innovate and scale up efforts for community based reconstruction (instead of a beneficiary approach)

Together with organizations such as ANANDI, OXFAM INDIA, HUM and the district administration, (supported by a team of engineers, architects and grassroots women's groups with previous experience of post disaster reconstruction), SSP has committed to reinforce people's initiatives covering over 200 villages in Kutch, Rajkot, and Jamnagar districts of Gujarat which are among the most affected. SSP has joined hands with SPARC -Mumbai based organization in fund raising from the corporate sector, international and relief agencies to implement a community driven approach in Gujarat.

## Myths and Facts

Arising from the experience of SSP and other like-minded organizations is a sampling of myths which, influence policy makers, planners, donor agencies, multilateral agencies and NGOs. These agencies, do not place adequate emphasis or resources on building community capacities, probably influenced by the following myths :

- **Myth:** Grassroots equals small scale. **Fact:** Grassroots equals very big scale.
- **Myth:** Grassroots work means low-tech work. **Fact:** Grassroots work can be very high-tech work.
- **Myth:** Grassroots equals people who need to learn and be trained. **Fact:** Grassroots can train and teach experts.
- **Myth:** Affected people are victims need to be provided with aid. **Fact:** Village communities have tremendous resilience and they are the first ones to spring to action in calamities and with a little technical assistance, they become prime movers of rehabilitation process.

In SSP's perspective a *people-led process from disaster to development action*:

- Ensures equitable access to information and public resources
- Rebuilds housing and infrastructure with full participation of grassroots women's groups and communities
- Reestablishes livelihoods and restore essential services such as health centers and schools, to ensure basic needs
- Strengthens local governance mechanisms to increases responsiveness to community needs.

- Recognizes community institutions such as grassroots women's groups in establishing safety standards through a community self-monitoring system.

### **Lessons for policy makers**

There are two ways of dealing with a disaster - to build houses and give it to people, or support people to rebuild their houses and lives. The manner in which communities, especially women, are facilitated to respond to disasters and to post-disaster sets the tone for their transition from disaster to development.

*To enable informed participation of women and for the emergence of community-led reconstruction effort, the State has to*

- Ensure information flow on entitlements
- Community consultations are held
- Empower CBOs, especially women's groups to monitor earthquake safety construction
- Create grievance redressal mechanisms
- Avoid intermediaries in the transfer of financial assistance.
- Provide technical training on earthquake resistant construction
- Establish on-site services and infrastructure

### **About Swayam Shikshan Prayog**

Swayam Shikshan Prayog - SSP is a non-profit organization located in Mumbai with field Resource Centres in 5 districts in Maharashtra. SSP's goal is to build and strengthen social political competencies of women's collectives in rural poor communities in the context of local development and governance.

Today, SSP partners with over 700 self-help groups in Latur -Osmanabad districts in Maharashtra to address practical issues around credit and livelihoods, access to basic services - health and education, water supply and sanitation housing and infrastructure. SSP plays a facilitator's role in building independent community owned institutions or the Sakhi Mahasanghs, provide capacity building and forge linkages with local institutions. An alliance between women's groups and the local self-governments addresses issues around access to services and public resources.