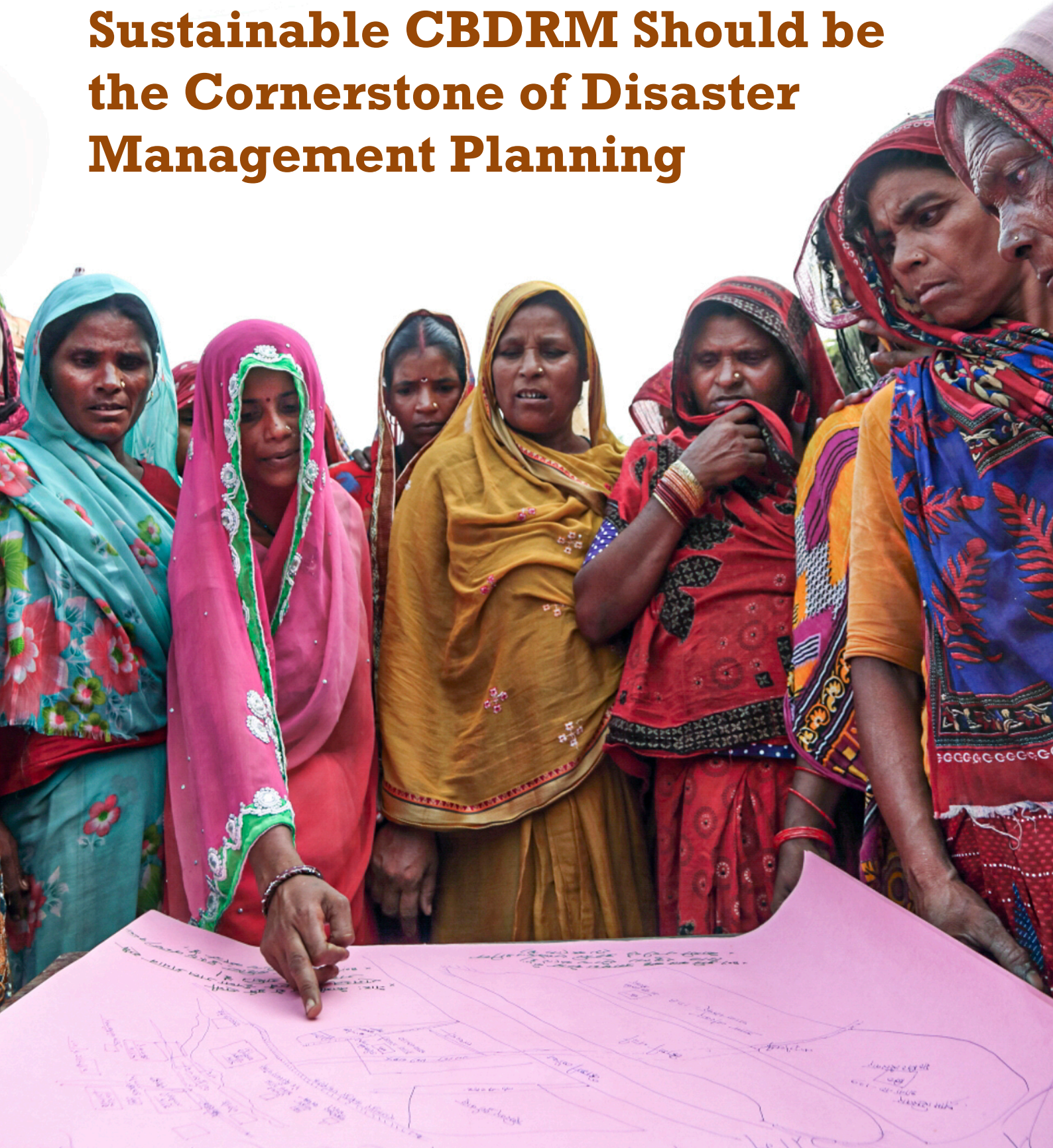




Why Institutionalising Sustainable CBDRM Should be the Cornerstone of Disaster Management Planning



SEEDS Co-Founder Dr Manu Gupta Explains What It Takes To Make Sure Indians Are Ready To Battle A Disaster

Institutionalising sustainable Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) is integral to facing the emerging new realities of a world undergoing unabated climate change. In empowering communities to cope with disasters to the best of their abilities and roping in stakeholders like governments, advocacy groups and corporate bodies to help increase the capacities people already have, we will be creating societies which have resilience in the face of massive disasters.

When the The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) set out to execute their vision of institutionalising sustainable CBDRM across the world, the first step was to frame a definition for the initiative that best captured their intentions. Alongwith their partner organisations, like SEEDS India, GNDR came up with the following definition for institutionalisation:

*“The action of establishing something as a norm in an organisation or culture.
Characteristics: Policy Environment, Structures & Mechanisms, Capacities, Culture, Funding, Accountability.”*

Dr Manu Gupta, co-founder of SEEDS, elaborated on the most significant principles of the charter for institutionalising CBDRM. Dr Gupta, who holds a doctorate in community based disaster management from Kyoto University, spearheads SEEDS’ efforts in making CBDRM a norm across demographics in India. In an interview, Dr Gupta answered questions critical to understanding CBDRM and the importance of institutionalising its practices in India.

Edited excerpts from the interview:

In a country like India which relentlessly faces disasters around the year, how important is CBDRM and the need to institutionalise it?

In the present context of climate change, the nature of disasters are changing dramatically. They are no longer predictable. For example, they are striking in an area and then becoming more frequent. So the traditional approaches to disaster management where the government is expected to be the first respondent during the disaster have to evolve and communities have to be empowered to have their own coping capacity. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown out all the traditional systems of responding to any emergency out of the window. The solution is hinting towards more decentralisation. So, in a way, we are trying to get ahead of the curve, that is the overall goal.



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Dr. Manu Gupta

How is institutionalising CBDRM aligned to that goal?

That's the overall goal in terms of saving lives. With that kind of a goal, community based approaches become very important. Basically, we extend the following to the communities: agency, dignity and choice. Agency, meaning that they have ownership of the initiatives. Dignity, meaning they are able to preserve self-respect in the face of a disaster and their traditions are not overwhelmed. The third is choice; they are able to decide what is best for them. You need to move the system towards this. I think the traditional ways of looking at CBDRM also need to change.

Could you elaborate a bit on how traditional approaches to CBDRM can evolve and change?

The practice of CBDRM started off with the Red Cross helping with rescue and relief in Bangladesh after the 1970 cyclone. They recruited volunteers from the community and trained them in contingency planning. The volunteers in turn taught the practices to the members of their communities.

They would do vulnerability assessment, mock drills and similar activities. The essential tools of CBDRM remain the same. However, considering the scale of the problem at hand, the scale of the need, we will have to use technology, we need to create a better partnership ecosystem that can work quickly enough so that communities can save themselves from the disaster. I think technology and partnerships are the areas which need to be brought in more powerfully than they are.



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What are your thoughts on the integration of CBDRM components with other developmental schemes?

First of all, it was very clear that there is a very inherent link between disasters and development. To understand that, one just needs to analyse what the pandemic has done to countries. The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) which were making good progress and had moved beyond their status as LDCs have slipped back to the category because of the pandemic. Basically, disasters take away all the benefits of development.

Moreover, deficits in development create multiple risks. For example, if physical conditions of housing and infrastructure continue to remain poor due to poor standards of construction and lack of maintenance, they become highly vulnerable even during low intensity earthquakes or storms.

At times, development itself creates disaster risks. Unsafe building practices in seismic zones and mountain slopes expose those very structures to dangers of earthquakes. Indiscriminate withdrawal of groundwater has reduced the traditional coping mechanisms for dealing with droughts in many countries in Asia and the Pacific.

Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction (DRR) in development essentially means looking critically at each programme, activity and project that is being planned from the perspective of reducing risks and making sure they do not end up creating new disaster risks.



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Nodal departments can plan for structural and non-structural mitigation measures concerning important schemes and projects.

Some examples are Indira Awas Yojana, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Sarv Shiksha Abhiyaan, Rajiv Awas Yojna.

Another important aspect to consider is how to safeguard the investments you are making in development. For example, we did this project where we set up solar panels for a health center meant to cater to a semi-large population. Why was it necessary? The people have a health center, but during a disaster when the power goes off, how will the health center run when it is most needed?

However, installing the solar panels made sure the health center could perform emergency surgeries and deliveries even during a disaster. This is the kind of planning and integration we need to do more.

Often, the communities you are working with to foster CDRM may not have had access to a lot of education, don't have too many privileges and have to work hard to make a living. How ready are these communities to invest their time and resources in planning for the possibility of a disaster?

That is a very relevant concern. We have faced some challenges in getting communities to accept CDRM into practice. It is a very normal human tendency to ignore disaster until it hits you. And this applies for all communities irrespective of privileges and education they have. It's just a natural human tendency. For example, we are so hesitant to buy car insurance and only buy it because the law mandates it. Even when we buy it, we look for options where we have to pay the least premium.

Having said that, we have realised that when a disaster strikes our work as advocacy groups becomes extremely important. When we are providing relief, it is also possible for us to explain to communities how important it is to be prepared for the future. This is when we have maximum traction and maximum kind of receptivity to our ideas. While we are providing relief, we are simultaneously educating them on CDRM.

Can you share some model projects fostering CDRM practices that are worth replicating?



There are a few dozen. We did this project in Bihar where communities had no Early Warning Systems for floods. Upstream downstream linkages and early warning systems where can save 90% of lives and livelihoods. In 2018, SEEDS helped set up a task force in Kothiya village in north Bihar. Then with Panchayat development funds, a

rudimentary early warning system was set up. The villagers monitored downstream Koshi River data through the installation of a river gauge in the village and upstream data from Chatara, Nepal through a Nepal government website. When Koshi river flooded a second time the same year, after these systems were put in place, there was no damage to life and household items.

Then in East Delhi, we undertook a programme called the Honeywell Safe Schools. We adopted a child-centric approach to disaster management here and empowered more than 69,441 children, 53,085 parents, and 4,568 teachers across 150 schools up till now in East Delhi, Dehradun and Haridwar to make them disaster ready.



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We helped create a citizen's disaster watch forum in East Delhi called Purvi Delhi Apada Prehri [PDAP] comprising representatives of existing local neighbourhood associations, academicians living in the area, retired government officials and youth. This group was formed to address issues that may arise from the area's location in a crowded river basin and proximity to an active seismic fault. It was also created to address a concoction of vulnerabilities like inequitable income, poor quality housing, lack of holistic public services, unemployment and the 'everyday disasters' these factors might lead to.

A bottom-up "pressure" was created on various line departments of the local government through proactive action, where citizens took upon themselves part of the civic services. Media, especially social media, was smartly used to confront the Government when needed. These are just a handful from the initiatives we have taken.

In your experience, which aspect of Indian community living is the biggest challenge during a disaster?

In India, the issues of water and sanitation should be the primary focus of CBDRM initiatives. We should focus on raising the level of hand-pumps so that they don't get submerged, introduce terra filters which are naturally laid to improve the water quality, work with schools to promote hygiene and washing practices. One very interesting experiment we did recently in Bihar and Delhi where we put up microscopes in communities and asked residents of the villages to look at their hands under the microscope. The bacteria, before and after washing their hands, got projected on the screen. It was a sort of graphic presentation on the necessity to practice hand washing. So yes, initiatives such as these are very integral to the idea of CBDRM.



In India, often women are known to manage and regulate practices in their households. How involved are women in your institutionalising sustainable CBDRM projects?

Our advocacy has been centered around the leadership of women. Our target is to build a leadership at the community level where the leaders can act rationally and calmly in the face of a crisis. Since women are often found to be primary caregivers in an Indian family set up, we always try to reach out to them and get them involved. However, we are trying to create spaces for them where they feel safe and comfortable to talk about their issues. So instead of calling them to large village gatherings, we call them to exclusive group meetings within their homes or at familiar social spaces.

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We also try to focus on women’s mental health a lot. In Kerala, many men go to work in the Gulf and the women are left behind to care for homes, work and also for family. When a disaster strikes, they are alone battling on various fronts. Women representatives from our partner organisations have been speaking to several of these communities of women and trying to extend support. We did one initiative where we gave cameras to these women and asked them to click photos of things that mattered to them — it gave us a profound glimpse into their mental health.

How can various stakeholders like corporate bodies and civil society organisations get involved in institutionalising CBDRM?

Corporate bodies focus a lot on education and health. So, how do we protect those investments against natural disasters? If we are investing in the education and health of underprivileged children, we should focus on CBDRM as well because health and preparedness for disasters are interlinked. For a child to go to school, especially in remote areas, they must be protected against disasters first. Civil societies have an important role to play in these efforts. They can help communities realise the value of taking initiatives on the ground and maintaining them to reduce the losses. They can showcase pilots on the ground to the government, providing them with solutions that can be contextualised and replicated. They can lobby with the government on various aspects of CBDRM and help them understand the need of mainstreaming disaster risk reduction (DRR) in developmental schemes.

