# Looking Back on Disasters[1]

## Swarna Rajagopalan and Nandhini Parthib

## Abstract

Much writing on disasters emerges from the field rather than the halls of academe, although in recent years, a greater alignment of interests exists and there is even a journal dedicated to this topic, *Disasters*. For political scientists and scholars of international relations, however, there is not much in this writing that is of direct interest. Logistical concerns around relief and reconstruction, environmental issues, even the specifics of particular disasters are of less interest than the domestic and international political portents of such events.

This paper draws from the ideas shared during a WISCOMP forum organized at Chennai in September 2006 and the recommendations that emerged from the deliberations. The issues discussed by civil society in the aftermath of two disasters – the December 26th 2004 tsunami and the October 8th 2005 Kashmir earthquake, find resonance in concerns that are currently emerging in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Natural Disasters, Human Security, Disaster Mitigation

## Author Profiles

**Swarna Rajagopalan** is the Founder and Director of the Prajnya Trust. She is also a founding member of the Women's Regional Network. She is a scholar on traditional and non-traditional security topics with several research publications, books and edited volumes to her credit. These include *Women and Disasters in South Asia: Survival, Security and Development*, co-edited with Linda Racioppi (Routledge 2016). She also writes for print and electronic media. She is presently a Visiting Professor of Politics at Krea University. She has previously taught at James Madison College, Michigan State University; Yale University; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; National Management School and Sophia College, Mumbai.

**Nandhini Parthib** is a freelance Writer and Researcher.

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Theoretical arguments for a re-envisioning of security got unexpected support after the December 26th 2004 tsunami and the October 8th 2005 Kashmir earthquake.

Traditional entrenched notions of "state" security, sacrosanct interstate frontiers, autonomous decision-making or complete self-reliance seemed to be washed away or ground into powder in the span of a few minutes. Shock and sympathy for the victims knew no borders as news flashed instantaneously across the world and donations poured in from individuals everywhere. The traumatic events created opportunities for setting aside old frameworks, within which we regard reconstruction and development and long-standing hostilities within and between states. As such, it could be argued that beyond the physical devastation they caused, they also caused fundamental changes along many parameters in the affected societies.

A WISCOMP forum was organized in Chennai, India, in September 2006 with a view to take stock of the range and variety of initiatives taken and lessons learnt in the aftermath of the two disasters. It also sought to identify the theoretical areas where these initiatives and lessons could produce a change and to capture and anticipate new themes and trends in human security scholarship. The discussion at the forum revolved around several themes, including: Gender and disasters; Displacement and disasters; State, civil society and disasters; and Disasters as opportunities for political change.

This paper draws from the ideas shared during the WISCOMP forum and recommendations that emerged from the deliberations. The issues discussed by civil society in the aftermath of the two disasters find resonance in concerns that are currently emerging in the wake of the COVID -19 pandemic.

**Perspective**

Disasters, natural and manmade, have served as a marker in human memory regardless of time and place. World mythologies hold many versions of the primeval deluge, similarly the Lisbon earthquake, the flood theories in the history of the Indus civilization, the Krakatoa volcanic eruption, serve as shorthand for an experience that left its mark, physically and culturally. In a 2005 book, Zeilinga de Boer and his colleagues argue that the decline of Sparta is a consequence of an earthquake in 464 BC; the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 set in motion a questioning view of history that led to the Age of Enlightenment and the Renaissance; the 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua and the failure of reconstruction fueled the Sandinista revolution; and the choice of Panama as the location for the Atlantic-Pacific link canal was a consequence of a volcanic eruption in Nicaragua, the original choice! (Ford 2005)

Much writing on disasters emerges from the field rather than the halls of academe, although in recent years, a greater alignment of interests exists and there is even a journal dedicated to this

topic, *Disasters*. For political scientists and scholars of international relations, however, there is not much in this writing that is of direct interest. Logistical concerns around relief and reconstruction, environmental issues, even the specifics of particular disasters are of less interest than the domestic and international political portents of such an event. In addition, the impact of such an event on power equations within societies is also relevant from this perspective.

**Gender and Disasters**

There are three questions we might pose regarding the gender-disaster relationship: (a) How does the existing gender politics of a society mediate the impact of a natural disaster? (b) What are the roles women play in the aftermath of the disaster? (c) What is the short-to-long term impact of the disaster on gender relations in an affected society? Much of the literature generated by scholars and practitioners focuses on the first question, although practitioners have had to explore the second in their work.

A report by the Global Fund for Women (GFW) identifies several ways in which women and girls are particularly and disproportionately affected by disasters. First, they point to statistics that show that in every natural disaster, women form an inexplicably large number of the dead. Oxfam's report in March 2005 on the impact of the tsunami on women provides several instances, two of which are in Aceh district in which only 189 out of 676 survivors were female and an area in Cuddalore where there were 391 female deaths to 14 male.

The Oxfam report raises a question that resonates with another feminist security studies issue: what happens when the sex ratio in a society changes, and changes dramatically? Elsewhere, den Boer and Hudson have pointed to the higher incidence of violence in society where males far outnumber females, historically (2004, 37). More immediately, the huge loss of life in the tsunami has resulted in families choosing to have children, with some women opting to reverse tubal ligations with recanalization surgery (Menon 2005; Cohen July 2005). This happens in a situation where many women and girls have poor access to the health care they need.

Empirical research on the experience of women and girls and their specific needs in disaster situations draws attention to the importance of the private and household spheres. On the one hand, this seems to perpetuate the private-public dichotomy that keeps women from accessing power. On the other, this is the site where women live and work, often in invisible, unaccounted ways. Indeed, while discussions of security usually take place in a rarified, abstract setting, gender-sensitive accounts suggest that women are most vulnerable because their simplest health and hygiene needs are overlooked in a relief environment where planning and distribution are both male-dominated.

Fordham for instance writes about the 'gendered domains of disaster' when she describes the experiences and responses of women in families evacuated from their homes during floods 1993-4 in Scotland. She explores the meanings of 'home' (lost or damaged in the flooding)— the setting for relationships, a worksite, a place of conflict or of repose or an investment but

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most of all, "a place of security, where one can feel safe and protected" (Fordham 2000, 130). Rashid and Michaud in a study of flood-affected adolescent girls in Bangladesh also find that the main concerns of the girls deal with their circumstances at home. Personal hygiene, privacy, safety en route communal facilities and their workplace were important, and their attempt to follow ingrained customary values and behaviors placed them in jeopardy (2000, 69) Being able to bathe, change and wash without fear of prying or molestation ranked very high (Oxfam 2005; Rashid and Michaud 2000).

The lack of access to facilities extends also to being left out when relief and compensation are being distributed, in needs assessments and planning processes (GFW 2005, 3). The Global Fund for Women reports that often only men are recognized as heads of household, leaving female-headed households out in the cold as far as relief supplies and financial assistance are concerned. Moreover, it is pointed out that agriculture or the informal sector where women preponderantly work are those most likely to be hit in these circumstances. Natural disasters thus reproduce the power equations of the (mostly) patriarchal societies whose lives they interrupt.

Disasters also appear to increase levels of violence within society. The World Health Organization states that child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence, sexual violence and exploitation including sexual exploitation are likely to increase after a disaster (2005). Where displacement occurs, coupled with impoverishment, it makes women and children singularly vulnerable to forced marriage, labor exploitation and trafficking.

Gender-sensitive inquiry thus brings to light important concerns in the relief and reconstruction phase, that enable scholars and practitioners to turn disaster into opportunity—an opportunity to recast gender relations in the direction of equity. Of the three questions posed at the beginning of this section, only the one relating to victim hood has been answered in some measure in the literature. This WISCOMP forum provided an opportunity to push the envelope on considering the other two—the role of women and the impact that disasters have on gender relations in society.

**Displacement and Disasters**

UNHCR's *State of the World's Refugees 2006* quotes Red Cross figures to say that disaster-induced displacement has tripled over the last decade, "with the accumulated impact of natural disasters resulting in an average of 211 million people directly affected each year." (SOWR 2006, 27) The report points out that this is five times the number thought to be affected by conflict. Further:

> Displaced populations and other migrants are often disproportionately vulnerable to disasters because their normal livelihoods have already been disrupted or destroyed, or because their presence has contributed to environmental degradation in their areas of refuge. Where disasters occur in conflict zones, the destruction of infrastructure and lack

of state services can seriously hamper the provision of relief and recovery assistance. (SOWR 2006, 28)

This interface between natural disasters, conflict and displacement is of special interest. How does disaster complicate conflict-induced displacement? In Sri Lanka, almost two decades of conflict and internal displacement were overlaid by the tsunami. Goodhand et al (2005) pointed out that the huge difference between the aid received by the tsunami-displaced and the conflict-displaced was a ready source of resentment. In Kashmir, families divided by diplomacy and conflict got a brief respite when they could cross the border to check on each other. In Aceh, the conflict had already displaced hundreds of thousands and the tsunami added nearly half a million to this (SOWR 2006, 28). What is the extent to which dealing with the latter prepares a society for the former, and what is the extent to which it depletes the capacity to cope with disasters? What are the similarities and differences between the two, and what has been the reality on the ground?

Two journals define two poles of interest in this subject: *Disasters* and *Forced Migration Review*. A search of back issues of the journal '*Disasters*' reveals that very few of the articles are actually about displacement due to disasters. Also, humanitarian workers' reports on disasters include displacement tangentially rather than paying it special attention. On the other hand, *Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends And Developments in 2005*, follows the conventions of the field by primarily defining Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as those displaced by conflict; disaster and development induced displacement are mentioned but receive little attention, except to note that in 2004-05, in Asia, the number of people displaced by disaster dwarfs those displaced by conflict (2006, 62, 64). The conventional association of conflict and displacement in this discourse has important implications for the rights and protection of those displaced by disaster (or for that matter, development). *Forced Migration Review* did compile an issue (July 2005) on the tsunami displaced, but other disasters have not received similar attention so we lack a comparative context. Further, *Forced Migration Online*'s thematic resource 'Disaster-induced Displacement and Resettlement' illustrates the pre-eminence of field concerns. Most of the links on this page lead to guidelines, case studies or best practices. Overall, there is little literature that one might call on to frame the issues in terms of political or security interest.

The WISCOMP Forum contributed by opening discussion along two related lines. The first is the question of multiple displacements in a single area or issues arising in areas where economic or conflict-driven displacement overlaps with disaster-induced displacement. The second is the more delicate and complex matter of a spectrum of factors, from local government to the international community, engaging—in practical and political terms—with these issues within the existing legal and discursive frameworks of sovereignty, rights and human security.

**State, Civil Society and Disasters**

In the aftermath of a major natural disaster, relief and reconstruction depend on several actors, each of which is indispensable to the process: the state including local and national agencies,

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civil society organizations including faith-based groups, international agencies including intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and the international community of donors, volunteers and media.

There is a growing literature on the role of non-governmental organizations, and of course, there are assessments of state performance. Jalali, writing about the Turkish earthquake of 1999, identifies three important functions performed by civil society organizations: "It creates social capital (cooperation and trust) for effective disaster relief, intermediates between state institutions and the concerns of disaster victims and supports the public sphere by raising issues in the public arena and demanding public action (2002, 123)." In the case of this Turkish earthquake, the state's ability to deliver relief or long-term solutions seemed doubtful. The 1995 Kobe earthquake in Japan is regarded as marking the renaissance of voluntarism, with organizations retooling to better respond to disasters in the future and the formulation through a process that engaged civil society of a disaster action plan to build the capacity of communities (Shaw and Goda 2004, 17).

In the aftermath of the tsunami relief and rehabilitation process in Tamil Nadu, the interaction and interplay between state and civil society have received some attention (Vivekanandan 2005; TISS 2005; DFID 2005). In this Indian state, on the whole, both state agencies and civil society organizations have been credited with doing good work and in coordination; the UN agencies seem to have played a weak role here. Functionaries at the most basic Indian administrative unit, while regarded by Vivekanandan as playing an insignificant role are regarded by DFID as having been effective in organization sites for temporary shelters, restoring drinking water and electricity supply, collecting information on damage to life and property and distributing relief. The state administration and its "proactive engagement and quick decision-making" (TISS 2005, 7) have come in for praise from many quarters. Two features of state-civil society interactions in Tamil Nadu's post-tsunami efforts are praised: private-public partnerships in the housing sector and the local coordination committees that made it possible for civil society to work with and inform government policy.

"…The Tamil Nadu experience shows that approaching disaster management from a public-private partnership perspective built around the core principles of accessibility and inclusiveness can enable greater institutional effectiveness, whether government or non-government." (TISS 2005, 42)

The need for synergy is clear from reports following the Kashmir earthquake. The army in Pakistani Kashmir had the best maps of the affected area and so it was with their involvement that relief supplies could be made available to the remote areas. However it was neither easy for the military organization to part with that information nor was it easy for aid workers to reconcile to working with them (Khan 2005). If the South Asian disasters of 2004-05 illustrate the importance of state-civil society cooperation, disasters have been turning points for other reasons as well.

Technological changes have expanded the scope of 'civil society' in each context, blurring its outer limits to include diasporic populations and concerned members of the international community. The deliberation took cognizance of this important factor that affects civil society's possibilities and the state's framework of action.

What is the role of state agencies in disasters, and under what conditions are states best able to deliver? What roles and tasks are best undertaken by civil society and what conditions facilitate their success? What cooperative arrangements between state agencies and civil society organizations are most likely to benefit society in the aftermath of disaster? What is the impact of increased civil society mobilization during an emergency on the nature of the state and society? These are some critical questions for exploration.

## Disasters as opportunities for political change

Natural disasters quite literally wipe the slate clean for a few moments in history and offer societies an opportunity to redraw their structures and rules.

"Disasters present unusual laboratories for the study of change and processes of transition. Disaster tends to shatter existing norms and practices among states, creating a (momentary) opportunity for fresh recognition of the fragility of life and common humanity that bond all peoples." (Comfort 2000)

While this opportunity is seldom availed self-consciously, the magnitude of disasters like the tsunami and Kashmir earthquakes does make its mark in the political sphere. There are two dimensions of this. The first is the idea that a changed political environment after a disaster can encourage a change of diplomatic trajectory. The second is that the crisis caused by large natural disasters brings together hostile groups in the shared need to administer relief and plan reconstruction.

*"Disaster diplomacy"*
The term "disaster diplomacy" was coined first by Kelman and Koukis (2000) as a rubric under which they sought to understand the extent to which disasters alter equations between states, especially those with a history of hostility. They do not define the term itself; for the purposes of this work, it is defined as the inter-state diplomatic interactions—formal and public—that follow in the immediate aftermath of a large natural disaster.

The question animating this research agenda was: "Do natural disasters induce international cooperation amongst countries that have traditionally been "enemies"?" (Kelman and Koukis 2000, 214). Three case studies were examined to this end: Greek-Turkish relations after the 1999 earthquakes in either country (Ker-Lindsay 2000); US-Cuba cooperation over hurricane forecasting (Glantz 2000); and drought prevention in Africa (Holloway 2000). The broad conclusion drawn from these case studies was that while disasters do spawn some cooperation, they do not yield long-term change in the absence of a strong peace process. In spite of this sober conclusion, Kelman, Wisner, Fordham and other scholar-practitioners have continued to

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build both a literature and an epistemic community on the subject. Two websites and related electronic networks are at the heart of this effort: Disaster Diplomacy (http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org) and Radix—Radical Interpretations of Disaster (http://www.radixonline.org). The former not only links to work in this area but also hosts case studies of major disasters and their impact on international relations.

Following both the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, the diplomatic potential of the disasters was very quickly apparent.  If after the tsunami, India's assertion of its status as a donor and recipient country suggested an important power shift, then after the earthquake the cooperation on the ground as well as the opening of transit points and communication links between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir suggests a changing framework on India-Pakistan relations.

As a point of departure, we ask what are the ramifications of natural disasters, especially those that transcend state borders, for regional and international security.

*Disasters and the resolution of civil conflicts*
Equally interesting is the relationship between conflict and disasters. Three of the states hit by the 2004 tsunami were engaged in internal struggles for political change—Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Maldives. Kashmir is not just a contentious inter-state issue but also the location of an insurgency whose politics is intertwined with the inter-state dispute.

When disasters strike, they evoke a shared horror—a horror that being shared raises hopes that other divisions will be effaced. The immediate rescue and recovery operations often occur in a climate of suspended hostilities and necessity fosters cooperation. In some cases, this cooperation is consolidated into a process of conflict transformation. In others, it is not, and when it is not, differences deepen rather than lessen in the aftermath of disaster.
Differences arise when the impact assessments begin.

"Although natural disasters are in a sense "non discriminatory," war-affected countries have higher pre-existing levels of vulnerability, while the distribution of vulnerability tends to be geographically concentrated in the areas most affected by violence." (Goodhand et al 2005, 58) While tsunamis, earthquakes or volcanoes do not favor one community over another, the pre-existing conditions in the areas they affect vary, and therefore the impact of the disaster varies—creating new problems or compounding old ones. Further, "…large injections of funding have the potential to adversely affect both the short-term conflict dynamics and long-term causes of conflict. A conflict sensitive approach must involve the accountable and balanced distribution of resources with the participation of affected populations." (Goodhand et al 2005, 96)

On the other hand, in Aceh and in the Maldives to varying extents, international assistance did have a somewhat positive impact on the existing situation. In Aceh, where the "system of control was largely washed away" by the tsunami, Renner and Chafe write that the scale of the disaster made foreign relief personnel essential and once they came in, it was impossible to

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continue the conflict in the old way (2006). The first half of 2005 saw several rounds of serious negotiations leading to a peace accord in August. In the Maldives, the magnitude of the disaster, the need for external assistance combined with growing international concern over human rights repression, facilitated a very brief period of cooperative engagement between President Gayoom's regime (1978-2008) and the opposition, but more significantly, has compelled the regime to initiate some manner of reform. That it is considered cosmetic is a different issue—the point being that disasters do initiate some change in existing conflict situations under certain circumstances.

What are the circumstances that facilitate or obstruct change? What has been the experience of peace-builders and relief-workers? The section on disasters and internal conflicts addresses these and other questions.

## KEY LESSONS

### Disasters as Opportunities or Opportunism?

The Forum participants framed disasters as opportunities for political breakthroughs and for renewing efforts towards unmet developmental goals including disaster preparedness. However, in a subsequent session, it was eloquently asked, "How many more opportunities do we need?"

Disasters were seen as highlighting missed opportunities of the past and creating openings for a renewed commitment:
1. to shift the discursive frame so human and state security are related in different ways;
2. to addressing structural inequalities and vulnerabilities;
3. to institutionalize gender mainstreaming and lobby for gender equity in laws and policies;
4. to build the capacity of civil society to coordinate, collaborate and strategize, in an accountable and introspective mode;
5. to invest in public and media education on a host of issues including appropriate response.

The large influx of NGOs into a disaster-hit area (sometimes called a "stampede," sometimes a "feeding frenzy"), some of the problems caused by mandate-driven interventions or interventions that are not contextualized and a lack of integrity on the part of some relief teams formed part of the discussion on the problem of distinguishing between opportunity and opportunism.

### Conflict, Development and Disaster

Both in analytical and practical terms, the interconnectedness and the interface between conflict, development and disasters has the potential of being a "toxic cocktail," reinforcing

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pre-existing vulnerabilities and creating new insecurities for individuals, families and communities. This "toxic cocktail" is one of the conjunctions between the development and security discourses.

Structural inequalities of income and access to opportunity and political power determine vulnerability to natural disasters, because of poor housing, non-diversified and fragile livelihoods and neglected civic amenities, among other things. They also get reinforced in the post-disaster context through discrimination in the distribution of relief and in the planning of reconstruction projects. Gender is one dimension of structural inequality where this is evident, whether in the recognition of male heads of household alone or in the impediments to transferring land title to women survivors. Another is caste, and reports of discrimination against Dalits in the post-tsunami context were cited.

The violence that lurks within societies with deep inequalities surfaces to further hurt victims of disaster, for instance trafficking of women and children. Structural inequality is one of the causes of conflict and when disaster assistance is given on the basis of ethnic or religious identity particularly, it has the potential to create conflict. Socio-economic inequalities, the impact of development projects and environmental degradation and conflicts create a situation in which disaster-induced displacement is only the newest layer. Differences in attention and assistance generate resentments and polarize divided societies further.

Herein lies the argument for including disaster preparedness and mitigation in the development agenda of a society. Existing social justice programs make a difference to the relief and rehabilitation process. Development plans should take into account vulnerability to disasters. The importance of ecologically sound, sustainable development is that it mitigates vulnerability to disaster.

**Working with the State**

The states of South Asia have failed to reduce the vulnerability of their people to natural disasters, to provide relief and envision reconstruction. However this critique does not foreclose possibility of an engagement with the state. The state can be a structurally capable actor, but for it to realize this potential, three conditions must be met: (1) it must be responsive; (2) it must place human security at par with if not ahead of state security; (3) it must work with local communities to plan for contingencies like disasters.

Beyond critiques of the state, civil society can also be held accountable for not having forced the political mainstreaming of disaster-related issues. Why after all these decades and disasters, disaster planning was not on the agenda or election platform of any South Asian political party.[2] The failure of civil society to make an issue of disaster prevention and disaster mitigation is undeniable.

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[2] This issue was raised by Meghna Guhathakurta at the forum.

Facilitating dialogue and coordination between NGOs and relevant state agencies is an important pre-disaster exercise. The objective of such a dialogue from the point of view of civil society would be to ready governments to be proactive, to make governments responsive to the lessons learnt from previous disasters and to influence the policies and actions of the state. From the point of view of the government, dialogues would offer a way to share information and coordinate work so that resources are not wasted.

Another area of concern was the sidelining of local governments. Emergencies elicit centralized responses; when they also draw a massive influx of outside players into the affected community, local governments are left out of the loop when needs assessments are made, plans are drawn up and resources allocated. Since outside organizations are unlikely to stay indefinitely, this leaves a weakened local administration to pick up the threads of a reconstruction process it had no part in strategizing.

Lastly, discussions of the state's role are incomplete without a discussion of the role of the military. Militaries play an important part in rescue and relief operations in the immediate aftermath of disasters, and this is a role in which people accept their presence. Nevertheless, there could be some concern about the long-term impact of a military presence anywhere.

**For NGOs: An Agenda for Reflection**

As trenchant as critique of the state was, participants in the Forum also raised questions about the quality of understanding that NGOs sometimes brought to specific situations and the honesty with which some work has been undertaken. Some of the problems recognized included the challenge of balancing the NGO's mandate with local circumstances and needs, sustained engagement over a period of time, building capacity rather than creating aid dependency and ensuring accountability for their activities. Collaboration, proper needs assessments, strategic thinking, introspection about mistakes and learning, transparency and communication and coordination of relief efforts were the solutions that came up in these discussions. More concrete proposals are included in the last section on future measures.

**Gender, Women and Disasters**

Acknowledging and sidestepping the slippery gender versus women's issues, Forum participants identified three concrete concerns beyond women's special needs and vulnerabilities.

Disaster relief programs sometimes self-consciously re-tool and empower women. The twin imperatives of scale and sustainability were however discussed at some length in the context of gender. Clearly, to empower women in one or two villages is not enough; how to replicate success across a district or state needs to be considered. The second question is whether there is a return to the old order when NGOs leave a site. Some participants made a strong case for thinking beyond relief projects and of institutional and legal reform if post-disaster changes were going to last. Whether civil society has the capacity to do this was questioned, however.

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Related to the argument that change comes through a long-term, structural perspective rather than emergency projects, is the argument that changes introduced are most effective when they are contextualized. Culture, the presence of conflict and legal frameworks were three specific modifiers. To empower women, facilitate change in gender roles and gender relations, sensitivity to context is a pre-requisite, without this being reduced to cultural relativism.

**Children, Child Rights and Disasters**

Forum participants made an unequivocal case for specifically and separately considering the problems and rights of children in disaster contexts, rather than treating them as an afterthought to a discussion on women. At different points, issues that concern them like adoption of orphans, interrupted schooling and trafficking were brought up.

**Disaster Preparedness**

Four dimensions of disaster preparedness came up during the discussion: (1) Vulnerability mapping; (2) Contextualizing preparation; (3) Learning from past experience, both positive and negative; (4) Preparing the ground for state, civil society and grassroots collaboration. Many concrete suggestions for action along these dimensions were made at the Forum, ranging from creating databases of actors, mandates and areas of operation to creating context-specific disaster preparedness manuals for public education.

**The Importance of Public Education Programs**

If opportunities for change are not to be missed, a shift in the discursive framework is required from thinking solely of state security to thinking of human security. Disaster preparedness training was also suggested as a way to build the capacity of society, local communities in particular, to take care of themselves in an emergency.

**The Way Ahead**

Discussions at the Forum generated a list of recommendations. They ranged from documenting lessons learnt to disaster preparedness, advocacy and state/civil society action. Some of these recommendations are listed here.

*Learning from Disasters*
- Creating a consolidated picture of what has happened, how and what the follow-up is and compiling lessons learned;
- Multi-pronged analysis of what happened including a socio-economic, ecological and political audit;
- Livelihood and vulnerability mapping through the creation of process documents;
- Learning from mistakes made: Compilation of best and worst practices.

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*Rethinking NGO Strategies*

- Developing an institutional approach that will work to transform and optimally use existing institutions;
- Sensitivity training for fieldworkers on special needs groups like children;
- Drawing up contingency plans in consultation also with the army, etc.;
- Engaging particularly constituencies like holding a Children's Parliament to find out children's perceptions of their needs;
- Building strengths of local communities to deal with disasters.

*Network-building*

- Sharing field experiences across contexts;
- Alliance-building between NGOs and others "with helicopter view" on the one hand and local communities on the other hand;
- Devising means for coordination of efforts between different organizations have different mandates, recognizing and learning, need to flag coordination with state and with each other;
- Activity analysis to prevent duplication of efforts;
- Building a database listing area, activity and agency to synergize efforts.

*Public Education about Disasters*

- Promotion of the concept of human security as a counterpoint to a state-centric view of security;
- Compilation of information about existing laws, resources and programs relevant to post-disaster relief and reconstruction;
- Making information widely available about what to do in a disaster situation, what to send to a disaster-hit area and how to choose between NGO recipients;
- Creating a workshop module for disaster preparation with area-specific, context-sensitive training manuals;
- Media articles and other documentation on missed opportunities and promises that were not kept to victims of disasters.

*Political Mainstreaming of Disaster-preparedness Issues*

- Using 'Right to Information' and similar transparency and anti-corruption laws to follow up on post-disaster promises;
- Dialogues with government officials and with political party representatives to create awareness of disaster-related concerns;
- Setting the agenda of a regional political debate on disaster prevention and mitigation.

*Policy Advocacy*

- Lobbying governments to be more proactive about disaster prevention;
- Have a clear operational frame at the national level;
- Joint monitoring centers for early warning on disasters;

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- Creating legal structures that facilitate the construction of more equitable conditions after disaster than prevailed before;
- Lobbying for enforcing existing zonal regulations;
- Child rights issues (including adoption policy and procedures).

*Areas for Further Research*
- Operationalizing 'human security' in the South Asian context;
- Integrating disaster mitigation and development, especially the problems of small countries

**Postscript**

What has changed in disaster mitigation and response in the fifteen years since the original publication of this report? An homage to gender issues through routine gender sensitisation has become more common practice. This is, in part, due to the changing international normative climate where gender equality and justice concerns are now included in agreements like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

In practice, we are still equating gender responsiveness with the supply of sanitary napkins. Our ability to see people's experiences across the gender spectrum and therefore to see gendered needs beyond the binary is still limited. While humanitarian work engages more women than other spheres, at the decision-making levels we still see one gender and therefore, one set of human experiences, dominate. Our ability to prevent, mitigate and rebuild in a transformative way after disasters has not kept pace with the frequency of climate change related disasters. Change will come with continuous sensitisation of not just the community of social workers on the ground but also policy-makers in state and national bodies, where such sensitisation includes opportunities to interact with people of all genders from affected localities.

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