

Engendered Disaster Management through Community Radio

by Prativa Chhetri and Sandhya Narayan

A disaster is any event occurring naturally or due to human activities, which threatens human lives, damages property and infrastructure, and disrupts social and economic life. Disasters result in significant morbidity, mortality and economic loss. The occurrences of natural disasters have increased with global warming and climate change. Though disasters cannot be completely prevented, its effects can be mitigated through effective communication and timely information.

Disaster Management

Disaster Management is a broad term and comprises of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

Mitigation is action considered long before an emergency occurs and includes any activity aimed at reducing the probability of damage from a disaster. Preparedness is action taken to save lives before and during a natural disaster. It ensures people are ready for a disaster and would be able to respond to it effectively. Response occurs after the onset of a disaster. Recovery activities begin immediately following a disaster.

Through the whole process of disaster management, it is necessary to keep an engendered approach though some may question this idea. After all when disasters do strike they affect everyone in the community, whether one is a man or a woman. So why do we need an engendered approach?

In any disaster, the death toll is greater amongst women, children, elderly, and the disabled as they are left at home with no information about the impending disaster, and are bound by cultural restrictions. All these factors are impediments to their safety and result



in the higher casualty rates. For example, it was found that during floods in Bangladesh women did not know how to swim and their clothes prevented them from climbing trees or seeking safety in higher grounds.

Disaster management must then be initiated towards the protection of vulnerable groups. In recent years, organisations involved in disaster management have shifted their efforts and resources from a post-disaster approach (response and recovery) to pre-disaster and pro-active efforts (mitigation and preparedness). The shift is the result of the realisation that by minimising the impact of natural and human-made hazards in communities, damages and loss will be lessened, reducing costs and recovery time.

Community radios operate on the principle, “for the community, by the community and of the community.” In other words they are not for profit and are set up for serving the needs of a specific community or for a specific purpose. Community

radio is the most effective communication tool when it comes to assisting people in poor communities as it reaches into the homes of the poorest of the poor and is one of the most effective vehicles for helping seriously disadvantaged communities share vital information.

Community radio is proven to be an effective tool for disaster management as it has been the most efficient means to deliver information that are suited to the needs of the community and packaged in their own language. It has helped build awareness and strategies so that the communities are better prepared and are able to participate more actively in disaster management.

Community radios have played a big role in disaster management in Indonesia, Japan and Nepal as these countries are prone to natural disasters. Yet a survey conducted by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) on the “Role of Community Radios in Disaster Management” found that though the participation of women in community radios has been increasing, the programmes on disaster management still fail to target women, children and elderly.

In order to address this gap AMARC and its gender arm, the AMARC Women International Network (AMARC -WIN), have been advocating for engendered disaster management practices by community radios.

An Engendered Approach to Disaster Management

Following the implementation of the Ford Foundation supported project on “Poverty Alleviation and Disaster Management through Community Radio” in Indonesia and in Asia Pacific region, AMARC Asia Pacific has been able to draw lessons on the good practices of community radio for disaster management.

For practical purpose, disaster management by community radios can be broadly divided into three phases – pre disaster (mitigation and preparedness) stage, emergency (response) stage and post disaster (recovery) stage. Timely preparedness and proactive

Radio Sahar, Afghanistan.

Photo courtesy of Pravita Chhetri

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Photo courtesy of Pravitā Chhetri

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steps by community radios can help reduce the damage and loss of lives occurring from a disaster.

Some important engendered steps to be taken during the three stages of disaster management as shared from the experiences of the community radios from Asia Pacific are given below.

Pre-disaster Stage:

It helps to broadcast programs that raise people's awareness of eminent disasters that occur frequently in the locality. For example Lintas Merapi FM station in Indonesia serves as an information broadcaster regarding the Mount Merapi volcanic status situated in the area. When the volcano is dormant the station broadcasts disaster reduction information. It also airs alerts on mud-flows and updated information about the Merapi volcanic activities.

Preventive measures like compiling local knowledge on signs of impending disaster and educating women and children on the likely occurrence of disasters proved helpful. Information on stockpiling and storage of food, medicines and water go a long way in better preparing the community to combat a disaster.

Radio FM YY in Japan conducts "town walk programmes." It is an open event where Radio FM YY audience can listen to disaster prevention specialists, program personalities and announcers as they walk around the town looking at it from a disaster prevention perspective. It is an event combining disaster prevention study and hiking. Similarly emergency drills conducted in the community and identification of safe places to take shelter especially targeting women, children, mentally and physically disabled people and elderly have proved beneficial when disasters strike.

Emergency Stage:

During emergency it is critical to start broadcasting as early as possible. All announcements and broadcasts should be done in a reassuring and calm manner. People relate to the voice on the radio and in times of crisis hearing a familiar voice renders some peace and calmness to the victims. Public service announcements on what women and children should do during disasters are very helpful as most of them are left traumatised because of the loss of loved ones, their homes and their belongings.

Community radios can broadcast updates on the damage situation and must provide gender disaggregated data as much as possible. Broadcast appeal for donations addressing women and children's special needs can help the relief efforts. Cultural practices would prevent a woman from seeking medical help from a male doctor or hijab (head covering traditional dress code for Muslim women) wearing women will not be able to use the clothes sent through relief donations from foreign countries. After the tsunami struck in Aceh and an earthquake in Yogyakarta in Indonesia there was not enough baby food and proper clothing for Muslim women victims in the relief support. In such instances proper information can fill this gap.

Special attention must also be paid to the safety of people behind the microphone, the people who are tasked with the responsibility to make it all happen. During the "Women Making Airwaves for Peace – 3," a seminar conducted by AMARC WIN and Isis International in Mysore, India in February 2010, one broadcaster shared her experience of reporting during a disaster.



A senior broadcaster based in Ahmedabad, India recalled the upheavals of the time when the Hindus and the Muslims in her community had attacked each other not too long ago. As a community broadcaster, when she went into the Muslim refugee camp, she was faced with a personal dilemma over one of her symbols of identity – as a Hindu woman, wearing a red bindi (vermilion dot) on her forehead was second nature to her. Yet at the camp her red bindi became the very factor that cast her as the one from the “other” community making it harder for her to gain the trust of those she was working with. She further shared an incident when getting back home from the camp she found that the sun had gone and the streets were almost empty. Shivering with fear outside the refugee camp she finally managed to find a rickshaw driver who was willing to take her across to the “other” part of the city. As they approached the Hindu area, she recalls that she felt calmer and at the same time noticed that the driver was now trembling with the same fear she had been entertaining for her own life earlier. The two parted, exchanging phone numbers and a promise from the driver to call and inform her once he had reached home.

Post-disaster Stage:

Following a disaster a lot of the victims need counselling for their traumas. Programs aimed to heal victim’s psychology trauma that feature interviews with trauma counsellors, monks, imams

and priests have proved very beneficial. Moreover, most of the broadcasters felt that along with the communities they too benefit from trauma healing sessions as they are expected to be rational and to provide an objective point of view, often done at the expense of internalising their traumas and as a result affecting their own health.

Providing call in or talk-back programs for people to people interactions and special programs in which victims can express themselves especially women, youth, and elderly have a healing effect.

Likewise, establishing support centres for information sharing and logistic distribution with special section for women and children have led to efficient relief delivery.

Conclusion

Disasters can strike suddenly or it can unfold slowly and though it cannot be prevented the damage can significantly be reduced through disaster management. While many organisations have shifted the focus of their response to developing effective strategies towards disaster management, a critical aspect to pay attention to is how these strategies are able to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups, particularly women.

To this end, it is important to recognise the crucial role community radio has to facilitate a more effective and efficient response to disaster situations. The study conducted by AMARC gives a clear picture of how community radio has the potential to minimise and even prevent massive damages that may be brought about by calamities. Even more important is the potential of community radio to surface the often invisible and silenced voices of vulnerable groups, particularly of women, in these scenarios. ♦

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