

# A Study on the Local Level Governance of Disasters in India

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*Abstract*— Local governments are in a better position to understand the social vulnerability of natural and human-made disasters. Local Governments have a unique role of ensuring co-ordination and convergence of the efforts among the government institutions, non-governmental agencies, and community based organisations and all other stakeholders. They are expected to address the differential impacts of disasters on men, women, and children, sick, elderly and differently abled. This paper will discuss the legal status, functions, role and importance of local governments on disasters, the level of efficiency and effectiveness of local governments in handling the disaster situation, the level of coordination and cooperation among different agencies and organisations working at the local level. So the paper is an attempt to understand the local level governance of disasters in India.

**Keywords:** Disasters, Disaster Management, Local Government, Local Governance, Decentralisation, Decentralised Governance, Panchayati Raj, Municipalities

## I. INTRODUCTION

Local governments are in a better position to understand the social vulnerability and human-made disasters. Local Governments play an important role of ensuring co-ordination and convergence of the efforts among the government organisations and non-governmental agencies and community based organisations and other stakeholders. They are expected to address the differential impacts of disasters on men, women, and children, sick, elderly and differently abled. Considering that the disaster management is part of providing public safety services, one can expect a positive relationship between effective disaster management and decentralization. Certainly, there are definite benefits of decentralization, which enables the local authority to apply local knowledge to disaster management.

In India different regions are prone to different types of disasters. With better understanding of local need, contexts and vulnerability, the local governments proved more effective in preparing for the types of disasters that tend to occur in the area. Local governments have comparative advantage regarding many critical pre-disaster preparation-related issues, such as the maintenance of urban infrastructure, disaster-sensitive building and land use regulations, and emergency planning (Skidmore & Toya, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. This paper tries to highlight the legal status, functions, role and importance of local governments on disasters. The level efficiency and effectiveness of local governance in disaster and the level of coordination and cooperation between different agencies and organisations working at the local level on the basis of secondary data and literature available. So the paper is an attempt to understand the local level governance of disasters in India.

## II. MEANING OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Local government is the government of the village and district level. It is the government closest to the common people that involves in day-to-day life and attempt to resolve problems of ordinary citizens. India is a federal republic with three spheres of government: central (union), state and local. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments give recognition and protection to local government and in addition each state has its own local government legislation. The Ministries for Housing and Urban Affairs, Panchayati Raj and Rural Development all have oversight responsibility for local government at the national level and each state has its own enabling legislation. As of summer 2017, there are a total of 267,428 local government bodies of which 262,771 are rural and 4,657 urban. Of the rural local governments, 632 are Zila Parishad at the district level, 6,672 are Panchayat Samaiti at the block level, and 255,466 are Gram Panchayat at the village level. Urban local bodies include Municipal Corporations for cities, Municipalities for larger towns and Town Panchayats for smaller towns.

## III. LEGAL STATUS AND FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Legal and regulatory frameworks comprises the laws, acts, executive orders and other legal instruments that set the ground rules for governmental and non-governmental activities relating to disasters and risk reduction. They define the authorities, functions, roles and responsibilities of officials and organisations, establish legal authority for organisations and programmes and sometime create organisations and coordination mechanisms. They dictate and encourage relevant policies, practices and processes (Dagur, 2011)<sup>2</sup>.

The parliament enacted the disaster management act 2005. Some states have also passed similar laws governing disaster management. Under the DM Act of 2005 Every State Government shall, as soon as may be after issue of notification under sub-section (1) of section 14, by notification in the Official Gazette, establish a District Disaster Management Authority for every district in the State with such name as may be specified in that notification. The District Authority shall act as the district planning; coordinating and implementing body for disaster management and take all measures for the purposes of disaster management in the district in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the National Authority and the State Authority<sup>3</sup>.

The district authority is assigned with various functions to carry out the disaster management at the district level. They are allocated to prepare a disaster management plan including district response plan for the district; coordinate and monitor the implementation of the National Policy, State Policy, National Plan, State Plan and District

Plan; ensure that the areas in the district susceptible to disasters are identified and measures for the prevention of disasters and the mitigation of its effects are undertaken by the departments of the Government at the district level as well as by the local authorities; ensure that the guidelines for prevention of disasters, mitigation of its effects, preparedness and response measures as laid down by the National Authority and the State Authority are followed by all departments of the Government at the district level and the local authorities in the district.

The district authority is assigned with the organisation and coordination of specialised training programmes for different levels of officers, employees and voluntary rescue workers in the district; they facilitate community training and awareness programmes for prevention of disaster or mitigation with the support of local authorities, governmental and non-governmental organisations; set up, maintain, review and upgrade the mechanism for early warnings and dissemination of proper information to public; prepare, review and update district level response plan and guidelines; advise, they assist and coordinate the activities of the Departments of the Government at the district level, statutory bodies and other governmental and non-governmental organisations in the district engaged in the disaster management.

#### IV. ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The district is the focal point for disaster management activities at the field level. The collector of the district or the district magistrate is the chief administrator in the district. The collector/ deputy commissioner is the focal point for all disaster management activities. The collector is assigned to maintain close liaison with the district and state governments as well as the nearest units of Armed Forces, central police organisations and other relevant central government organisations such as the Ministries of communications, Water Resources, Drinking water, Surface Transport who could support the efforts of the district administration in the rescue and relief operations.

The collector and coordination committee functioning under the district collector review preparedness measures prior to an impending hazard strike. A contingency plan for the district for various type disasters is generally formulated by the collector/deputy commissioner which is approved by the state government. Presently district disaster management plans have been prepared in many districts and in other districts they are being prepared.

The district authority also coordinate with, and give guidelines to, local authorities in the district to ensure that measures for the prevention or mitigation of threatening disaster situation or disaster in the district are carried out promptly and effectively, provide necessary technical assistance or give advice to the local authorities in the district for carrying out their functions review development plans prepared by the Departments of the Government at the district level, statutory authorities or local authorities with a view to make necessary provisions therein for prevention of disaster or mitigation; they examine the construction in any area in the district and, if they are of the opinion that the standards for the prevention of disaster or mitigation laid down for such

construction is not being or has not been followed, may direct the concerned authority to take such action as may be necessary to secure compliance of such standards.

The district authority also identify buildings and places which could, in the event of any threatening disaster situation or disaster, be used as relief centres or camps and can make arrangements for water supply and sanitation in such buildings or places; provide information to the State Authority relating to different aspects of disaster management; they encourage the involvement of non-governmental organisations and voluntary social-welfare institutions working at the grassroots level in the district for disaster management; perform such other functions as the State Government or State Authority may assign to it or as it deems necessary for disaster management in the District.

The importance of local governments when it comes to delivering effective disaster management, they have better understanding of unique local needs and assets than the higher levels of government, and are the first to react to the disasters affecting their localities. Decentralization in general has been acknowledged to have a positive impact on public service delivery (Bardhan, 2002)<sup>4</sup>. Disasters often take place unpredictably and demand immediate response. Local governments are in the position to reach first on site with rescue and other mitigation efforts, and they also have the local knowledge of the particular place and circumstances, which can be greatly beneficial in such emergencies. Situations during complex disasters can quickly change, hence requiring strategies that can quickly adapt. When decision-makers are at the local level, they are closer to the disaster and are able to use local knowledge for more adaptive and successful management (Baker & Refsgaard, 2007)<sup>5</sup>.

Though all levels of government are generally involved in disaster management, the role and actions of local government are particularly critical. O'Leary writes, "Virtually all disasters are experienced at the local level, where many communities can expect to be 'on their own' for the first seventy-two hours after disaster impact". There are two key concepts that describe the role of local government with regard to disasters: first is comprehensive emergency management and second is integrated emergency management. A government acts comprehensively when it coordinates the four phases of emergency management: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. A government acts in an integrated manner when it coordinates planning and strategy of hazard assessment, resource mobilization, and operations with other entities, both laterally and vertically.

#### V. EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Efficiency and effectiveness in governance is the most vital in the disaster management cycle. In the case of sudden disasters like earthquake the impact could be so intense that it may depending on its severity almost create a sort of paralysis. The local community and the administration will have to face the effect of the fury generated by the catastrophe, creating a sense of chaos, trauma and uncertainty. The survivors would also require to shoulder the responsibility of immediate responders, to provide necessary

assistance, before others are mobilised (Dagur, 2011). Yet there are also reasons to question the efficiency and effectiveness of relying primarily on local governments for disaster management. For instance, there are structural issues of local governments having to perform numerous tasks to meet the variety of local demands for public services, while their resources are rather limited. Disaster management that targets high-risk but low probability events inevitably fails to become a top priority on the generally under-resourced local government's agenda (Wolensky & Wolensky, 1990)<sup>6</sup>.

To provide effective and efficient governance there should be well prepared plan at all the grass root levels, especially at the village, block and district levels which should form the fulcrum of all the activities. A multi-hazard prone district should have separate hazard specific plans. All stakeholders should actively participate in the formulation of the plan so that they contribute towards its formulation and understand its provisions. The roles and responsibilities of authorities and the community at the local level should be made explicit. The interface with neighbouring localities, block and districts should also be well defined.

Community participation is one of the most essential principles of disaster management. The responsibilities of citizens should be adequately provided for in the law because the local community would be the first responders in crisis and disaster situation. Every individual, family, community must always remain aware of the fact that no amount of relief and rehabilitation is going to succeed until and unless there is active participation of the affected community (Dagur, 2011). Laying down a legal framework and establishing a regulatory mechanism should be viewed as part of the holistic approach towards disaster management. Besides defining authorities and assigning leadership responsibilities and accountability, the mechanism should also emphasise and provide for suitable linkage to national economic and social development plan.

#### VI. COORDINATION AND COOPERATION AMONG AGENCIES

Disaster management as a process comprises multi-faced activities that need to be performed, some concurrently by different agencies and other sequentially. Keeping in view the fact that managing disasters is an integral part of the development process and hence a continuous engagement that transcends the responsibility paradigm of many agencies and departments within and outside the states and centres, including non-governmental stakeholders, the legislative provision should clearly define the responsibilities of not only the newly created organisations but also the existing agencies and departments that are dealing with managing disasters (Dagur, 2011). A district level coordination and relief committee is there and is headed by the collector as chairman with participant from all related government and non-government organisations and departments in addition to the elected representatives. These committees are being reconstituted or redesigned as disaster management committees with officers from relevant departments being added as members. The district heads and departments engaged in development shall also be a part of this committee so that disaster mitigation and preparedness are mainstreamed into the district plan. As all the departments of the state

governments and district level reports to the collector, there is an effective coordination mechanism ensuring holistic response.

Management of disasters should be viewed as a system in terms of phases of the complete cycle. The functions required to be performed in each phase need to be categorised and the responsibility and the authority assigned to each of the agencies and committees will have to be distinct and specific. The structure for managing disasters should be constituted and organised to facilitate horizontal as well as vertical linkages to ensure effective coordination mechanism. The administrative reforms commission has recommended an administrative structure with unity of command and well defined responsibilities at all levels (Dagur, 2011). The act should facilitate integration of various organisations working for the same purpose and ensure a well-coordinated mechanism with a view to provide a coherent approach to disaster management across all phases, from preparedness and mitigation to response and recovery (Dagur, 2011).

The necessity for vertical collaboration, especially for mega disasters, is quite apparent. Even in the U.S. local capacities have been observed to be overwhelmed at the time of mega disasters, with local governments becoming paralyzed and unable to provide meaningful assistance (Wachtendorf & Kendra, 2005)<sup>7</sup>. Another important element in filling the gap of low local government capacities in disaster management is horizontal collaboration with academics and various civil society organizations. These non-governmental local actors, with their specialized knowledge and local networks, are valuable assets that the local government could tap into during disaster response and recovery efforts. In fact, building resilience at the local level with public participation is increasingly being promoted and studied in disaster management.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

Considering that disaster management is part of providing public safety services, one can expect a positive relationship between effective disaster management and decentralization. Decentralization is a notion that connects to the structure of an organization which finds itself with strong centres of power at various organizational levels. Some argue that decentralisation achieves the best possible outcomes for the residents of a country while others argue that government decentralization can be seen as a way to limit the overall size of government (Joulfaian & Marlow, 1990; Cassette & Paty, 2010)<sup>8</sup>.

In India different regions are prone to different types of disasters. With better understanding of local contexts and vulnerability, the local governments can be more effective in preparing for the types of disasters that tend to occur in the area. To enhance the local level of governance a number of provisions dealing with crisis and disasters which have been enacted earlier should be either be replaced or else amalgamate into a comprehensive law, particularly to deal with disasters. The responsibilities of citizens should be adequately provided for in the law because the local community would be the first responders in crisis and disaster situation. A well prepared plan at all the grass root levels, especially at the village, block and district levels should form

the fulcrum of all the activities. A multi-hazard prone district should have separate hazard specific plans. All stakeholders should actively participate in the formulation of the plan so that they contribute towards its formulation and understand its provisions. The roles and responsibilities of authorities and the community at the local level should be made explicit. The interface with neighbouring localities, block and districts should also be well defined. Fool proof communications with inbuilt redundancy will contribute positively towards mobilisation of resources and conduct of relief and rescue operations. The communication of all the government and non-government agencies need to be well integrated. Application of information and communication technology in the assessment of vulnerabilities, hazard mapping, hazard prediction, and risk monitoring and risk dissemination should result in reducing the loss of life and property during disasters.

Management of disasters should be viewed as a system in terms of phases of the complete cycle. The functions required to be performed in each phase need to be categorised and the responsibility and the authority assigned to each of the agencies and committees will have to be distinct and specific. The structure for managing disasters should be constituted and organised to facilitate horizontal as well as vertical linkages to ensure effective coordination mechanism. While disaster risk management has been argued to be most effective at the local level, in practice there seems to be a question as to whether the decentralized local actors are indeed able to take effective actions in disaster management.

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