

## BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH SOCIAL COHESION

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### Abstract

The impact of disasters on the lives and livelihoods of people is widely recognized. Attempts have been made to mitigate the impact and decrease the losses globally but now the focal point for any plan has shifted from global to regional level where proper mitigation and adaptation strategies can be worked out in much effective way .This paper discusses the impact of the disasters on economic condition, the importance and role of social cohesion in community resiliency to disasters. In similar disaster or emergency situation there is a huge difference in the attitude, behavior and reaction of different communities'. The widening economic gap between rich and poor is changing the social structure and increasing the individualistic approach in the society. This gap needs to be decreased through policy interventions in order to strengthen social cohesion will lead to resiliency

**Key words:** Resiliency, Social cohesion, community, economic inequality, disasters, policy makers

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Economic impact of Disasters

Disasters are affecting the world in a big way today. According EM DAT (Figure 1- Trends in occurrence and victims\*), in 2013, 330 natural triggered disasters were registered globally. It killed a significant number of people (21,610) and 96.5 million people became victims worldwide. Economic damages estimates in 2013 were US\$ 118.6 billion. It is important to note that amongst the top 10 countries in terms of disaster mortality in 2013, five countries are classified as low income or lower-middle income economies (based on World Bank income classification)<sup>1</sup> Table1 . These countries accounted for 88% of global reported disaster mortality in 2013.

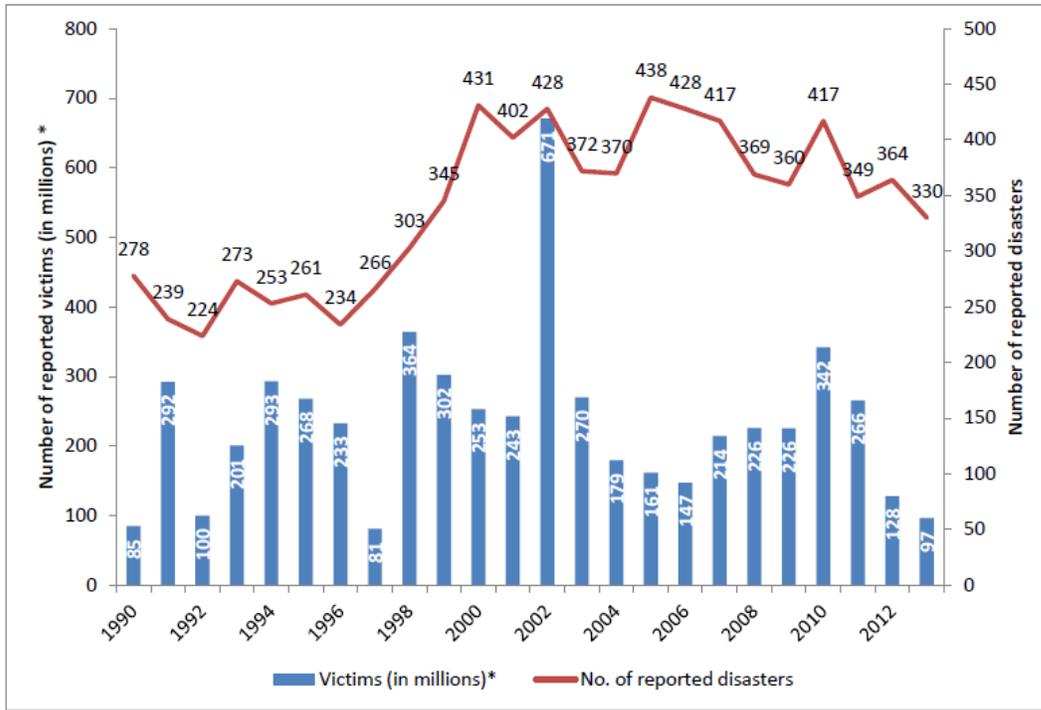
<sup>1</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-classifications/country-and-lending-groups>, accessed on 17 July 2014.

**Table 1: Top ten countries in terms of mortality in 2013 with World bank income classification**

Sno.	Country	Status	Income **
1.	Japan, United Kingdom, United States of America	High-income	(\$12,746 or more)
2.	China, Mexico	Upper-middle income	(\$4,126 to \$12,745)
3.	India, Pakistan, Philippines, Vietnam	Lower-middle income	(\$1,046 to \$4,125)
4.	Cambodia	Low income	(\$1,045 or less)

\*\*Calculated in GNI per capita which is gross national income divided by mid-year population. GNI per capita in US dollars is converted using the World Bank Atlas method.

Figure 1: Trends in occurrence and victims\*



(Source: EM-DAT)

Some of the key findings of the statistics are:

- Seven out of the top 10 countries (in terms of people killed by natural disasters) are located in Asia, and accounted for 82.3% of global reported disaster mortality.
- These seven countries are classified as lower-middle income or low-income economies according to the World Bank income classification.

Disasters hinder the development process in countries with limited resources and capital .It degrades the economic conditions of the people and induces poverty. Disasters destroy material goods like homes, schools, infrastructure, livestock etc. and also impacts social capital by decreasing access to education, eroding social norms and values, longer-term migration etc.<sup>2</sup> Poor economic conditions makes it difficult for the countries or regions to take mitigation actions and any incident of disaster further damages the available resources thereby increasing the poverty. This vicious circle of poverty and disasters needs a different approach and have to be

dealt at the smallest possible level. Hence action at regional or local level is required for a global impact.

**1.2** Poor economic condition is the indicator of the increased disparity in a society. This disparity weakens the societal bond- “social cohesion” that exist among people. The poorest people also have less access to health, education, housing and other basic necessities. The vulnerability of the poor thus increases in the absence of information, safe surroundings and good life. This vulnerability along with the weakening social cohesion reduces the resiliency in a society. Problems of hunger, malnutrition and disease afflict the poorest in society. The poorest are also typically marginalized from society and have little representation or voice in public and political debates, making it even harder to escape poverty.

**1.3** Disasters impact different societies differently likewise their reaction to disasters also varies. It is the collective approach of the societies which deals with disasters in better way. This

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<sup>2</sup> Hossen M. Anwar, “The Impact of Recurring Natural Disasters on Chronic Poverty,” Societies without Borders, 2008, pp.285-301, <http://societieswithoutborders.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/anwar3-1.pdf>

approach makes some communities are resilient and some less resilient. This is quite visible by the fact that a small disaster cause greater loss of life and property in developing or under developed countries whereas developed countries face much less damage in big scaled disasters. In today’s globalizing world, regions can be seen as serving as an effective bridge between the international and national systems. A regional entity, working from cultural and linguistic commonalities, can provide a forum for building trust and familiarity that is not possible on a global scale. For these reasons they can often be more effective in establishing common policies and resolving issues of contention<sup>3</sup>.

## **2. Risk, Resilience and social system**

**2.1** Income disparity is the most likely global risks which could possibly cause systemic shock on a global scale followed by extreme weather events (World Economic Forum’s Global Risk Report, 2014). The causes the disparity are many like lack of individual responsibility, ineffective and

bad government policy, exploitation and domination by people with power and influence, or some combination of these and other factors.

**2.2** The term “Resilience” in disaster risk reduction, is defined as “The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions.” (UNISDR, 2009, p. 24). The term was first used by Scottish engineer William J. M. Rankine (1820–72) in 1858, while describing the strength and ductility of steel beams (Rankine, 1867). A resilient steel beam survives the application of a force by resisting it with strength (rigidity) and absorbing it with deformation (ductility). With respect to humans society ,resilience is the strength under stress and its ability to devise means of resisting disaster and maintaining its integrity (coherence), while the ductility lies in its ability to adapt to circumstances produced by the calamity in order to lessen their

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine Haver and Conor Foley, International and Regional Initiatives, Background paper prepared for the International Dialogue on Strengthening Partnership in Disaster Response, October 2011

impact (Alexander, 2012).

**2.3** The level of risk and resilience depend on the social system or the societies which are invariably formed for a particular purpose. Individual human beings are not self-sufficient; no one working alone can acquire all of the genuine necessities of life. In order to resolve this difficulty, we gather together into communities for the mutual achievement of our *common goals* (Plato in The republic). A worthwhile society has specified and separate functions for all the members. The execution of those functions build the “social resiliency” .It is much more complicated as it has to do with adaptability and the willingness of communities to work and think around a common cause and set of values. The reason for increasing risks and vulnerabilities in the societies today is the increasing complexities and decreasing cohesion due to the high and widening inequality—the gap between the rich and the poor .

2.4 This inequality causes the difference in access to resources, facilities, justice and opportunities. The individuals struggle for better life constantly. This struggle is responsible for the clashes, oppression and revolution too. This growing sense of self interest or the individualistic approach is decreasing the cohesion among the other community members.

2.5 For a society to be resilient the cohesion should be there and for cohesion, two separate problems must be overcome. People must be able to coordinate their actions and they must cooperate to attain common goals. This is possible only when the basic necessities are fulfilled and people are able to think beyond those basic needs. That situation enables one individual to think and work for a greater goal keeping in mind a greater good for all. Today due to economic disparity we are facing challenges in both these problems because there is no possibility of a common point of view or thought process among people who have different background (economic as well as cultural, educational and so on). Different economic conditions make people to behave differently as individuals as well as in groups under similar circumstances like in an event of disaster or calamity at any place create havoc and a situation of complete chaos. But people in some places return to normalcy in their life and society in some time and we see acts of cooperation, willingness to work, volunteerism and service among people at such places. Whereas in some areas people continue to face inefficiency, chaos, corruption, hopelessness and despair suggesting that social life is so fragile that any event, even like a small disaster, can create unsolvable problems. In fact places affected by calamities seem to change forever in every respect. The communities that have not responded well to disasters often do not accurately understand the risk and there exist a wide economic gap that weakens social cohesion. The weakening cohesion has the following characteristic:

- There is lack of trust and cooperation
- Increased crime and theft
- Opportunistic and selfish character

### 3. Concept of social resiliency and social cohesion

Increasing evidence shows that the component of **social cohesion** is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable and resilient. Social resiliency can

be described with regard to social resources derived from social interactions (social capital) and individual development (human capital). There is a range of understanding available in the literature regarding social cohesion, for example:

- The capacity of societies, not merely groups and networks, to peacefully manage collective action problems (Woolcock, 2011).
- Lack of social cohesion as based on —the nature and extent of social and economic divisions within society (income, ethnicity, political party, caste, language, etc.) which create societal cleavages (Easterly et al (2006).
- The forces holding the individuals within the groupings in which they are (Moreno & Jennings 1937).
- The total field of forces which act on members to remain in the group (Festinger et al. 1950, p. 164).
- ‘The capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation’, Council of Europe’s (2004: 3).
- ‘The nexus of vertical and horizontal social capital and the balance of bonding and bridging social capital’ (Colletta and Cullen’s, 2000: 4).

Economic equality and social cohesion have a role in building stronger resilient societies. Resilient societies are the only way to reduce the losses caused by disasters. A resilient community is informed, knowledgeable and skilled. It has the capacity to identify problems, establish priorities and act. The diverse opportunities of employment and resources enable people to have the ability to assess, manage and monitor its risks and can learn new skills and build on past experiences.

Disaster management activities have shifter from relief and rehabilitation to preparedness and mitigation. But the capacity building approaches and awareness alone would not change the situation much. The ultimate solution is to make people resourceful and this is possible only through better economic condition and less disparity in the society.

Less disparity will enable people to think and act collectively for greater good .Hence it will strengthen social cohesion. Measuring subjects like "community" and "cohesion" is tricky but

there are different approaches to assessing social cohesion as per the needs and requirement. The status of the following is could help in assessing the quality of social cohesion in a society:

- Social membership/national citizenship—clarity on who belongs to the community. This enables clarity around the basic rights and obligations which govern social interaction.
- Fairness and equality—Equal access to resources, opportunities, information and justice.
- Security of access to livelihoods and basic services like shelter, housing, education, labour market, income, health, living standards etc.
- Governance- For policy formation and proper execution of plans.

Better cohesion will ensure better economic conditions and better resiliency. For building cohesion the government or policy makers have the greatest role to play. The status of the above four indicators in developing developed and under developed nations proves the reason for greater loss in developing or under developed nations as compared to the developed nations.

The weak trust and lack of network in the society is the reason why there is bonding but no linking or bridging in most of the societies. This lack of trust make people think in terms of individual interest for better material life. There is no sense of responsibility or belonging. This is alarming because these characteristic features increase the conflict between poverty and wealth and so on. There is disparity in the society which weakens the cohesion and hence increases the vulnerability. Higher levels of income inequality are associated with lower levels of public health and general well-being, and also with lower levels of social cohesion; at the same time, more income-equal societies tend to have higher levels of social and political trust, and lower levels of violent crime (Green *et al* 2006). This confirms that the right approach to decrease the losses due to disasters is by building cohesion though decreasing the inequalities in the society.

Building the social cohesion will foster the sense of responsibility and belonging among the individuals and then only they will work together as units. Each country has its own culture and socio-economic context. The importance of local cultural issues needs to be emphasized upon. However, community activity is connected to certain basic issues and norms, which are widely applicable without any geographic limitations. Human can remake their own life everyday and bring in the change but can do so only in association with others and not in isolation. Social

cohesion in the community is the basic attributes that are universal in nature, irrespective of the development stage of the country.

Cohesion is the characteristic of the strong and resilient societies across the world. By building this it will enable us to shifting attention away from making the environment sustainable to how social systems can function in any environment. This is how human-environment and human-human relationship will strengthen. This will also make social systems as active resources, not passive victims. The focus will shift in a positive direction, away from human vulnerability towards working on human capability.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

To conclude certain factors that can increase or diminish social cohesion. Reducing inequality in the societies is the priority and it should be included amongst national priorities. It might be useful to study communities that have adapted, persisted and grown in situations now seen as high risk. It can be the tool for building resilience and decreasing vulnerabilities in a community. Keeping all this in mind the need of the hour is to form our development policy and plans with the aim of strengthening the social cohesion for an informed, empowered and resilient world.

##### **4.1 Some recommendations for the policy makers:**

1. Form policies or integrate concept of resilience in policies concerning development like fiscal policy, the policy process, employment and labor market policy, education, gender, migration etc.
2. Ensure proper execution and monitoring of the plans and policies.
3. Provide equal opportunities in labour market, working conditions, income and consumption patterns.
4. Build an inclusive model to empower women, youth, girls and minority groups as social and economic change.
5. Provide equal and better opportunities in education will enable better societies with better health, growth and future.

6. Provide equal access to resources, right to justice and decision making.

The above actions will enable to build empowered, informed, educated and skilled population which will be strong enough to with stand disasters but before that such population will understand the risk before hand and the less disparity in the society will also make them think towards a common goal for the betterment of the society because their basic needs and necessity would have been fulfilled.

Economic, societal and environmental concerns are interlinked and there is a need for effective governance and a better understanding of causes and consequences to be able to prepare for, mitigate and strengthen resilience. The common understanding of the importance and interconnected nature, and a readiness to take action together will indicate better cohesion and a resilient society.

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