

Community, Disability and Response to Disaster Mitigation in Bangladesh

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Abstract

‘Prevention is better than cure’ - this simple affirmation is hinted in our everyday life. The effects of climate change on Bangladesh, one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, is just an “add salt into the sour”. Bangladesh seems to be one of the worst victims of climate change (Sidr on 15 Nov. 2007). A recent study reveals that 11% of the people that sustained injuries during Sidr strike fall victim to permanent disability. And the cruel fact is that disabled people are virtually excluded from the country’s greater disaster preparedness and response activities. This paper is prepared based on a study where some selected qualitative tools i.e. focus group discussion (FGD), case study and in-depth interviews, besides a questionnaire survey, were employed to understand the disability issue in relation to climate change, disaster preparedness and response activities including injury care. Study found that in pre- and post-Sidr situation no attention was paid to the disability issue.

Introduction

Disaster preparedness and mitigation became a major concern in Bangladesh after super-cyclone Sidr that hit the southern part of the country on 15 Nov. 2007. The world scientists have already alerted that due to global warming world climate has been seriously affected, which subsequently is affecting the climatic events worldwide. Bangladesh seems to be the worst victim after Tuvalu due its geographical location and for its geographical incompatibility such as flood zones, fault lines etc. In other ways, due to it sea level and riverbank erosion will increase, and frequency of climatic events i.e. cyclone, tidal surge, uneven and huge rainfall, flash floods will further intensify the problems here. Besides, sometimes the negligence of some state own agencies including absence of absolute policy, lack of direction in voluntary services, a less functional public health system, inadequate development policies, absence of disaster preparedness programs and disaster management policies etc. influence and stimulate disasters and makes the situation complex. Therefore, it creates a frustration as a whole and further intensifies the problems of disabled people who could potentially be the worst sufferer of the impact of climatic changes in Bangladesh.

This paper is based on the findings and data gathered from a research conducted at the Sidr-affected areas recently. And the analysis and discussions focused on the governmental along with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society initiatives to address the issues in the context of changing scenario of environmental and climatic change. However, we concentrated our observations, findings and discussions on disability issue in particular that is still out of the country’s greater disaster preparedness, response and mitigation activities.

Disability: an emerging and special issue

It is estimated that disabled people represent around 10% of the population worldwide, with 70-80% of them living in developing countries. Socially these people face discrimination, which has an influence on all aspects of their life. They often have less access to education, employment, information or to essential goods, and are often part of the most disadvantaged groups of the society. Neurological damage from head injuries and inaccessibility to prostheses, wheelchairs and other assistive technologies for different types of disabilities make their rehabilitation a distant dream. Most people, even the disabled themselves, in Bangladesh are not aware that technology can be their real friends in assisting them in everyday life. Though it is expected that emergence of ICT will bring equity for all irrespective of nation, caste and race. But it seems that poor nations are still far from that end and to the poorest of the poor of a poor country yet it's a space journey.

For each permanent disability many more people either seek care at home or are hospitalized. They are virtually excluded from the country's greater disaster preparedness, response and mitigation activities, as generally there seems a negative bias towards considering them as a special group with special needs. Most of the development organizations working on disability issue are concentrating on mainstreaming and advocacy program on accessibility for ensuring their rights. Some groups of these people have been targeted by few other institutions. Other than these developments there is relatively insignificant interventions compared to other development programs implemented in the country.

Disability sensitivity in disaster management

Many natural disasters like Sidr can be predicted in advance. So, disaster preparedness for people is critical in minimizing the impact of a disaster. Disasters lead to disability and the plight of the disabled in disaster situations are an agenda that deserves a prominent place in the national and international humanitarian agenda. Many practitioners agree that it is only in relief and response phases of disaster management that special emphasis has been paid to disabled people. While examining the current practices related to disaster management in Bangladesh we found that disability sensitivity has not been incorporated in planning and implementing such practices. Unfortunately, in no policy paper related to the socio-economic development of the country were we able to find a reference to disability, let alone disability sensitivity.

The Social Services Department of the country conducts some programs where disabled people have been taken into consideration as a whole, but no mention is found in any governmental policy on disability sensitivity. There is no reference at all on disabled people in the main pre-disaster management action plan. Furthermore, there is no reference on taking special needs of disabled people into consideration in planning for disaster preparedness and response activities. Whereas, there are broad-based Disaster Management Committees in the field levels, at district, upazila and union headed by Deputy Commissioner (DC), Upazila/Thana Nirbahi Officer (UNO/TNO) and Chairman at respective areas. Coordination and dialogue among experts and decision-makers on this issue may reduce the gap and enhance the process to address the problem. However, the relief organizations (both Governmental NGOs) and rescue personnel increasingly must have the preparedness to address the needs of that individual before and after a disaster. There should be a deep understanding that disaster causes impairment and it leaves many as disabled.

Response to disabled people during Sidr

It was reviled by some of the organizations working on disability issue that, there are almost half a million people with disability who were affected by Sidr. Before that the government had been able to move only one-third of the people at risk to cyclone shelters. A good number of people were given primary treatment by

the doctors and health service providers working in the affected areas. Most of the patients had been suffering from injury in head the face, neck, chest, abdomen, upper and lower limb. Some, who were injured in lumber region and thereby in their spinal cord, became paralyzed and many of the victims are amputees. According to a recent study by the Center for Injury Presentation and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) 11% among them fall victim to permanent disability. There may be a chance of paralysis or disability of several injured persons in course of time.

It is observed that persons with disability are more vulnerable to disaster rather than the children, women and aged in the family and community. During Sidr, in most of the places, disabled were left in the house when all other family members had to run off to safer places. And in pre- and post-Sidr no attention was paid to the disability issue. For disabled people surviving a disaster can be the beginning of a greater struggle. Whether an individual with a disability requires life-sustaining medication, mobility assistance, or post-disaster recovery services, relief organizations and rescue personnel therefore need to be equipped to address the needs of that individual in the hours and days before and after a disaster.

Case-1

No one even informed me about evacuation: Runu

Twelve year old Runu is a student of class IV at local primary School at Pathorgata, Borguna., Live with her maternal grand mother, because of her physical inability, she was heard about Sidr but no one said or assist her about Sidr but for person with special ability is a must to go for safer place before the Sidr. According to her voice she didn't heard form any private or public source, regarding evacuation of any one and for special one is a far dream. She is weak in left hand and a twisted left leg and suffered from tin cut on her leg on that fateful night. Besides, there was a deep wound in one of her foot, which was created by a flying screw when she along with other was trying to move for safer place, assisted by her grandmother and aunt. It was strong wind along with extra pressure frequently obstacle there walk. But any one like other saving life is matter to me. Again they have taken their last coin *two empty containers* with her. Suddenly a flying tin (roof of house) hit her leg and a screw was implanted on her foot. She was fell down into the water at once and separated. But her grandmother and aunt could manage to save her life again. The last utter of Runu is 'am I able to walk as I was'

Unfortunately field evidence suggested that even in the relief and response period, many lapses have occurred and there was poor integration of disability sensitivity in disaster management in relation to need-based relief provision during the Sidr response. There were no special programs targeted at the needs of disabled people in pre- and post-relief operations. It is also sad to note that there were no references to disabled people or any attempt to address their special needs in disaster management programs focused on later phases of disaster management cycle.

Observations and think forward

In light of the above discussion it is clear that efforts to accommodate disabled people frequently ignore disaster preparedness and response activities. As a result, too few disaster response officials are trained to deal effectively with these people, and too few of these people have the knowledge that could help them save their own lives. Absences of a disaster management policy and the exclusion disability in policies have amplified the sufferings of the victims of Sidr. Therefore following area and issues could be foot for thought for future research, policy makers, field level workers as well as for the people and organizations who are exclusively working for disability disaster mitigation.

Sensitivity in disaster management

Disability sensitivity in disaster management could be improved if existing guidelines on disaster preparedness and response plans at district and local government levels included specially designed programs which catered to the needs of disabled people. Disability sensitive development and disaster management should not be considered charity or assistance to helpless groups within society, it has to be considered as part of the process to provide a more equitable solution to peoples' needs. Everyone has the right to access opportunities, which ensures the liberties of humans to live a respectable life. Thus, just as disaster management is being considered as part of the development process of a country and disabled should not be relegated to the corners of society - they need to be treated as equal citizens who not only have special needs but also special knowledge and experiences that can be useful for the future of the nation. Use ICTs in disaster mitigation is still absence but could bet potential tools to address disability in disaster mitigation i.e. a web based information on location and number of person with special ability by using GIS like cluster or grouping of nature of disability and to use of community radio could be one step ahead of holistic disaster management approaches.

Experts, expertise to addressed special needs:

By saying special need it doesn't mean they had to some thing special rather need ensure equity and fare judgement equal to every one. Unfortunately, in post disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction phase, experts policy makers and many of the development practitioners just forgo the voice of distressed people. Again inability to use and cope-up with new technology (ICT4) is also absence in our development approach. Further the people and organizations seems to dedicated to disability concern have found in lack of issues to be incorporate in their development agenda. However, holistic development approach applicable in all aspects i.e public constructions, roads, and transport sector is need to re-map. The identification of jobs, informal education and training will be an added value in this regards. Therefore make the thing simpler means making life easier for all.

Develop a Database and Share Resources

Existing literature and field level data show that there is lack of substantial data on disabled people in Bangladesh. Different data figure out by various organization (local, national and international one) *World Health Organization (WHO)* 3% and corresponding number of total population is 150 million, *National Forum for Organizations Working for Disabilities (NFOWD, 2005)* and *Handicap International*, 5.6%,again *Action on Disability and Development (ADD, 2007)* figured that almost 10% (14 million) people are disabled which can easily create anomalies among the different stakeholders of the society. However, the type and nature of disability sketch out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), are as visual, hearing, memory, speech, arm and leg impairment, paralyzed body part(s), physical retardation, mentally handicapped, leukoderma, goiter, cataract, night blindness and other disabilities. But not include the data related to incidence of disability in Bangladesh.

But by an concentrated afford form every part government, NGO and international development community in Bangladeshi can easily develop a database on the said issue and come forward with unified data regarding disability and nature. And by use of ICTs could be make the think simpler and easier for example a GIS data base can represent geographical concentration and nature of disability of the country and community radio can help to sensitize people attitude and behavior as well as evacuation by providing information who needs what and which area pre post and during any natural calamities. Specific data can also be generated during population census the government. The database should be developed using a coordinated, planned and appropriate method with a well-coordinated and collaborative effort in order to rescue and serve these people. Besides, in post-disaster situations, when rapid damage assessments are being performed to asses needs of the affected communities, it is essential to include necessary tools to collect disability-related information. Very often, relief operations are based on the findings and recommendations of these rapid damage assessments. Therefore, coordination among

government NGOs and Civil society is very important and this type of resource and information sharing mechanism has to be enhanced to better performed in preparedness, rescue rehabilitation phase of disaster management.

Conclusion:

Like rethink after shock, Sidr pushed towards a renewed realization about the urgency for a more enhanced preparedness to face such catastrophe. So, many people including experts and intellectuals are suggesting to take actions and to implement them to save lives during such events. The government has decided to adopt a holistic approach, which includes process of hazard identification and mitigation, community preparedness and integrated response. However, it also needs to include measures to take into account disabled people. It is evident that based on the current understandings disaster management cannot be treated separately from the whole development process. It can be considered a pre-condition for sustainable development without which development outcomes will be compromised.

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