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**A CRITICAL DISCONNECT:
THE ROLE OF SAARC IN BUILDING THE
DRM CAPACITIES OF SOUTH ASIAN
COUNTRIES**

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Front Cover Photograph: the UK's International Search and Rescue team reach local villagers in earthquake-hit Chautara in Sindhupalchok District – north east of Kathmandu, Nepal. (U.K. Department for International Development, Jessica Lea/DFID, April 19, 2015).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
REGIONAL NATURAL HAZARDS	4
REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTH ASIA: SAARC	7
NATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING EFFORTS OF SAARC DMC	10
Road Maps	10
Toolkits for School and Hospital Safety	11
Training	11
Rapid Response Mechanism	12
South Asian Disaster Knowledge Network (SADKN)	13
Other Areas of Engagement	14
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SAARC DMC AND SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES:	
THE CASES OF INDIA AND NEPAL	15
India	15
<i>Governance and Institutional Structure</i>	16
<i>Current Status of DRM in India</i>	17
<i>Perceived Role of SDMC in building national</i>	
<i>DRM capacity in India</i>	19
Nepal	20
<i>Governance and Institutional Structure</i>	21

<i>Current Status of DRM in Nepal</i>	23
<i>Perceived Role of SDMC in building national</i>	
<i>DRM capacity in Nepal</i>	27
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	28
Recommendations	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY	31

ACRONYMS

AADMER	ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADRC	Asian Disaster Reduction Centre
AHA	ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance
APG	ASEAN Partnership Group
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAITEC	Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation
CDERA	Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency
CISAR	China International Search and Rescue Team
CNDRC	Central Natural Disaster Relief Committee (Nepal)
CPMFs	Central Paramilitary Forces (India)
DDMA	District disaster management authority
DDRC	District Disaster Relief Committee (Nepal)
DFID	Department for International Development (U.K.)
DP-NET	Disaster Preparedness Network (Nepal)
DRM	Disaster risk management
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
DVA	Digital Vulnerability Atlas (SAARC)
EADRCC	Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Office
EHS	Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU)
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
GDP	Gross domestic product
GFDRR	Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery
GIS	Geographic information system
GLOF	Glacial lake outburst flood
HDI	Human Development Index
HFA	Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
ICS	Incident command system

ICT	Information and communications technology
IDKN	India Disaster Knowledge Network
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LDC	Least developed country
MoHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
NDKN	National Disaster Knowledge Network
NDMA	National disaster management authority
NDMF	National Disaster Mitigation Fund (India)
NDRF	National Disaster Response Fund (India)
NDRRM	Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (SAARC)
NEC	National Executive Committee (India)
NIDM	National Institute of Disaster Management (India)
NRRC	National Risk Reduction Commission (Nepal)
NSDRM	National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management (Nepal)
NSET	National Society for Earthquake Technology (Nepal)
OECD DAC	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee
PACOM	United States Pacific Command
RDRC	Regional Disaster Relief Committee (Nepal)
REOC	Regional Emergency Operation Centre (SAARC)
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SADKN	South Asian Disaster Knowledge Network
SCFDM	SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management
SCZMC	SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre
SDMA	State disaster management authority
SDMC	SAARC Disaster Management Centre
SEDMC	SAARC Environment and Disaster Management Centre
SFC	SAARC Forestry Centre
SMRC	SAARC Meteorological Research Centre
SPC	South Pacific Community
ToT	Training of Trainers

UN United Nations

UN-HABITAT United Nations Human Settlements Programme

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

UNISDR United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

UNU United Nations University

USAID United States Agency for International Development

WRI World Risk Index

INTRODUCTION

Regional cooperation in South Asia is not easy. The history of the sub-region, most notably influenced by the partition of India in 1947, the political sensitivities and trust deficit between states, particularly between India and Pakistan, and the vast disparity between the size and wealth of the different countries make it hard to find mutual ground on a host of important trans-boundary issues. Regional cooperation for disaster risk management (DRM) is no exception.

While the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) developed a Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management and Disaster Prevention in 2005 and established a number of SAARC centers, chiefly the SAARC Centre for Disaster Management and Preparedness (SDMC) to implement the framework,¹ progress to build the DRM capacities of South Asian states through regional cooperation has been slow. Over the last decade, SDMC has produced regional guidelines, conducted technical trainings, and developed a mechanism for collective emergency response for ratification by states. However, despite these and other SAARC efforts, there is little sense that this regional support has been absorbed by member states in a way that influences their DRM national capacities in any meaningful way. Unfortunately, delicate inter- and intra-state politics are so compelling within the South Asian context that they continually draw national attention away from the sustained focus required to make progress on DRM issues.

Further to the thorny political challenges that hamper cooperation in the sub-region, it has to be noted that SAARC DMC, on its own merits, has never been considered a particularly effective institution. Although there was some initial enthusiasm for the SDMC in the early years, any cautious hopes about what it could achieve seem to have been replaced by widespread cynicism about its ostensibly non-existent influence. DRM stakeholders in the region recognize that SAARC DMC conducts some capacity-building activities for states, but these efforts are seen as superficial, having negligible impact on the day-to-day activities and planning of states. It is important to remark that not a single DRM government official interviewed for this study was able to comment on any SDMC activities that had provided critical support to their national capacity building efforts. International stakeholders who engaged in this study were equally at a loss when it came to SAARC DMC, unable to describe much of what the Centre does even though they had much to say about other risk reduction, preparedness, and response activities in support of national governments.

While SDMC has certainly produced some useful guidelines and conducted what seem like important technical DRM trainings, it is evident that the Centre has lacked the requisite vision and political support of its members to fulfill its mandate. Rather than homing in on specific DRM activities and seeing them through from start to finish, it

¹ Other SAARC centres charged with the implementation of the SAARC DRM agreement are the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (Male) and the SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (Dhaka). The SDMC is located in New Delhi. See SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management, 2005, <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/pdf/framework.pdf>.

seems that SAARC DMC has dabbled in too many areas at once, devoting insufficient attention to what its comparative advantage is or should be. At the same time, the Centre has perhaps been negatively influenced by the hyperactivity of ASEAN to the East, in the sense that it has aspired to mimic many of the elements of the Southeast Asian regional cooperation for DRM rather than taking a more tailored approach to its potential added value in its own regional context.. Finally, it goes nearly without saying that SDMC has been victim to many of SAARC's more widespread regional integration failures. As in other fields, SAARC's DRM engagement has been much about pleasing the political whims of different member states through "a little of this and a little of that" rather than acting boldly and purposefully to develop regional systems and processes that can facilitate long-term resilience to disasters.

Notwithstanding the slow progress of SAARC in the area of DRM national capacity building, it would be wrong to write off the potential role of the organization completely as there are certainly reasons to be supportive of SAARC's continued engagement in this area. For one, it should be noted that nothing happens fast in South Asia, and SAARC has only been involved in regional cooperation for DRM for a relatively short period of time compared to other Asian regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Pacific Community (SPC). Second, despite the cynicism surrounding multilateral work on trans-boundary issues in South Asia, there continues to remain a considerable level of expectation - if perhaps not yet the requisite commitment by member states - for a regional DRM approach. Given its perceived underperformance thus far, continuing discussions about the potential of SDMC by regional stakeholders is perhaps surprising, but certainly undeniable. Against difficult odds, South Asian member states and international onlookers would still very much like to see SAARC DMC function effectively, most notably because the sub-region is simply in too dire need of a trans-boundary approach to disaster risk to throw in the towel now.

It is the purpose of this study to consider the different elements of SAARC DMC's efforts over the last decade and to assess their impact in supporting the national capacities of member states. This study evaluates the development of DRM national architecture and activities in two case study countries in South Asia, namely India and Nepal, to get a better sense of where these countries stand with regard to DRM capabilities and to understand what role, if any, regional approaches have had in reinforcing national systems. As this paper went to press, a 7.8 earthquake hit Nepal on April 25, 2015, the most powerful in 80 years, killing at least 7,000 persons (and possibly as many as 10,000) and affecting an additional eight million. This paper does not endeavor to assess the full extent of earthquake losses or the emergency relief efforts still unfolding in Nepal at the time of its publication. Instead, it maps out the national architecture and systems that were in place in disaster-affected country and across the sub-region prior to the disaster.²

² To this end, it should be mentioned that reviewers from Nepal were unable to offer their feedback on this paper as a result of the emergency. Any inaccuracies are the responsibility of the author and will be corrected as and when Nepal country experts are able to engage.

The larger objective of this work is to compare the actions of SAARC in South Asia with the actions of regional organizations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands regions. This study is a follow-up effort to a more general analysis about the work of regional organizations in DRM globally called *In the Neighborhood: The Role of Regional Organizations in Disaster Risk Management* that was published by Brookings Institution in 2013 and a complement to more detailed sub-regional analyses of DRM capacity building work in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands that were prepared by Brookings in late 2014 and 2015.³ It is the hope that a thorough study of the relationship of regional organizations with member states, and with national disaster management agencies (NDMAs) in particular, can offer greater insight into what regional activities are useful to national governments in their efforts to prevent and respond to disasters.

The research methodology utilized to produce this paper included a thorough desk review of existing literature on DRM in South Asia, a two-week field research mission to India and Nepal, and key informant interviews with some 22 regional experts including staff from SAARC SDMC, the UN, the Red Cross, donors, national government officials, and academics.

³ These studies can be found on the Brookings Institution website at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/02/06-drm-pacific-islands-climate-white> and <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2014/11/05-south-east-asia-disasters-petz>.

REGIONAL NATURAL HAZARDS

South Asia is a physically diverse sub-region of the Asian continent comprising eight countries located just south of the Hindu-Kush Himalayas. These countries are Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The three main rivers of the region, the Ganges, Indus and Brahmaputra, all have their source in the Himalayas and run through several different countries of South Asia. Many millions of people live and gain their livelihoods in the fertile valleys of these rivers. Seventy percent of South Asia's landmass is within the sovereign territory of India, and all other countries of the sub-region have a border with India while none, apart from Afghanistan and Pakistan, have a border with one another. India is, therefore, central to everything that happens in South Asia. South Asia is home to one fifth of the world's population, currently estimated at 1.4 billion, making it both the most populous and the most densely populated region in the world.⁴ Of the region's 1.4 billion population, some 600 million persons are estimated to live in poverty.⁵

Figure 1: Regional map



Source: www.mapsoftheworld.com, 2009, as found at <http://www.mapsofworld.com/asia/south-asia-geography.html>

Countries of the South Asian sub-region represent very asymmetrical characteristics with regard to size, population, and economics. On the one hand, there is India,

⁴ SDMC. *Post-2015 DRR Framework for SAARC Region (HFA2)* SDMC, March 2014, SAARC, New Delhi <http://www.recoveryplatform.org/assets/HFA2/Post-2015%20Drr%20Framework%20SAARC.pdf>.

⁵ Naseer Memon, *Disasters in South Asia: A Regional Perspective*, 2012, Pakistan Institute of Labor Education and Research, 2012, http://www.tdh.de/fileadmin/user_upload/inhalte/04_Was_wir_tun/Themen/Humanitaere_Hilfe/Katastroph_english/Disaster_in_South_Asia_-_Naseer_memon.pdf.

projected to surpass China as the most populous country in the world by 2028, with an estimated population of some 1.5 billion, a population expected to be larger than the current population of all of South Asian countries combined.⁶ On the other hand, and in the same sub-region, there is the Republic of Maldives, a small island nation comprised of 26 different atolls that barely rise above sea level with a population of only 350,000 people. Of the eight countries that are members of SAARC, four of them – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal - are categorized as Least Developed Countries (LDC). Maldives “graduated” from the LDC status in 2011. On the flip side, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have very strong economies and highly developed military assets to match. It is often remarked that there can be no “one size fits all” approach to DRM, and this is nowhere more true than in South Asia.

Countries in the region face a range of different natural hazards, including earthquakes, cyclones, tsunamis, floods, landslides, sea rise, and droughts. In recent decades, demographic changes, urbanization, environmental degradation, and climate change have increased exposure to these hazards, resulting in more frequent and more intense natural disasters. For the two landlocked countries in the region, Nepal and Bhutan, landslides, floods, and earthquakes are the primary risks. For countries with large coastal regions, such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, cyclones and tsunamis also pose serious threats to life and livelihoods. The region currently includes the five “mega-cities” of Mumbai, New Delhi, Dhaka, Kolkata and Karachi, which, by their very nature, are at increased exposure to natural disasters.⁷

Figure 2: Number of natural disaster events in South Asia in 2011

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Total
Drought	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Earthquake	34	0	1	27	1	45	13	0	121
Epidemic	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
Extreme temperature	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	6
Flood	2	1	0	7	0	2	1	3	16
Avalanche	2	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	8
Landslide	3	25	1	32	0	63	7	0	131
Storm	1	1	0	3	0	0	0	1	6
Total	43	29	2	71	2	115	24	5	291

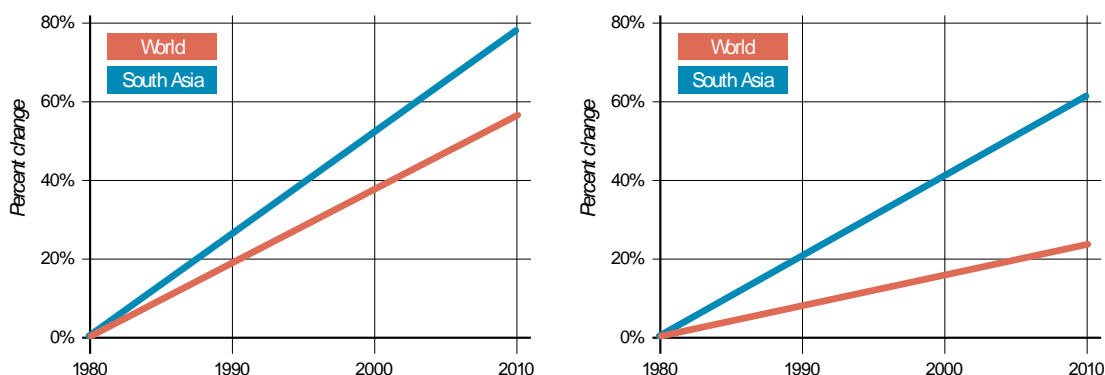
Source: EM-DAT and data compiled by SDMC from other sources, as found in 2011 Disaster Report by SAARC.⁸

⁶ BBC, “UN: India to be world’s most populous nation by 2028,” *BBC News Asia*, 14 June 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22907307>.

⁷ SDMC, *Post-2015 DRR Framework for SAARC Region (HFA2)* SDMC, March 2014, SAARC, New Delhi <http://www.recoveryplatform.org/assets/HFA2/Post-2015%20Drr%20Framework%20SAARC.pdf>.

⁸ SDMC, *South Asia Disaster Report 2011*, SAARC DMC, New Delhi, 2011, <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/pdf/Publications/SADR2011.pdf>.

Figure 3: Exposure (left) and vulnerability (right) trends in South Asia from 1980 through 2010



Sources: UN DESA and UNDP (2014) as found in Justin Ginetti and Chris Lavell. *The Risk of Disaster-Induced Displacement in South Asia*, NRC, and IDMC, April 2015.⁹

South Asia has faced nearly 1,500 disasters over the last forty years, killing some one million people and affecting an additional 2.4 billion. During the 1970–2008 period, floods accounted for half of the total number of events reported, while droughts accounted for only two per cent but had devastating impacts on populations in the arid and semi-arid regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.¹⁰ South Asia is also experiencing urbanization at a very rapid rate, even by global standards, exposing increasingly larger populations to disaster risk.

Also exceptional to South Asia are the risks posed by melting glaciers across the Himalayas. As these glaciers recede in the short and medium-term, downstream countries face the increased threat of glacial lake outbursts, or GLOFs, and other types of flash flooding. Two known hotspots of glacial activity are the Dudh Koshi sub-basin of Nepal and the Pho Chu sub-basin of Bhutan.¹¹ Over the longer-term, the sub-region is likely to be deprived of precious water resources as the glaciers recede still further.¹²

⁹ Ginetti, Justin and Chris Lavell. *The Risk of Disaster-Induced Displacement in South Asia*, Norwegian Refugee Council and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, April 2015, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/publications/images/2015/201504-ap-south-asia-disaster-induced-displacement-risk-en.pdf>.

¹⁰ Naseer Memon, *Disasters in South Asia: A Regional Perspective*, 2012, Pakistan Institute of Labor Education and Research, 2012, http://www.tdh.de/fileadmin/user_upload/inhalte/04_Was_wir_tun/Themen/Humanitaere_Hilfe/Katastrophenhilfe/Disaster_in_South_Asia_-_Naseer_memon.pdf.

¹¹ From ICIMOD, 2007, as found in ESCAP and ISDR. *Protecting Development Gains: Reducing Disaster Vulnerability and Building Resilience in Asia and the Pacific*, *The Asia Pacific Disaster Report*, 2010, http://www.unisdr.org/files/16132_asiapacificdisasterreport20101.pdf.

¹² Naseer Memon, *Disasters in South Asia: A Regional Perspective*, 2012, Pakistan Institute of Labor Education and Research, 2012, http://www.tdh.de/fileadmin/user_upload/inhalte/04_Was_wir_tun/Themen/Humanitaere_Hilfe/Katastrophenhilfe/Disaster_in_South_Asia_-_Naseer_memon.pdf.

REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTH ASIA: SAARC

The main institution for inter-state cooperation in South Asia is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This regional organization was established in 1985 when all of the countries in South Asia, apart from Afghanistan, adopted the SAARC Charter. Afghanistan later applied to join SAARC in 2005 and was formally made a member in 2007. The SAARC Secretariat is located in Kathmandu. Its work is currently supported by 11 SAARC regional centres that cover a range of integration issues.¹³ A central feature of the SAARC model is that all decisions are taken on the basis of unanimity. This means that unless all member states are in agreement, a decision cannot be made regarding a particular issue. SAARC Summits are held annually. The last, or 18th, SAARC Summit was held in November 2014 in Kathmandu.

While the initial SAARC Charter did not make specific mention of disaster risk management, DRM was presumably covered within the Charter under the general principles of “collective self-reliance,” “active collaboration,” and “mutual assistance.”¹⁴ It was not until 2006, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, that countries of South Asia addressed the issue of natural disasters in an explicit manner through the development of the SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management. The Framework was aligned with the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 and declared as priorities:

1. Development and implementation of risk reduction strategies;
2. Establishment of regional and national response mechanisms;
3. Establishment of regional information sharing platforms;
4. Development and implementation of disaster management training, education, research, and awareness programmes;
5. Application of information and communications technology (ICT) for disaster management; and
6. Establishment of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.¹⁵

The Framework articulated that three thematic centres would be responsible for implementing its strategic priorities. One such centre would be a newly established SAARC Centre for Disaster Management and Preparedness (SDMC) in New Delhi. The others would be the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC) in Male and the SAARC Meteorological Centre (SMRC) in Dhaka. In 2006, the SDMC was established within India’s National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) which, in

¹³ The full list of SAARC regional centres and their geographic locations can be found on the SAARC website at the following link: <http://saarc-sec.org/Regional-Centers/12/>.

¹⁴ See SAARC, *SAARC Charter*, 1985, <http://www.saarc-sec.org/SAARC-Charter/5/>.

¹⁵ See SAARC, *SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management*, 2005, <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/pdf/framework.pdf>.

turn, was housed under the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India.¹⁶ The Centre was charged with providing policy advice and capacity building services to SAARC member states. It was to be governed by an Independent Executive Council made up of member state representatives and managed by an SDMC Director who was also the Director of NIDM.

Placing SDMC within the NIDM which, in turn, was inside the Indian government was a somewhat peculiar arrangement for a regional organization, but the idea to do so was agreed upon by member states with the following rationale in mind. It minimized capital costs associated with the running of the Centre and allowed the Centre to leverage the DRM capacities and expertise of India to serve SAARC member states better. It was decided that administrative and operational costs for the Centre would be divided between member states based on a formula that takes into consideration the gross domestic product (GDP) of each country in addition to other factors.¹⁷ According to this arrangement, India pays well over half of the Centre’s operational costs (in addition to capital costs).

Thus far, and unlike other regional institutions, there is little outside donor funding for the Centre except on an ad hoc basis for particular projects. Stakeholders point out that the “members only” approach of SAARC was taken as South Asian countries wanted to protect the regional institution from external interests (such as those of China and the United States) in the development of its programming.¹⁸ However, the Centre runs with skeleton staff due to funding constraints, suggesting that an opening up of the institution to financing by outside donors could permit the institution to function much more effectively.¹⁹

In order to facilitate communication between the Centre and member states, National Focal Points were established in each of the South Asian countries. These are generally the national disaster management authorities (NDMA) or other government entities charged with DRM in a country where an NDMA does not exist.

Figure 4: SDMC National Focal Points

Afghanistan	Afghan National Disaster Management Authority
Bangladesh	Disaster Management Bureau
Bhutan	Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs
India	National Institute of Disaster Management
Maldives	National Disaster Management Center
Nepal	Ministry of Home Affairs
Pakistan	National Disaster Management Authority
Sri Lanka	Disaster Management Center

¹⁶ NIDM was established in 2013 to support the Indian government and other stakeholders through policy research, publication, and trainings.

¹⁷ Key informant interview, March 2015.

¹⁸ Key informant interview, March 2015.

¹⁹ No information on SDMC’s budget or on specific budgets of member states was made available for this study.

Initially, it was envisioned that member states would also second national experts to SDMC to facilitate regional ownership and inter-state hands-on learning but, apparently, only a couple of countries sent representatives in the early days of the Centre's existence and, then, for only a limited period of time. As a result, SDMC is run almost entirely by Indian nationals. There are currently just 12 SDMC staff members working side-by-side with some 150 NIDM staff in New Delhi.²⁰

A decision was made by the SAARC Programming Committee in November 2014 to consolidate and rename the Centre. In an overall trimming of SAARC regional centres, the Committee decided to merge the SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC) in Bhutan, the SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC) in the Maldives, the SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC) in Bangladesh, and the SAARC SDMC in India into one centre called the SAARC Environment and Disaster Management Centre (SEDMC).²¹ The location of the new Centre is yet to be determined by SAARC member states but apparently India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have all put themselves forward as possible host countries. A decision about the SEDMC's location will be taken later in 2015. At the time of this study, observers in India were relatively confident that the Centre would remain in New Delhi although it likely would no longer be housed within NIDM.²²

²⁰ According to key informants, Bangladesh and Nepal sent representatives for the first year or two of the Centre's existence. Since that time, the Centre has relied on Indian staffing. That being said, SDMC has apparently not recruited anyone for 1.5 years due to funding constraints. Key informant interviews, March 2015.

²¹ The decision to merge the SDMC with other centres occurred at the same time that the Committee also agreed to close three pre-existing SAARC regional centres, namely the SAARC Information Centre in Kathmandu, the SAARC Human Resources Development Centre in Islamabad, and the SAARC Documentation Centre in New Delhi bringing down the number of SAARC regional centres from 11 to 4. See Anil Giri, "SAARC to trim regional centres," Ekatnipur.com, 24 November 2014, <http://www.ekantipur.com/2014/11/23/top-story/saarc-to-trim-regional-centres/398040.html>

²² In fact, NIDM is currently seeking a new Director, an individual who will be - for the first time ever - separate from the SDMC Director, suggesting that the SEDMC may have a more independent platform regardless of country host.

NATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING EFFORTS OF SAARC DMC

Since its establishment in 2006, SDMC has initiated a number of efforts to support member states in their DRM capacity building. Most striking about many of these initiatives is that, at least superficially, they seem to reflect positive and thoughtful engagement on DRM issues even though SAARC seems to get very little credit for its work.

For the most part, SAARC SDMC appears to get a good start on particular initiatives but is unable, for whatever reason, to influence national action in a more meaningful way. It is only when one reads through the various materials produced by SAARC DMC that the critical disconnect between the Centre and its member states is fully realized. The material is good, but one wonders, is anyone paying attention? Certainly, there is significant room for improvement in terms of the SDMC's own capacity, focus, and speed of action. At the same time, however, there are evidently some very real blockages at national levels that are preventing countries from taking better advantage of the regional information and know-how that is made available to them through regional DRM arrangements.

The following section outlines some of SDMC's more important achievements over the last decade with a description of how activities have evolved and their potential to support member states.

Road Maps

Over a five-year period from 2008 to 2012, SDMC developed a number of guidelines or "road maps" on different aspects of disaster management through a participatory process involving member state representatives and regional experts in relevant DRM fields. SDMC was supported by a handful of donors for this initiative, apparently receiving partial funding to create the road maps from ISDR, USAID (for ICS trainings) and JICA. In all, SDMC developed ten road maps that are all available online. These include:

- *Community based disaster risk management in South Asia (2008);*
- *Application of Science and Technology for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (2008);*
- *Coastal and Marine Risk Mitigation Plan (2008);*
- *Integration of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation in South Asia (2008);*
- *Mainstreaming Disaster Reduction in Development in South Asia (2008);*
- *Earthquake Risk Management in South Asia (2009);*
- *Landslide Risk Management in South Asia (2010);*
- *Urban Risk Management in South Asia (2010);*
- *Drought Risk Management in South Asia (2010);*

- *Flood Risk Management in South Asia* (2012).²³

Each of the guidelines, or road maps, outlines the status of activities in different DRM areas and explores possibilities for regional cooperation. For every road map, an accompanying workshop was held to flesh out ideas and to share national experiences and technical information. Over time, the quality of the road maps seemed to become better and better. The last road map that was produced on flood risk management in collaboration with the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in Pakistan in 2012 is a solid piece of work on the risk of floods across a range of South Asian countries and includes a checklist of priority actions that governments are advised to take to mitigate, prepare and respond to flooding.

What is unclear in the context of all of these guidelines is whether these lessons are produced and then put on a shelf to collect dust or whether they are employed as “living documents” to reinforce regional training or to inform academic curricula across South Asian universities. As no evaluation on the impact of these road maps has ever been conducted, it is unclear to what extent they are referenced by national officials. In terms of government officials interviewed for this study, few if any of them were familiar with these documents. Therefore, it would seem that whatever learning did occur in the context of their production benefited only the experts attending the road map workshops themselves and was soon lost thereafter.

Toolkits for School and Hospital Safety

In addition to the SDMC road maps, the Centre has also worked in collaboration with UN-HABITAT and UNISDR to produce *Tools for the Assessment of School and Hospital Safety for Multi-Hazards in South Asia*.²⁴ The set of four standardized toolkits, released in 2012, was designed to assist national level officials in their assessments of the safety of school and hospital structures to multiple hazards in the region. The toolkits address design safety issues of new structures as well as the retrofitting of existing structures. While the impact of these toolkits on national planning for building and school and hospital safety is unknown, the subject continues to be a priority for SDMC. For example, in the Post-2015 Framework for the SAARC Region (HFA2) SDMC, school and hospital safety is identified as one of the top priorities of the sub-region in the post-2015 era.²⁵ Work in this particular area of disaster risk reduction was promoted through a number of global advocacy campaigns such as *One Million Safe Schools and Hospitals, Making Cities Resilient*, and the *World Urban Campaign*.

Training

Trainings have also been a central component of SDMC programming. The trainings seek to address the most pressing collective needs of member states. SDMC does not conduct trainings itself but contracts out expert technical and academic institutions from

²³ See the SAARC website for access to all Road Maps: <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/roadmap.asp>.

²⁴ UNISDR, UN-HABITAT, SDMC, *Tools for the Assessment of School and Hospital Safety for Multi-Hazards in South Asia*, 2012, <http://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/publications/31889>.

²⁵ SDMC, *Post-2015 DRR Framework for SAARC Region (HFA2)* SDMC, March 2014, SAARC, New Delhi <http://www.recoveryplatform.org/assets/HFA2/Post-2015%20Drr%20Framework%20SAARC.pdf>.

across the region to support work in this regard. On average, four to six trainings are conducted per year. Trainings cover subjects such as geographic information systems (GIS) and remote sensing technology, incident command systems (ICS), seismic retrofitting, water resource management, and river erosion and embankment safety among other topics.²⁶ The trainings last anywhere from a few days to two full weeks. Member state participants in these trainings generally range from 15 to 30 persons. According to SDMC, trainings are said to be greatly appreciated by member states, especially by the smaller South Asian countries. SDMC points out that applications to attend trainings always surpass available places. That being said, the SDMC training program has been weak in that there is no collated documentation about which country representatives have participated in which trainings as a means to gauge where capacity on a particular topic sits within different national governments. At the same time, stakeholders seem to be unanimous in their view that a Training-of-Trainers (ToT) programme is needed so that knowledge on these subjects can become more widespread across the whole of governments, resulting in a more common understanding of best practice among a much larger community of national actors.

Rapid Response Mechanism

A potentially major contribution of the SAARC SDMC in support of member states is the development of a Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM). In 2008, SAARC announced that such a mechanism would be developed to facilitate a coordinated and planned approach to disasters in the region. Thereafter, in 2011, the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters was drafted and signed by all member states.²⁷ The SAARC NDRRM is largely modeled on the AADMER of Southeast Asia. As such, it calls on countries to earmark assets and capacities for regional standby arrangements on a voluntary basis.²⁸ India was the first country to ratify the NDRRM in 2012. The NDRRM awaits the ratification of a number of other SAARC member states before it can come into force.²⁹

In the meantime, the location of the Regional Emergency Operation Centre (REOC) to be established under the auspices of the NDRRM has apparently already been identified as Kathmandu. In preparation for the setting up of the REOC, SAARC conducted a field study exchange to Jakarta in January 2015 to visit ASEAN colleagues and to observe the AHA Centre of the AADMER. The purpose of the visit was to draw lessons from ASEAN's experience in setting up and operationalizing the AHA Centre

²⁶ For a full list of trainings that have been offered by the SDMC, see <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/training.asp>.

²⁷ SAARC, *SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters*, Male, 2011, <https://www.ifrc.org/docs/idrl/N840EN.pdf>.

²⁸ Other models considered when developing the NDRRM were the Coordination Response Model used by the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) and the Assured Response Model employed by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA). See SAARC, *Report of Expert Group Meeting on SAARC Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism*, New Delhi, February 2009, http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/PDF/expert_group/report.pdf.

²⁹ SAARC's principle of unanimity in decision-making means that the NDRRM cannot come into force until all SAARC member states have ratified it.

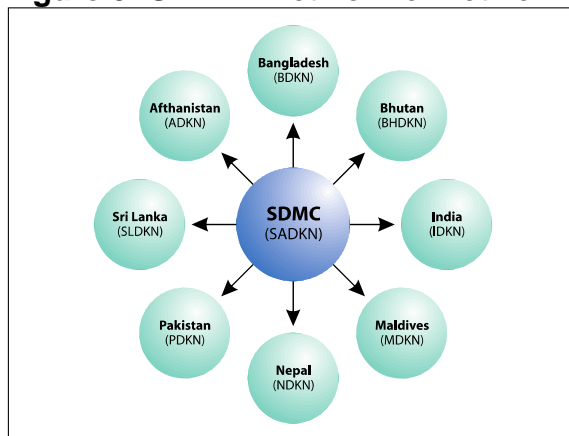
since 2011. The visit was supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the US Forest Service.³⁰

Again, in the instance of the NDRRM, there seems to be a significant disconnect between what SAARC DMC is doing at the regional level and what is taken up by member states and their partners at national levels. Many stakeholders interviewed for this study did not carry much hope in the operationalization of a Rapid Response Mechanism in South Asia and were quick to point out that apart from the success of ASEAN in response to Cyclone Nargis (Myanmar) in 2008, the Southeast Asian model has not necessarily worked there either. Also to note in this regard that no one interviewed in Nepal mentioned the eventual establishment of the Regional Emergency Operation Centre (REOC) in Kathmandu, seemingly unaware that such a Centre was to be set up.

South Asian Disaster Knowledge Network (SADKN)

In addition to the above activities, SDMC has developed the South Asian Disaster Knowledge Network, or SADKN, in order to capture the various streams of knowledge on DRM in the South Asian region. The SADKN is an open platform that allows for information sharing on hazards, vulnerabilities, risks, and disasters. The SADKN is a network of networks, developed in partnership with the national member states of South Asia and with a large number of knowledge base institutions. The regional portal is both designed and maintained by SDMC while the eight National Portals are maintained by the different National Focal Points within member state countries. Support for the development of the SADKN was made available by UNISDR with financial assistance from the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR).³¹

Figure 5: SADKN network of networks



Source: SDMC, *SADKN Brochure*, <http://www.saarc-sadkn.org/downloads/Brochure%20SADKN%20SAARC.pdf>

³⁰ ASEAN, "ASEAN Shares Experience to SAARC in Setting up Regional Disaster Response Mechanisms," *ASEAN Secretariat News*, Jakarta, 27 January 2015, <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-secretariat-news/item/asean-shares-experience-to-saarc-in-setting-up-regional-disaster-response-mechanisms>.

³¹ SDMC, *SADKN Brochure*, as found on the SDMC website in April 2015, <http://www.saarc-sadkn.org/downloads/Brochure%20SADKN%20SAARC.pdf>.

The SADKN has a number of different features including Disaster Knowledge Mining, RealTime Disaster, RealTime Weather, a Disaster Dashboard, and a Digital Vulnerability Atlas (DVA). The DVA is found in a separate but linked portal. It provides layers of digitized visual information on administrative boundaries, physiographic features, housing, and critical infrastructure. Acquiring information for the DVA has not been easy given the trust deficit that exists between certain states and the security issues that each country has considered in sharing the types of information required for the Atlas. Nonetheless, hundreds of map layers have been created for five SAARC countries, including Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. The compilation of information on Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka is still a work in progress.³²

Other Areas of Engagement

In addition to its flagship activities, SDMC has also explored the possibility of setting up a catastrophe risk insurance scheme similar to that operating in the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands regions although it has chosen not to develop one of its own at this time. It has also considered the possibility of developing a Regional Recovery Framework for SAARC and a standby capacity for recovery planning assistance.³³ Regional workshops are currently being conducted to examine how such a Framework might be established.

Further to activities directly under SDMC, SAARC countries have also signed an agreement to establish a SAARC Food Bank to be utilized during emergencies and food shortages in the region.³⁴ Furthermore, SAARC member states have signed a SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change that recommends cooperation on climate risk modeling, sharing information, particularly meteorological data, and capacity building in early forecasting and warning and adaptation measures.³⁵ And, finally, it should be noted that India announced at the latest SAARC Summit in November 2014 that it would launch a SAARC satellite to enhance regional cooperation in space technology. The SAARC satellite is envisioned to address regional telecommunications and disaster management needs as well.³⁶

³² SDMC, *SADKN Brochure*, as found on the SDMC website in April 2015, <http://www.saarc-sadkn.org/downloads/Brochure%20SADKN%20SAARC.pdf>.

³³ ADRC, "Workshop on Recovery Planning for SAARC," *ADRC Activity Report*, 10-13 April 2013 http://www.adrc.asia/adrcreport_e/archives/2013/04/10132654.html.

³⁴ SAARC, *Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Bank*, New Delhi, 2007, <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idri/N646EN.pdf>.

³⁵ ESCAP and ISDR, *Protecting Development Gains: Reducing Disaster Vulnerability and Building Resilience in Asia and the Pacific, The Asia Pacific Disaster Report*, 2010, http://www.unisdr.org/files/16132_asiapacificdisasterreport20101.pdf.

See also SAARC, *SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change*, 2008, <http://saarc-sdmc.nic.in/pdf/publications/climate/chapter-2.pdf>.

³⁶ Indo-Asian News Service, "India to Launch Satellite for SAARC region in 2016: Prime Minister Modi," *NDTV Gadgets*, 227 November 2014, <http://gadgets.ndtv.com/science/news/india-to-launch-satellite-for-saarc-region-in-2016-prime-minister-modi-626603>.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SAARC DMC AND SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES – THE CASES OF INDIA AND NEPAL

Over the course of SDMC's existence, South Asian countries have been busy developing their own disaster preparedness, prevention, and mitigation policies, with varying levels of intensity and success. Since 2005, in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami, several countries in the region have passed Disaster Management Acts and created National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs). Currently, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan all have NDMAs or National Disaster Management Centres (as is the specific case of Sri Lanka) with accompanying National Disaster Acts.³⁷ Bhutan passed an updated Disaster Act in 2013. The Maldives has a National Disaster Management Centre but is still working on its national disaster management legislation. The governments of Nepal and Bangladesh have not yet passed updated disaster acts and, thus, operate according to laws and structures dating back to 1982 and 1997 respectively.

Even for those countries with disaster policies in place, the actual implementation of these policies and the establishment of mechanisms required to support them are still areas in dire need of improvement. There does not seem to be the sense of urgency and prioritization of DRM in South Asia that one sees in other regions. That being said, progress is taking place, slowly. The following case studies of India and Nepal will be examined to illustrate how national architecture for DRM has evolved over the last years and, in particular, what national elements were in place at the time of the Nepal earthquake of April 2015.

India

India is the largest SAARC country by far with a total of 29 states and 7 union territories. Within these, there are 626 districts across the nation. India has the strongest disaster management capabilities in the region, presumably the chief reason that SDMC was initially established in New Delhi.

Notable about the disaster management situation in India is that a major review of the national disaster legislation was conducted from 2011-2013. Government officials called for the review because they felt that much of what India's Disaster Act had mandated was not being implemented and they wanted to find ways to improve the country's performance. In light of the review's findings (described in detail below), there has been a reconfiguration of the NDMA both in terms of size and political ranking. Regrettably,

³⁷ Pakistan created its NMDA in 2007; India created its NDMA in 2005; Afghanistan created its NDMA in its current form in 2007. See the various National Disaster Knowledge Networks (NDKN) of South Asian countries for further information on NDMA establishment and accompanying National Disaster Acts.

quite a number of observers feel that the NDMA's new configuration may weaken rather than strengthen DRM in the country.³⁸

Governance and institutional structure

India passed its first proper Disaster Management Act in 2005.³⁹ The Act called for the establishment of an NDMA with the Prime Minister as chairperson. The NDMA was required to have no more than nine members including a Vice Chairperson. The Vice Chairperson had the status of Cabinet Minister and the NDMA members had the status of Ministers of State. The National Executive Committee (NEC) was named the executive committee of the NDMA and was mandated to assist the authority in the discharge of its functions. The NEC is composed of secretaries from a host of different governmental ministries.⁴⁰

Disaster risk management is a responsibility of India's state authorities to be supported by central government only when a disaster overwhelms the ability of a particular state to address it on its own. For this reason, the Disaster Act calls for the setting up of State Disaster Management Authorities (SDMAs) in each of the 29 states headed by Chief Ministers. Furthermore, the Act dictates the creation of District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMA) in each of the country's 626 districts. The Disaster Act reflected a paradigm shift at the time, moving away from response-focused activities only to a more proactive approach to DRM that included prevention, mitigation, and preparedness (in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015).⁴¹

When the Disaster Act was first passed and the NDMA established, there was great enthusiasm for the potential of the new central disaster management authority to support states in their management of disasters. There was a sense of earnestness and a lot of good work was done.⁴² The NDMA developed a National Policy on Disaster Management in 2009 that outlined the strategy and institutional arrangements that

³⁸ Key informant interviews, March 2015.

³⁹ Although India did not have a comprehensive disaster management law until 2005, the disaster law was preceded by some limited legislation addressing specific aspects of disaster risk management. See Government of India, *Report of the Task Force: A Review of the Disaster Management Act, 2005*, Ministry of Home Affairs, March 2013, http://ndmindia.nic.in/Rpt_TaskForce_300913.pdf.

⁴⁰ Government of India, *National Policy on Disaster Management 2009*, Ministry of Home Affairs, National Disaster Management Authority, 2009, <http://www.ndma.gov.in/images/guidelines/national-dm-policy2009.pdf>.

⁴¹ The Disaster Act provides for two Funds, namely, the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) and the National Disaster Mitigation Fund (NDMF). The former is to be used to respond to any threatening disaster situation or disaster. The second is designed specifically for the purpose of mitigation. The Act provides for the creation of similar funds at state and district levels. Government of India, *Report of the Task Force: A Review of the Disaster Management Act, 2005*, Ministry of Home Affairs, March 2013, http://ndmindia.nic.in/Rpt_TaskForce_300913.pdf.

⁴² Key informant interviews, March 2015.

would govern disaster management in India. It stipulated, in particular, that the NDMA would be supported by:

- **The National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM):** The NIDM, established in 2001, is the preeminent think-tank in India addressing disaster management issues. Major responsibilities of the NIDM under the National Policy have been to conduct research, documentation, training, and capacity building. As previously mentioned, the NIDM is housed within the Ministry of Home Affairs and currently hosts the SAARC DMC.
- **The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF):** The Disaster Act itself called for the establishment of a special force for disaster management, the first of its kind in the world. This was reiterated in the National Policy. Today, the NDRF consists of 11 battalions (1,100 forces within each) of paramilitary forces deployed throughout the country that maintain a close liaison with State Governments for disaster mitigation, preparedness and response purposes. NDRF deployment is mandated at the central level by the NDMA.⁴³

With the support of NIDM and other experts from across India, the NDMA also created some twenty different guidelines on DRM topics in its first years of existence. These guidelines aimed to assist the Central Ministries, Departments, and States to formulate their respective disaster management plans.⁴⁴ According to the National Policy, other key institutions in DRM in India are the Armed Forces, the Central Paramilitary Forces (CPMFs), and State Police Forces and Fire Services.

Current status of DRM in India

Despite positive progress in setting standards and building capacities in the initial years of the NDMA, DRM stakeholders in India apparently grew wary of the set up mandated by the 2005 Disaster Act. Nearly ten years since the NDMA's establishment, many government officials, particularly those at the State level, were not happy with the functioning of the central authority. Ministers of State felt that NDMA Members, all political appointees, did not necessarily have the requisite DRM experience to fulfill their responsibilities in an effective manner nor did they understand the criteria for identifying and appointing these Members to the NDMA in the first place. Furthermore, they considered the central structure for DRM to be too top heavy, resulting in delays and bottlenecks that did not serve them at State levels.⁴⁵

⁴³ Government of India. *The Disaster Management Act 2005*, The Gazette of India, New Delhi, 26 December 2005, http://www.ndma.gov.in/images/ndma-pdf/DM_act2005.pdf and key informant interview, March 2015.

⁴⁴ To review the NDMA Guidelines, see <http://www.ndma.gov.in/en/ndma-guidelines.html>.

⁴⁵ Government of India, *Report of the Task Force: A Review of the Disaster Management Act, 2005*, Ministry of Home Affairs, March 2013, http://ndmindia.nic.in/Rpt_TaskForce_300913.pdf and key informant interview, March 2015.

As a result, in 2011, the Government of India (through its Ministry of Home Affairs) set up a Task Force to conduct a review of the 2005 Disaster Act and the institutional modalities contained therein. The Review took nearly two years to complete and its findings were released in 2013. Overall, the Review found there to be an overall lack of implementation of the Disaster Act across all levels of government. Some of the larger problems identified by the Task Force are expressed in the following excerpt:

But the fact remains that the functioning of these entities (DRM entities established through the Act) at all levels is constrained by a lack of clarity on their roles as well as by structural anomalies, dearth of human resources and inadequate infrastructure. Also, some of the Act's provisions themselves have given rise to implementation problems. Not surprisingly, much of what the Act mandates is yet to be realised. In most cases, the new entities have not made any appreciable impact; some are even non-functional. Further, institutional arrangements existing prior to the Act continue to remain in force. Needless to say, all this has created a confusing scenario.⁴⁶

In its recommendations, the Task Force proposed a redesign of the NDMA to ensure “greater objectivity and transparency” in selecting its Members.⁴⁷ In practice, it also decreased the number of Members operating within the national structure. The current NDMA includes only three Members and a Member Secretary. At the time of this study, a Vice Chairperson had not yet been appointed. Also significant is that the new arrangement offers NDMA Members the status of Secretary, rather than the status of Ministers of State as had been the case previously. Several DRM experts in India interviewed for this study voiced concern about the reduction in the number of NDMA Members serving at the central level and about their lowered political status. They explained that the current set up simply does not allow for the capacity to follow through on all of the activities that are required, and furthermore, that the lowered status of NDMA Members will make it difficult for them to liaise with State Ministers who carry a higher official ranking. Generally speaking, stakeholders were worried about the downgrading of NDMA functions and an accompanying de-prioritization of DRM within the Indian government.

Presently, there remains significant disparity in the capabilities of states and districts across India to manage the risks associated with natural disasters. According to key informants, there are a number of states that have strong DRM structures with dedicated staff in place, but these states are by and large the exception rather than the

⁴⁶ Government of India, *Report of the Task Force: A Review of the Disaster Management Act, 2005*, Ministry of Home Affairs, March 2013, http://ndmindia.nic.in/Rpt_TaskForce_300913.pdf.

⁴⁷ Government of India, *Report of the Task Force: A Review of the Disaster Management Act, 2005*, Ministry of Home Affairs, March 2013, http://ndmindia.nic.in/Rpt_TaskForce_300913.pdf.

rule. At the same time that state capabilities are considered weak generally, it is worth noting that the administrative training institutes of each state (established through the 2009 National Policy) that previously conducted DRM trainings have not received funding since 2012, meaning that sub-national capacity building has been put on hold for several years. It is widely viewed that a national policy on training/capacity for DRM is needed. However, it has yet to be developed.⁴⁸

If there is one clear success in India, it is the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF). The NDRF is well regarded and was characterized as a clear success by the Disaster Act Task Force in its final report. The NDRF has operated successfully in response to several domestic disasters as well as deploying to Japan following the nuclear disaster in Fukushima in March 2011 and, most recently, to Nepal in response to the 2015 earthquake.

Perceived role of SDMC in building national DRM capacity in India

In a country as large and capable as India, SDMC would seem to have had little influence over national policies for DRM. In the case of India, the flow of information and expertise for DRM appears to go from India to SDMC rather than the other way around. Given its position within the NIDM, SDMC is highly dependent on India for everything that it does. The Indian government at the central level and through its state administrations does not seem to rely on SDMC, but instead on NIDM and other Indian knowledge bases.

That being said, there has been some synergy between the activities of the Indian NDMA and the SDMC over the last decade. For instance, at the same time that SDMC was developing its “Road Maps,” the Indian NDMA, with support from NIDM, was also putting together a series of national guidelines of a similar type. Trainings surely benefit from a cross-organizational approach between SDMC and NIDM. And finally, it can be said that India participates in the SADKN network of networks through its own India Disaster Knowledge Network (IDKN).⁴⁹

Regardless of the inputs of SDMC, India is likely to continue to support its neighbors bilaterally in the event of large-scale disasters. In fact, in smaller South Asian countries like Nepal, natural disaster contingency planning would seem to revolve almost entirely around the expectation that India will come to help out. India was the first country to respond to the earthquake in Nepal and is conducting a number of relief activities through its NDRF and through its close relationship with hundreds of retired Gorkha

⁴⁸ The Indian Public Administration Institute has recommended that NIDM create a National Policy on DRM Training and Capacity building, but this has not yet been done. Key informant interview, March 2015.

⁴⁹ See <http://nidm.gov.in/idkn.asp>.

soldiers of the Indian Army. In short, India is and will continue to be the major player in DRM in the region, supporting other South Asian states both bilaterally and through its continued participation in SAARC DRM efforts.

Given the relative might of India in this area of statehood, one might wonder what incentive exists for Indian government officials to invest time and resources in SAARC DRM efforts. The SDMC has been housed and heavily supported by NIDM and its parent ministry, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, since its inception. As such, the Indian government has greatly influenced much of what the SMDC has done thus far. When pressed on the issue of the future of SDMC and the importance of SAARC's role in DRM capacity building, Indian government officials, while realistic about the limited gains that have been made thus far, were quick to lend their uniform support to SDMC. Some reasons why Indian stakeholders consider the regional entity to be so important include the following:

- They view cooperation across state territories as essential to disaster risk reduction and preparedness, particularly in the area of shared water resources and flooding vulnerability;
- They believe that any surplus DRM capacity in India can be utilized by neighboring countries more easily through a regional framework for DRM such as that provided by SAARC;
- They believe that regional cooperation in DRM is key to the larger goal of building inter-state trust and developing a South Asian regional society.⁵⁰

Nepal

Unlike the large and populous nation of India, Nepal is one of the smaller countries in the sub-region with a population of only 27.8 million. It is mountainous and landlocked, bordered on one side by China and on three sides by India. It ranks 145 out of 187 on the Human Development Index (HDI) and is one of 49 countries worldwide classified as a Least Developed Country (LDC).⁵¹ The main disaster risks in the country are landslides, floods, and earthquakes.

Since the end of the decade-long civil war between the government and militant Maoists in 2006, the political situation in the country has remained deeply complex and fragile. Despite years of negotiations, the Nepal Constituent Assembly has failed to develop a permanent constitution agreed to by all parties, continually extending the deadline by which a formal agreement is required. In this highly political context, Nepal's capacity to manage disasters on its own or to implement sustainable development programmes for that matter has remained inadequate, requiring significant propping up by the UN and

⁵⁰ Key informant interview, March 2015.

⁵¹ Three other South Asian countries that are LDCs are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.

other international stakeholders.⁵² Just prior to the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, it was widely acknowledged that government officials in the country were simply not seized by the urgency of disaster risk in the country. In fact, DRM was such a low priority that more than one observer mentioned that the only factor likely to force the Government of Nepal to take decisive action on DRM was another major disaster.⁵³ Now, that very disaster has come to pass with tragic consequences for the country.

Governance and institutional structure

Without a strong enabling environment for DRM, the Government of Nepal has never adopted an updated National Disaster Act or established an NDMA. Numerous versions of a Disaster Act are said to exist and the draft Act, at least in theory, is scheduled for review by Parliament sometime in 2015. However, given the multiple delays in finalizing the DRM legislation over so many years, stakeholders – at least before the 2015 earthquake – were highly dubious that any version of the Act would be adopted in the foreseeable future.

In the absence of a new Disaster Act, the country's disaster management policies derive from the Calamity Act of 1982,⁵⁴ an outdated and response-driven law that does not include the preventive and proactive concepts of modern-day DRM nor does it include many of the elements required under the auspices of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015. DRM policies are further supported by the Local Self-Governance Act of 1999 that authorizes sub-national government authorities to design and implement development programming, including DRR measures at local levels.⁵⁵ Finally, Nepal is guided by the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management (NSDRM) developed in 2008 by the Government of Nepal and UNDP with the technical support of NSET. The NSDRM provides more detailed, sector-specific guidelines for disaster management planning at various levels of government, in an effort to fill the gaps left by the Calamity Act.

Institutionally, a relatively new DRM division is housed within the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA). MoHA is also the Secretariat of the Central Natural Disaster Relief

⁵² Critics of the country's sluggish development record underscore that even though Nepal has received continuous development assistance for over 60 years, it still ranks as an LDC primarily as a result of an extractive government that is more focused on political corruption and the receipt of commissions than on disaster resilience or true national economic viability. See Thomas Bell, "Nepal's Failed Development," *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 22 March 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/03/nepal-failed-development-150322052502920.html>.

⁵³ The last major disaster in Nepal was the Nepal-Bihar Earthquake of 1934. There was another significant earthquake near Bihar in 1988.

⁵⁴ Government of Nepal, *Natural Calamity (Relief) Act 1982*, Law Commission of Nepal, 1982, <http://www.nrcs.org/sites/default/files/pro-doc/natural-calamity-relief-act.pdf>.

⁵⁵ DP-NET, *Nepal Disaster Report 2013*, 2013, <http://www.slideshare.net/dpnetnepal/nepal-disaster-report-2013>.

Committee (CNDRC), a high-level multi-ministerial committee (27-member apex body) that is currently mandated by the NSDRM to address natural disasters.⁵⁶ The CNDRC is authorized to formulate national policy regarding programmes for preparedness, response, and recovery. It is also charged with mobilizing the Central Disaster Relief Fund.⁵⁷ At regional and district levels, the current institutional DRM structure envisions the establishment of Regional Disaster Relief Committees (RDRCs) and District Disaster Relief Committees (DDRCs).

According to MoHA, the draft Disaster Act currently in circulation would modify the present-day arrangement in that it proposes a Disaster Management Council rather than a CNDRC that would be headed by the Prime Minister. The Council would be comprised of three different committees: [i] Disaster Risk Reduction; [ii] Preparedness and Response; and [iii] Recovery. These committees would be responsible for offering directives to an operational Executive Committee that would run a Disaster Management Centre under the Ministry of Home Affairs.⁵⁸

In addition to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Urban Development in Nepal is heavily involved in DRR due to the acute risk of landslides, flooding, and earthquakes in the country. The Ministry of Urban Development is made up of the Department of Water Supply and the Department of Urban Development and Construction. The Department of Urban Development and Construction has been instrumental in earthquake resistance and seismic retrofitting efforts. It has also spearheaded the drafting of a new Building National Plan of Action with the support of JICA and a special task force that includes DFID, UNDP, JICA, and NSET. Once adopted, the new National Plan of Action will replace the current building code dating back to 1993.⁵⁹

In addition to the Government of Nepal's civilian engagement in DRM, a Disaster Directorate has recently been established within the Ministry of Defence. Further to this Directorate, the country possesses three additional armed forces mandated to engage in DRM activities. The first is the Armed Police Force. The Armed Police Force, created during the civil conflict, is very well resourced and even has a training centre for DRM exercises. The second is the Nepal Army. Some 100,000 Nepalese Armed Forces are

⁵⁶ According to the 1982 Calamity Act, the CNDRC is comprised of representatives from 12 different ministries, the Nepal Army, the Nepal Red Cross, and other governmental departments. The Minister of Home Affairs acts as Chairperson. Government of Nepal, *Natural Calamity (Relief) Act 1982*, Law Commission of Nepal, 1982, <http://www.nrscs.org/sites/default/files/pro-doc/natural-calamity-relief-act.pdf>.

⁵⁷ A meeting of the CNDRC was held immediately following Nepal's 2015 earthquake. For more information on the origins of the CNDRC, see DP-NET, *Nepal Disaster Report 2013*, 2014, <http://www.slideshare.net/dpnetnepal/nepal-disaster-report-2013>

⁵⁸ Key informant interview, March 2015.

⁵⁹ DP-NET, *Nepal Disaster Report 2013*, 2014, <http://www.slideshare.net/dpnetnepal/nepal-disaster-report-2013>.

currently deployed throughout the country. The Nepalese Army receives support from China and from the United States among other military donors. It is reported that the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) recently granted the Nepalese Army some USD 800,000 worth of equipment to support their DRM capacities. Third, the Nepalese Police are involved in DRM at local levels although the capabilities of the Police are not perceived to be as robust as those of the other two forces. A major criticism of military action for DRM in Nepal is that there is no clear sense of the comparative capabilities of the different forces. At the same time, civilian government entities and their international partners have not been made aware of what the armed forces are doing in this realm, leading to confusion and missed opportunities for collaboration and exchange. At the time of the 2015 earthquake, no standard operating procedures were in place to govern civil-military relations for response.

Current status of DRM in Nepal

Given the absence of an updated Disaster Act, Nepal has taken a predominantly reactive approach to disaster risk rather than the more effective (and less expensive) option of proactive preparedness and risk reduction. What is most frustrating about the situation is that there is evidently no lack of resources or technical advice to move the DRM agenda forward in Nepal. Instead, the complete lack of progress in DRM is generally viewed to be a political problem. International donors are said to be part of the predicament, tiptoeing around government ministries who do not perform effectively rather than demanding meaningful action against the inertia and entrenched political corruption that is in the way.⁶⁰

While some may argue that it does not matter if Nepal has an updated Disaster Act or not, the fact remains that there will never be adequate institutional structures, trained human resources, integrated planning, and realistic budgets for DRM without a state-of-the-art National Disaster Act in the country. Certainly, there does not have to be an NDMA *per se* in Nepal (and, in fact, a number of governments worldwide are moving away from the NDMA model), but there certainly has to be nation-wide legislation to allow for the election of local officials and for the provision of resources to implement the range of DRM activities necessary to build sustainable resilience in Nepal. One can only wait and see how the most recent earthquake in Nepal will impact political will to put the country's DRM house in order and to offer Nepalese people greater resilience against the considerable disaster risk that they face.

In the absence of real government progress on DRM over the last decade, international partners have had to step in to provide assistance. Two key institutional arrangements

⁶⁰ Thomas Bell, "Nepal's Failed Development," *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 22 March 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/03/nepal-failed-development-150322052502920.html>.

that have brought together the Nepalese government and external actors in the absence of approved national structures and policies for DRM are: [i] the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC), and [ii] the Cluster Approach.

The Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC): The NRRC is an innovative structure that unites a wide range of Nepalese government entities, international humanitarian and development agencies, international financial institutions, and donors to implement DRR measures in Nepal. The NRRC was formed in May 2009 to support the government in developing a long-term Disaster Risk Reduction Action Plan, one that builds on the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management (NSDRM) and that supports the government in meeting its commitments under the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA).⁶¹

The NRRC was designed as a stopgap measure to fill the void in national architecture, intended to function until the time that an NDMA was established under a new National Disaster Act.⁶² Programmatically, the Consortium operates according to five Flagship Priorities. These priorities are noted below.

Figure 6: NRRC Flagship Programmes

	Flagship	Leads/Coordinators
01.	School and Hospital Safety	Min of Education/Min of Health/ADB/WHO
02.	Emergency Preparedness and Response Capacity	MoHA/Red Cross (formerly it was OCHA that co-led)
03.	Flood Management in the Koshi River Basin	Min of Irrigation/World Bank
04.	Integrated Community Disaster Risk Management	Min of Local Development; Red Cross/IFRC
05.	Policy/Institutional Support for Disaster Risk Management	MoHA/UNDP

Source: United Nations Nepal Information Platform⁶³

⁶¹ Glyn Taylor et al, *Review of the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC)*, Humanitarian Outcomes, UNDP, World Bank, 22 August 2013, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Review%20of%20the%20Nepal%20Risk%20Reduction%20Consortium.pdf>.

⁶² The NRRC's current term was set to end in 2015. Prior to the earthquake, the Government of Nepal was dragging its feet over a decision as to whether to extend the NRRC mandate through 2020, as recommended by an independent review of the NRRC undertaken in 2013, or not. With the current response and recovery at hand, it is likely that the Government will accept this continued and intensive international DRM support. See Glyn Taylor et al, *Review of the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC)*, Humanitarian Outcomes, UNDP, World Bank, 22 August 2013, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Review%20of%20the%20Nepal%20Risk%20Reduction%20Consortium.pdf>.

⁶³ See link at: <http://www.un.org.np/coordinationmechanism/nrrc>.

While the NRRC has certainly been successful in creating a focus on DRR and preparedness nationwide and in facilitating communication between key national and international actors, the Consortium has been hampered in its effectiveness by too many lines of activity (74 in total) and a lack of prioritization. Even in areas where the government and the NRRC have truly focused over the last five years, such as in the area of school and hospital safety (Flagship 1), progress has occurred at a snail's pace. Apparently, not a single hospital has yet to be retrofitted in the country and only 286 out of the identified 956 schools have been made safe.⁶⁴ Overall, it can be said that the government lacks focus for DRM, conducting multiple and duplicative risk assessments, rather than tackling concrete projects to build resilience. For instance, there have apparently been a total of 85 risk assessments mandated by different parts of government over the years and a total of seven assessments of USAR capabilities in the country alone with little effort to take meaningful action based on the various assessments.⁶⁵

There is no doubt that the NRRC has served an important purpose, functioning as a bookmark until the government is able to put its own structures in place. However, many international observers worried that the intensive “hand-holding” of the government through the NRRC model was having negative consequences, substituting for government and, thus, reducing national incentive to centralize the issue as a core government priority in the future. The NRRC mandate was set to end in 2015 and there is still no Disaster Act in place or alternative structure to replace the NRRC moving forward.⁶⁶ In light of the tragic earthquake in the country, it can only be hoped that the NRRC's mandate will be extended and that Parliament will adopt a new Disaster Act without delay.

The Cluster Approach: Another joint arrangement between national and international representatives that has helped to prop up the government's role in DRM is the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) Cluster Approach. While there is not yet any legislation to back the arrangement, the Cluster Approach has been “nationalized” in Nepal in the sense that there are different government ministries that have identified themselves as focal points for the various Clusters.

Although this is certainly positive, the idea of a nationalized cluster system in Nepal should not be overstated as many of the ministries heading up the clusters are not

⁶⁴ Key informant interview, March 2015.

⁶⁵ Key informant interview, March 2015.

⁶⁶ Apparently, the Government of Nepal is exploring a number of ideas about what to do when the NRRC ends. Some officials believe that a Disaster Act will pass and the NRRC will no longer be needed. At the time of writing, the government had not formally informed NRRC participants about its plans post-2015. Key informant interviews, March 2015.

perceived to have the capacity to fulfill their duties in a large-scale emergency. In any event, it is encouraging that these designations have been made. It will be interesting to see how the government entities engaged in the Cluster Approach will be assessed to have performed in the context of the current emergency.

The government ministries that are involved in the Cluster Approach are noted in the figure below.

Figure 7: Cluster Approach leads in Nepal

Cluster	National lead	International lead
Food security	Min of Agriculture	FAO/WFP
Health	Min of Health	WHO
Nutrition	Min of Health	UNICEF
Water and sanitation	Min of Planning	UNICEF
Education	Min of Education	UNICEF/Save the Children
Protection	Dept of Women/NHRC	UNICEF/UNFPA
Shelter	Min of Urban Development	IFRC/Nepal Red Cross/UN-HABITAT
Camp coordination	Min of Urban Development	IOM
Logistics	MOHA/Min of Labor	WFP
Early recovery	Min of Urban Development	UNDP

Perceived role of SDMC in building national DRM capacity in Nepal

Ironically, even though SAARC headquarters are located in Kathmandu, discussions with national government officials and their international partners around issues of DRM are devoid of any mention of SDMC. Certainly, there have been engineers and other experts from Nepal that have attended SDMC trainings over the years. However, it would seem that Nepal government ministries benefit more directly from the expertise of the National Society of Earthquake Technology (NSET) in Nepal and its network of engineers, geologists, and scientists and from external entities like the U.S. Forest Service than they do from SDMC.

As regards Nepal’s commitment to a regional DRM approach through SAARC, this would seem to be the furthest thing from anyone’s mind. National stakeholders, if they

are said to have given DRM attention at all, are more squarely focused on setting up their own national systems than on investing in regional arrangements. And at the rate of progress recorded over the last decade, this may never happen. What is interesting is that when stakeholders were pushed to respond as to why SAARC member states, most notably India, do not put more pressure on Nepal to adopt a Disaster Act, they immediately responded that DRM was an issue of national sovereignty and that outside entities would not be comfortable “telling Nepal what to do.”⁶⁷ Given the current situation in the small country, it is hoped that neighboring countries may take a more proactive approach in ensuring that Nepal’s disaster laws and policies are up to date.

⁶⁷ Key informant interview, March 2015.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Capacity building is an ongoing process that equips government officials and other stakeholders with the tools necessary to perform their functions in a more effective manner during all phases of the disaster cycle. The process of capacity building involves many elements, including human resource development, training, enhanced functioning of groups, interoperability of systems, and, most of all, a common vision. All of these activities require careful accompaniment, time, and resources.

Despite the seemingly slow progress of SAARC in the area of DRM capacity building, it still plays an important role in building a common regional vision for DRM and should be truly encouraged, and supported by its member states, to plug along. It cannot be denied that there is some sort of a disconnect between SAARC and South Asian countries on issues of DRM at the moment, but this disconnect may have as much to do with the lack of attention, resources, and focus of its member state as it does with the efficacy of SAARC DRM initiatives implemented thus far. Nothing will come quickly or easily in sub-region. What is encouraging in the difficult South Asian political situation, however, is that no one has given up on SDMC. On the contrary, it continues to have the backing of its member states, even if the support is only lukewarm at best.

What SAARC would be prudent to do at this point is to utilize the merging of SAARC regional centres and the reconfiguration of the SDMC into the SEDMC as a means to rebrand itself and to remind member states of their commitment to a regional DRM approach. Although the trimming of SAARC regional centres may have been motivated by financial considerations rather than conceptual tenets, the move is a progressive one as it will more easily permit the mainstreaming of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation activities in the region, something that SAARC DMC has already identified as a priority for its post-2015 agenda.⁶⁸

What is clear from examining the DRM architecture in the South Asia case study countries of India and Nepal is that while countries may not seem heavily invested in the SAARC approach at present, countries both big and small are struggling to build national DRM structures that work both practically and politically and could benefit greatly from more consistent regional information exchange, standard-setting, monitoring and evaluation, and other activities of common concern. The challenge for SAARC now is to focus on a few priority activities over the next five years and see them through from start to finish. Momentum for SAARC leadership in DRM may surely gain

⁶⁸ SDMC. *Post-2015 DRR Framework for SAARC Region (HFA2) SDMC*, March 2014, SAARC, New Delhi <http://www.recoveryplatform.org/assets/HFA2/Post-2015%20Drr%20Framework%20SAARC.pdf>.

dynamism in the post Nepal earthquake era as the countries of the sub-region come together to help their neighbor respond and recover from this large-scale disaster.

More detailed recommendations are as follows:

Recommendations

1. SAARC should seize the opportunity provided by the reconfiguration of SDMC and by the Nepal 2015 earthquake to rebrand itself and to remind member states of the importance of their commitment to a regional DRM approach;
2. With the reconfiguration of the SDMC, SAARC should develop a small number of priority activities that can assist member states in the *implementation* of policies at the sub-national level, an area of DRM in which all SAARC member states, both big and small, are struggling;
3. SDMC should enhance its training programme with a regional Training-of-Trainers (ToT) strategy that would allow national trainers to expand knowledge-sharing beyond the limited training opportunities offered by SDMC and other platforms. The training curriculum could also be shared with regional universities offering DRM degrees;
4. SDMC should open itself up to resourcing by external donors. With only 12 staff members, the SDMC is too limited in its human resources to provide the follow up and servicing to member states that is required to assist them in the implementation of national DRM policies. Developing projects in collaboration with international financial institutions and donors would position SDMC as a key partner in the region;
5. SDMC should, likewise, create a line of activity that would permit it to build the capacity of civil societies within member states. This is of particular importance since member states seem to have only a limited absorption capacity. A lot of good learning and exchange of best practices could be achieved through the networking of civil society associations across borders. The civil society partnership model envisaged by South Asian partners is something similar to that being utilized by ASEAN, namely the ASEAN Partnership Group (APG);
6. Given the slow pace by which some governments in South Asia are addressing the implementation of disaster law, SMDC may wish to establish a peer review system that would permit SAARC member states to assess each others' performance. The peer review system could emulate the donor peer review process currently undertaken by OECD DAC countries.
7. SDMC would do well to engage more meaningfully on behalf of all of its member states with the Chinese government and with Chinese think tanks such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of International Trade

and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC). Lessons learned from the deployment of a 68-man China International Search and Rescue Team (CISAR) immediately following the earthquake in Nepal could serve as an entry point for more consistent discussions between SAARC countries and the Chinese.

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