



When the Community Geared Up To Fight Rising Waters

Saharsa showcases an exemplary example of functioning of Community- led Early Warning System

Recently the nation witnessed the Bihar state government prepare to tackle the Flood situation likely to arise in nine districts of Bihar, due to release of 28 lakh cusecs of water accumulated in a lake-like formation caused by massive landslide in river Bhatta Kosi on the Nepal side, into the Kosi embankments in India. On the other hand an exemplary example of functioning of Community-led disaster



preparedness was witnessed recently in Saharsa District of Bihar. Ten hamlets located in Biratpur and Atalka Gram Panchayat in Sonbarsa block of Saharsa District, situated in kosi embankment are extremely vulnerable to floods. The district which was on high alert for Floods as Nepal was likely to release excess water accumulated due to landslide, into the Kosi river. In 2008, the release of excess water into Kosi leading to killing

hundreds of people and displacing around 30 lakh people. The incident also brought wide scale destruction of agriculture over 8 lakh acres of land. However this time the situation was different: Community was more informed and prepared to face floods, with major aim to have no loss of lives. Under the Flood Resilient Environmentally Enhanced Disaster Management (FREEDM) project, being implemented by SEEDS with support from Lutheran World Relief, a disaster Preparedness System is established within the community in the 10 hamlets.

As soon as the first piece of information on likely hood of floods was received by the community as part of the Early Warning systems put in place, Disaster Management Committees formed in each of these 10 hamlets became active and called upon emergency meetings to decide on the plan of action with the major aim of ensuring no loss of lives. A clear line of communication was established wherein the heads of each DMC who were part of Disaster management coordination committee at block (Sonbarsa) level became active. The DMCC established communication with the Community Forum that was formed at

District level in Saharsa. The Saharsa Community forum gathered information from District authorities and pass it on to the DMCC. SEEDS facilitated establishment of the linkages in this communication flow.

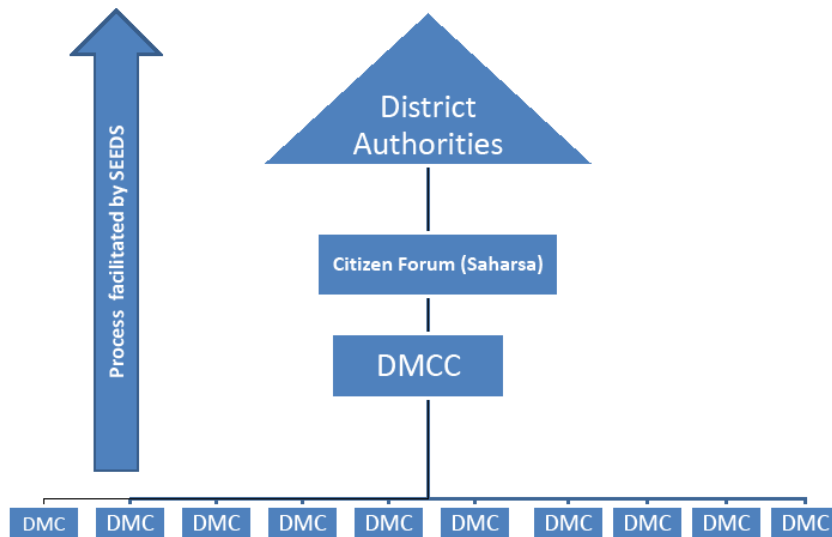


Figure 1: Flow of communication established - process facilitated by SEEDS

Further to this the following set of activities were initiated and carried out by the DMCs within their respective hamlets as part of the Emergency action plan.

- The task forces identified and trained earlier in the community were alerted. Volunteers were also identified. Clear channels of flow of communication were activated as established.
- Door to door Campaigning on alerting the villagers about the expected disaster and the measures to be adopted to ensure life safety was communicated to them.
- Early warning flags were heisted in different areas depending on the level of risk as was planned.



- DMCs kept continuous vigil on the water level to alert villagers accordingly.
- An uninterrupted channel was ensured for flow of information from the village as well as state level.
- Coordination established with Panchayat head by the DMCs to ensure continuous flow of information from the district office.
- The Grain Banks developed and maintained by community for reserving stock for emergencies was transferred to safe zones.
- SEEDS personnel were communicating the information to the village level from the district Magistrate office
- Information from informal sources like relatives residing nearer to the border were also acknowledged by the DMCs and shared with other DMCs after vetting.
- DMCs had emergency meetings at SEEDS office to ensure coordinated effort
- The ten emergency kits maintained by all DMC kits were all put in place and was communicated and made accessible.

Mean while as the Citizen forum formed and developed by SEEDS at Saharsa district level (as mentioned earlier) did ensure continuous flow of information to villages from the district level, simultaneously they themselves also carried out disaster preparedness activities at district level. Volunteers associated with the forum undertook awareness drives across various parts of the district on alerting community and educating them on the measures to be adopted in case of emergency.



This community led preparedness programme helped people to be more alert and vigilant and prepare themselves accordingly, to the disaster. Also a lot of chaos which usually arises due to multiple sources of information, most of which are usually unreliable, was averted as a proper channel of communication was established by DMCs.

It is true that disaster cannot be stopped, but communities can be capacitated to minimize losses.