

# Investments for a Safe Future: Disaster Reduction in Schools in South Asia

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## Abstract

*Disaster risk reduction can most successfully be brought about through education. Schools provide the most appropriate entry towards building a culture of safety in society. At the same time, considering the large loss in lives of schoolchildren in recent disasters, disaster management practitioners need to hold themselves responsible for ensuring that schools and schoolchildren are protected at any cost. Ensuring zero mortality of schoolchildren by preventable disasters by 2015 is a concrete target that governments, NGOs and other stakeholders should earnestly strive for.*

*This paper describes some of the pilot initiatives taken up by governments and NGOs on school safety in South Asia. The author has summarized the approach to school safety based on successes and lessons learned so far in implementing disaster risk reduction in schools. The author emphasizes the importance of prioritizing specific aspects of school safety, considering the principal causes of disasters as well as the given constraints of resources among developing countries in South Asia. The final part of the paper describes the salient features of some of the recent international initiatives taken in setting the framework for school safety activities in the region.*

A series of natural disasters leaving thousands of children dead or injured has brought the issue of disaster prevention in schools to the centre of all attention.

No civilization can bear the loss of its children. Little wonder that public angst in China, following the May 2008 earthquake in the Sichuan province, was primarily aimed at the government for not taking responsibility for weak school buildings. And over 9000 children and teachers died in their classrooms when the 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck at Sichuan (14:28:01 CST) on May 12, 2008.

The message is simple. We as adults are accountable for the safety of our children. As the little girl in the remote school in Nepal wrote in an essay competition, *"I think that*

*it is our right to know about earthquakes. This is because when earthquake comes everybody including our parent, teachers will try to save their own lives. At that time they may not take care of us. So we ourselves need to know what to do during earthquakes... Also it is our right to have a safe school. We don't build our school building ourselves. But if it is very weak then earthquake will destroy it and kill us. Why should children die from weakness which others create? That is not because of our fault. It is their fault who build houses. So we request all our parents, teachers to build safe school buildings for us." (Written by Sony, a student in Nepal)*

## Safety in Schools: The Starting Point for DRR

Fortunately, the winds of realization that have brought about a paradigm shift from disaster response to disaster risk reduction have recognized schools as an important forum to address sustainable disaster prevention issues.

The South Asian region has been exposed to a series of devastating disasters in recent years. Real experiences thus turned into lessons that were quickly translated into action.

In **India**, the UNDP-supported Disaster Risk Management Programme of the Government of India has reached out to 169 most vulnerable districts of the country. Among the beneficiaries, school communities have responded most enthusiastically. Teachers and students more often than not took the lead in taking disaster reduction issues into the community. The Government's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) introduced disaster education in the curriculum for senior classes. The board caters to 900,000 children in schools across India.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm of teachers and students, SEEDS, along with Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority, designed a pilot programme to promote school safety in the State. For people in Gujarat this was a case of learning and applying lessons from their most recent experience (2001, Gujarat Earthquake) in which they had lost friends and family members. The mutually reinforcing efforts of government, civil society organizations, school community and parents have resulted in the programme's gaining significant momentum and appreciation.

## The Cascading Effect of Pilot Initiatives

The Hyogo Framework for Action provided the direction and tied it in with other interventions in risk reduction. The result of some of the initial successes as well as strong international advocacy by United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR), Coalition for Global School Safety (COGSS) was the development and recognition of tools, techniques and mechanisms aimed at promoting a culture of safety in schools all across India.

During 2005 SEEDS, in association with State Governments and the international humanitarian community, introduced school safety programmes in four regions across India.

The Andaman School Safety Initiative, covering 40 schools in Andaman & Nicobar Islands is using the window of opportunity offered by the post-tsunami rehabilitation process. The project supported by Christian Aid, Danchurch Aid and subsequently by Save the Children has been carried out in association with the Andaman Nicobar administration in schools located in Port Blair, the capital of Andaman & Nicobar Islands. The tsunami experience has brought the international community together in the most unique way. One interesting case of sharing and learning at the grass roots has been the effort of the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network, with support from the Asian Disaster Reduction Centre, Japan. It has brought a famous Japanese folktale, Inamura-no-hi, to be shared in nine local languages in schools across tsunami-hit countries in Asia. The story relates how Goryo Hamaguchi, a village elder in 19th-century Japan, saved his fellow villagers from an impending tsunami by burning his rice sheaves, thus attracting people away from sea coast. This story is now being shared among school children thousands of kilometres away in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Children have begun to overcome their fears by learning to know about tsunamis and the precautions that are needed for protection.

In the capital city of New Delhi, which has been fortunate not to experience any major earthquake for a long time even though it lies in a high seismic zone, children learnt about non-structural hazard mitigation. Buildings do not always collapse in earthquakes, but the elements within the building can become potential hazards, injuring or killing people. Non-structural hazard mitigation thus becomes important for safety against small and medium earthquakes that happen much more frequently than large ones. The message on non-structural mitigation taught through simple 'hazard-hunt' forms was picked up by students in schools and shared further with their families at home. This was piloted by SEEDS in partnership with GeoHazards International and support from USAID in the Ludlow Castle School.

In the north, the attention has been on the Himalayan belt that was most recently hit by a devastating earthquake in October 2005. The Himalayas are notorious for some of the most devastating earthquakes in history. The 1905 Kangra earthquake was the worst in Indian history. Thereafter, many earthquakes have struck the region claiming a large number of lives. In spite of such high risk, physical development in the region has continued unabated without incorporating any safety standards. The building construction is largely un-engineered, haphazard and likely to collapse even in medium-level tremors. In and around Shimla city, the capital of Himachal Pradesh, SEEDS with a

benevolent support of Christian Aid and European Commission launched a school safety programme with a four-pronged strategy: (i) Structural retrofitting of school buildings to prevent their collapse in future earthquakes; (ii) Implementation of non-structural mitigation measures to avoid injuries from falling hazards in schools; (iii) Education of school management and construction workers on safe infrastructure; and (iv) Preparation of school disaster management plans and training of school communities in immediate response, evacuation and first aid. In the emerging concrete jungle that continues to accrue unmindful of the growing risk, the selected school buildings will serve as models of a safe community.

In the coastal states of Orissa and Tamil Nadu, school safety work has been extended to include local neighbourhoods and their active participation in joint risk assessment and disaster management planning. Disaster Risk Reduction Strategies are now focused on making schools 'safe havens' for local communities during disasters. Schools are thus strengthened and equipped to serve as temporary relief shelters for communities. This also provides impetus for early restoration of education following disasters, an important priority that is now voiced by the humanitarian community internationally. (INEE 2008)

## Nepal

In the schools in **Nepal**, both the buildings and their occupants face extreme risk from earthquakes because of highly vulnerable building stock, high occupancy in it, and high seismic hazard. On an average, Nepal is hit by a major earthquake once every 100 years and a medium-sized earthquake once every 40 years. In 1988, eastern Nepal experienced an earthquake that measured 6.6 on the Richter scale. More than 950 school buildings were damaged.

Most of the Nepalese school buildings are produced by the community itself, mostly employing local craftsmen who play a pivotal organizational and technical role. Most of these craftsmen have no formal training, and some are illiterate. The process is characterized by a high degree of informality. The local availability of the construction materials such as fired or unfired bricks, stone in mud mortar, timber, controls the construction process. The use of modern materials such as cement, concrete, and steel bars is limited by affordability and accessibility, and is confined to urban areas and areas accessible by transport. Since so much school construction in Nepal takes place locally in a decentralized, traditional, and informal manner, a Nepalese NGO, the National Society for Earthquake Technology Nepal (NSET) and ADPC conducted a programme to strengthen existing school buildings and promote earthquake-resilient school building construction, with support from USAID (programme started in 1997).

The programme incorporated strengthening of structural as well as non-structural components of the school buildings for seismic safety. This programme involved craftsman training, technology development and transfer, and community awareness. Such activity focused on schools has far-reaching effects. By raising awareness in schools, the entire community is reached because lessons trickle down to parents, relatives, and friends. When designing seismic retrofitting or earthquake resilience for new construction, NSET's focus has been on socio-cultural and economic issues that affect acceptance by the community. An approach was developed, with outreach to all stakeholders—school staff, students, local community, local clubs, local and central government. They have all been involved in the process so that they become aware of the risk and support the solution. School building construction was taken as an opportunity to train masons and to transfer simple but effective technology to others in the community, including house owners. By 2003, four non-reinforced masonry schools had been retrofitted and 16 new constructions were completed in Kathmandu valley. The project's key success has been to demonstrate that trained local masons transfer knowledge and safety messages within the surrounding community, leading to replication of earthquake-resilient construction.

### Sri Lanka

Following the 2004 tsunami, under the leadership of Ministry of Education and National Institute of Education, and with the support from German Technical Cooperation and India's National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), a concerted effort was undertaken to integrate DRR into the school curriculum and train the teachers for its implementation.

In response to the tsunami, ActionAid also spearheaded a nationwide 'Back to School' campaign in Sri Lanka. Teachers participated in psychosocial care training sessions, lead by ActionAid staff, and positive impact on the lives of both children and adults was documented. The emphasis was on return to normal life. Handouts and materials were provided to parents to give to their children, in the context of the traumatic upheaval of disaster.

The Asian Disaster Reduction Centre also implemented a project, 'Enhancing Natural Disaster Education in School' with support from USAID and Department of Education, Sri Lanka, from March 2006 to March 2007. This project covered Galle District, which was severely affected by the 2004 tsunami disaster. This project targeted 437 schools in Galle including 15 pilot schools, which can promote disaster education as leaders for others. Under the programme, consultative meetings conducted on the development of

curriculum for disaster education and training workshops were conducted, and the pilot lessons implemented in 15 schools.

### **Pakistan**

On 8 October 2005 in Pakistan, over 8,000 out of 9,000 schools were either destroyed or damaged beyond repair by an earthquake. Over 17,000 school-age children perished in collapsed schools, there were approximately 23% of total deaths and over 20,000 more suffered serious injury. Over 80% schools in Pakistan are unprotected from similar risks. To address these risks, a concerted effort was required to advance further to protect the children. Under the backdrop of the October 2005 earthquake and loss of lives of innocent school children, Aga Khan Planning and Building Services and Focus Humanitarian Assistance agencies launched a two-day international conference on School Safety (15-16 May 2008) at Islamabad. As a result, the Islamabad Declaration on School Safety came into the picture. The International Conference on School Safety aimed to highlight the major risks inherent in construction and design of current school structures and the devastating consequences following natural disasters. The Conference also aimed to identify ways in which school safety could be further enhanced to help better protect school communities. The Islamabad Declaration also set forth practical recommendations for civil society and private organizations to act as the critical partners in implementation of the action plans. The other Conference partners included the Pakistan Ministry of Education, UN/ISDR, ADPC, United Nations Centre for Regional Development, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Austrian Development Agency and Institute of Architects Pakistan.

### **Maldives**

As per the historical data, the risk level is quite moderate. However, there are possibilities of damage due to tsunami and cyclone because of the coastal zone. Following the 2004 tsunami, the approach of the past was found deficient in dealing with a disaster of that magnitude. Later, Govt. of Maldives came out strongly by setting up a National Disaster Management Centre and formulating a draft National Disaster Management Policy. Agencies like UNDP, UNICEF and American Red Cross came forward to assist the Govt. of Maldives for advocating on the safe buildings, psychosocial programme and integrating the school safety initiatives. Meanwhile, Care Society Maldives, a national NGO of Maldives also embarked on a 5-month disaster preparedness programme, covering the integration of DM in the school system. Later, a comprehensive study was carried out by Insight Consultancy Services for Care Society Maldives to assist the Ministry of Education regarding the Disaster Preparedness Policy for Schools in the Maldives.

SEEDS, primarily a national NGO of India, with financial support from MERCY Malaysia, are currently working with the Government of Maldives and CARE Society, a national NGO in the Maldives for implementing school safety activities. As a pilot project, 10 schools have been selected for the initiative. As a part of this, a sensitization workshop on school safety was held in Male, capital of the Maldives. It was attended by five schools from various Atolls identified by CARE society. Group activities were held for identifying school-specific hazards and vulnerabilities and the participants were given an overview of the school safety programme. After the orientation, specific training was provided on Fire safety, Search & Rescue and First Aid. Later, mock drills also conducted to check the preparedness level. A few members of the CARE Society Maldives have also been trained in India at SEEDS Delhi Office.

### **Bangladesh**

In 2007, cyclone destroyed 496 school buildings and severely damaged approximately 2110 buildings in Bangladesh. Before that, in 2004, a total of 1,259 school buildings were lost and 24,236 buildings damaged due to floods. This country has faced many other disasters in the past, but now some INGOs and NGOs are also coming forward, apart from the Govt. and playing a very important role in DRR through schools projects. For example, ActionAid has piloted many initiatives here regarding floods and cyclones. A joint programme of local NGO and international NGO ActionAid adopted the DRR educational board game and activity book for children into Bangla language and local context, and presented these during the students extra curricular weekly period. Disaster education for schoolteachers was evaluated.

In Patuakhali area, ActionAid and SAP-Bangladesh have conducted intensive work on the DRR. Primary schoolteachers and students have been trained in DRR. With special focus on cyclone, a modular teaching pack was produced, covering contingency, lifesaving devices, warnings, First Aid, rescue, hygiene, etc.

### **Bhutan**

Here also the focus has is now on the disaster management component, with reference to school safety. Disaster Management has now been included in schools and colleges through the course curriculum. In Bhutan, the key agencies involved in disaster management school safety component are UNDP, UNICEF and one organization from Nepal. They have assisted the Govt. of Bhutan on this issue. Through the concerted efforts of all these agencies, now the school safety initiative has picked up momentum.

In Bhutan, a few pilot projects have been launched on DRM by the government at the national level, in association with UNDP and UNICEF. Now these are being cascaded

down to the district level, by conducting the sensitization programmes, training workshops and mock drills at the school level. Despite no past record of any major disaster, here progress is quite significant at the school level. And a partnership amongst the concerned stakeholders is clearly visible.

### Afghanistan

Here the school buildings are weak, old and poorly maintained. Infrastructure is not so good. Most crucially, the knowledge resources on mitigation and preparedness are extremely scarce. This country has a vast experience of facing disasters such as earthquakes, floods, sandstorms and the extreme climatic conditions. This makes response and recovery quite difficult. This country has also faced two decade-long wars. As part of the community, both schools and school children suffer from both disasters and post-war conflicts.

In 2003, under the arrangement of UNAMA and Deptt. of Disaster Preparedness, Govt. of Afghanistan, SEEDS carried out the consultation process for National Disaster Management Plan for Afghanistan, and its dissemination. It also included the awareness and capacity building of schools on DRM. SEEDS produced a range of educational material on school safety for wider use in Afghanistan. This is currently being disseminated through the national government and NGO partners. The objectives of the project were: to introduce concepts of disaster management to school teachers and students, orient them according to their role, form task forces, develop the evacuation plan and conduct rehearsal of evacuation. In 2007, the structural and non structural hazards were identified in school buildings, fire safety demonstration carried out and mock drills also conducted. TOT workshops were conducted in Kabul. In Afghanistan schools, the important aspect is to be prepared and better respond for disasters is to build capacity of people (schoolteachers, students and staff) along with community involvement and integration with the government systems. Here the involvement of national government and its will to take up school safety as a large programme is a very positive element.

### Approach to School Safety

Addressing school safety in schools has been a challenging process. Schools and the education system in India face heated public debate on the usefulness of the current curriculum and the need to address rapidly changing social and economic realities. Introducing a new subject, therefore, was not always welcomed. The programme had to be designed as to cause minimal additional stress on students, while sending the message across succinctly in a manner that makes the absorption process natural. Dr. Daisaku

Ikeda's proposal, *The Challenge of Global Empowerment: Education for a sustainable future*, aimed at introducing environmental education in schools provided a useful cue in designing the disaster education intervention. The approach adopted was to help students, teachers and school management **To Learn, To Reflect and To Empower**.

**To Learn:** Students deepen their awareness about hazards and risks through understanding realities and knowing facts. Recent natural disasters have been well documented and shared. These serve as case studies for teachers as well as students. Wherever needed, disasters are simulated with the help of portable models. Curriculum changes strengthen the learning process.

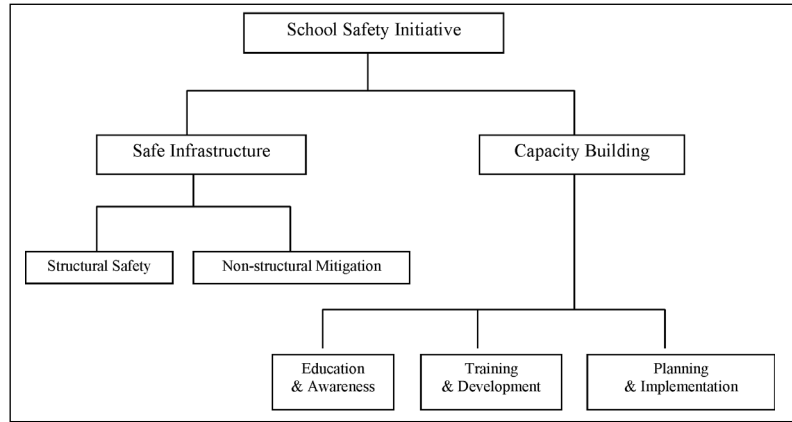
**To Reflect:** Students analyze reasons that have led to loss of life and injury in disasters. They are able to make a distinction in development practices and people's actions that can cause disasters or prevent them. Students connect to their own local communities and families and share their learning with them.

**To Empower:** Students take concrete action toward lowering risks in the environment. Classroom and school exercises are introduced to help them take small definitive actions that can become a precursor to bigger investments for disaster risk reduction. School Management prepares school disaster management plans in which roles and responsibilities are identified and rehearsed periodically.

The stated approach translates into the following interventions carried out at school level:

- Raising awareness of disaster issues among the targeted stakeholders (students, teachers, school management and others) through lectures, discussions, posters, drama (street play) and demonstration;
- Identifying and listing hazards and vulnerabilities outside the school as well as structural and non-structural hazards inside the school;
- Identifying and listing ways of reducing vulnerabilities;
- Identifying the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders;
- Training teachers how to prepare a school evacuation plan and preparing a school evacuation plan;
- Building emergency response capacity, focusing on skills such as rescue and first aid (training provided to student groups);
- Listing, in the school disaster management plan, the contact information of all facilities and resources for emergency management;
- Conducting a mock drill at the end of the school safety activities, to demonstrate the evacuation, rescue and first aid skills acquired by the students;
- Keeping targeted schools informed through a newsletter;
- Promoting School Safety Clubs to sustain risk education.

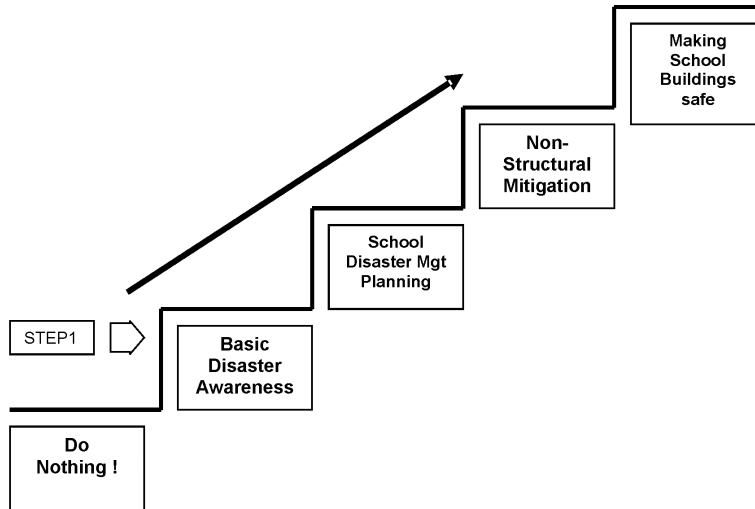
**Figure 8.1 : Approach to School Safety**



In a nutshell, the approach to school safety may be described in two broad categories: Safe Infrastructure and Capacity Building (Figure 8.1). The capacity-building component comprises establishment of basic disaster awareness (BDA) among all stakeholders—school children, teachers, school management and parents. Activities such as children-led risk assessments, curriculum-based studies, and practical lessons on preparedness, games and quizzes are carried out as part of BDA. As part of training and development, select groups of senior students in school as well teachers and administration staff are given specific skill-based training on aspects such as first-aid, search and rescue, evacuation, fire safety. Each task force is given specific roles and responsibilities based on possible disaster scenarios. As part of planning and implementation, school disaster management plans (SDMPs) are prepared. These plans are a compilation of basic set of actions before, during and after a disaster, along with an inventory of resources. These plans are made specific to each school and include details about its vulnerability and access to resources.

As part of safe infrastructure, school buildings are strengthened to withstand strong hazards and protect lives. At the same time, non structural mitigation is carried out to prevent injuries and enable safe evacuation of children.

Figure 8.2: Steps to School Safety



## Steps to School Safety

Considering the constraints of resources and the magnitude of the problem in South Asia, a feeling of helplessness is inevitable. Ensuring basic education is a millennium development goal, and governments in South Asia are redoubling their efforts in putting more and more children in school. In the given situation, we are in a dilemma of either doing nothing and waiting for a disaster to happen, or taking the first steps towards school safety. Ideally, we can aim for every school building to be safe against natural hazards, so that lives are protected. However, in real world terms, this is a monumental task to be achieved. It requires resources, sustained political will and a coordinated approach between various government and private agencies, all of which is hard to come by in the South Asian Region, where demands from other sectors are equally compelling.

Therefore, the author is of the firm conviction that a beginning has to be made somewhere. Once a good beginning has been made that gains popular support and goodwill, taking the subsequent steps would become easier. As a first step (Figure 8.2), a concerted effort is needed to create awareness on disaster risk reduction among all school students irrespective of their location and local vulnerabilities. If this is done, it would create a culture wherein schools would be motivated to take initiatives on planning. One step would lead to the other, taking them higher on levels of safety that can be achieved. It is remarkable how Families for School Seismic Safety in British

Columbia, Canada through successful grass roots advocacy have ensured a US\$1.3 billion commitment by the State Government to ensuring the all schools are brought up to acceptable life safety standards by 2019. (Monk 2007).

### Safe School Buildings: Safe Havens

The importance of having safe school buildings needs to be underscored. During the May 2008 China Earthquake, Ye Zhiping, the principal of Sangzao Middle School in Sangzao, was been credited with proactive action that spared the lives of all 2,323 pupils in attendance when the earthquake happened. His school in Peace County very likely withstood the 8.0-magnitude earthquake because he pushed the county government to upgrade it. Just 32 km north, the collapse of Beichuan Middle School buried 1,000 students and teachers. During a three-year period that ended in 1999, the Principal oversaw a major overhaul of his school. During that time he obtained funds from the county education department, and utilised the funds to widen and strengthen concrete pillars and the balcony railing of all four storeys of his school, as well as securing its concrete floors. An estimated 10,000 children were crushed in their classrooms by this earthquake.

Measures such as the one taken by the school in Sangzao amply describes how school building safety compared to all other steps can so critical in deciding between life and death. A recent discussion among experts in the field makes a compelling point:

*“Dear All:*

*The point is that we have been focusing more on what to teach children about disasters rather than how to protect children from disasters. We can't keep misleading children (and everybody else) by telling them that they will be safe from crushing-heavy concrete slab buildings by ducking underneath their desks. We can't hope by teaching about disasters at school, somehow the next generation will be all committed and will solve the problem. Children learn many things at school that, when it all blends in does not make them DRR soldiers when they are adults. Including disaster risk management in the curriculum of schools is important, but it does not help this generation or the next one, or may not even be the one after. If we want to protect children, we must address the structural issue of thousands and thousands of schools that are unsafe, not only in China but in most countries of the world. For the millions of children who are at risk every day in their schools, being in a safe building is only one parameter that will save their lives. Everything else is just rhetoric. Let's not go into endless debates, and do what it takes to protect these children. For those who are*

*not convinced I give one single undeniable fact: Since 1933 when California enacted the Field Act that demands and imposes competent earthquake construction for schools, not a single school has collapsed or was heavily damaged, and not a single child or teacher or parent was injured or died in a school due to earthquakes. There are 60,000 public schools in California, and there many many earthquakes. We have an ocean to cross. We have to take the right ship to do it. We cannot reach the other side of the ocean by rowing in a little boat. No matter how hard we row together, we will never get there.*

*Kindly,*

*Fouad Bendimerad, Ph.D., P.E., Chairman of the Board, EMI"*

Bendimerad makes a strong point here, even to the extent of labelling all other approaches as 'misleading' and dismissing them as rhetoric. Indirectly, the point strengthens the author's case here for having safe school buildings as the ultimate goal for ensuring that all schoolchildren are safe. Different regions, cultures need different approaches. Unless stakeholders are sensitized to potential impact of natural hazards, it is very unlikely that they can devote their scarce resources to an ambitious target, such as Bendimerad argues above.

## **Empowering Teachers**

At the level of the school, teachers play a crucial role in ensuring the safety of children in school. The authors' experience in interacting with teachers during the implementation of school safety programmes revealed their keen interest in contemporary issues that catch the attention of the children. Stories from live events, such as most recent major catastrophes, their scientific perspective and follow-up steps that children are expected to take, are areas of interest which teachers like to incorporate in their lessons.

Further, teachers act as guardians to children in school. In the event of emergency evacuation, the teachers take on the role of 'Emergency Managers', guiding actions that children need to take.

Teachers also serve as links between parents and children. Parents rely on teachers for the welfare and upbringing of their children. Hence, there is an implicit trust reposed in teachers. A trust that can potentially be reinforced if teachers can also provide a guarantee to parents that children are 'safe' under their teachers' care.

In a formal school set-up, however, school-level disaster management does not figure in the 'job task' of the teachers. Teachers find it as an 'additional responsibility' and sometimes, even a burden to be learning skills and practising disaster management.

The approach to school safety therefore needs to take a 'complementary' approach where teachers are able to view the subject as an extension of their existing curricula. Much work needs to be done in interpreting disaster reduction through mainline subjects such as science, mathematics, physical education and social studies. Currently, in most cases, disaster management is integrated with geography; however, viewed from a larger perspective this may not be adequate. Practical lessons in life saving skills add value to existing classes on physical education. Similarly, the subject of science can provide a useful framework for understanding cause-effect relationships, which would help students reflect better on the inherent links between ourselves and our natural environments.

### Setting Achievable Goals

Coinciding with the United Nations' International Strategy for Disaster Reduction campaign for 2006-07, 'Disaster Reduction Begins at School', an International Conference on School Safety took place at Ahmedabad, India from the 18th to 20th of January 2007. An important outcome of the conference is the 'Ahmedabad Agenda of Action for School Safety', which summarizes important contributions made by school safety champions, as well as 'users'—school communities that have been exposed to safety programmes.

Reaffirming the Priority for Action 3 of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, to use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels, and the UN Millennium Development Goals (Goal 2) to Achieve Universal Primary Education by the year 2015, the Ahmedabad Agenda of Action for School Safety sets the goal of achieving 'Zero Mortality of Children in Schools from Preventable Disaster by the year 2015'

Towards achieving this goal, the following immediate actions have been laid out:

- To include disaster risk reduction in the formal curriculum both at primary as well as secondary levels.
- To promote disaster risk reduction through co-curricular activities in schools acknowledging that school children need to develop 'survival skills' first, along with 'life skills' and 'academic inputs'.
- Complete risk assessment and safety measures must be undertaken to ensure zero potential damage to new school buildings.
- Mandatory safety audit of all existing school buildings with respect to their location,

design and quality of construction and prioritizing them for demolition, retrofit or repair.

- Mobilize parent, student, local community and school staff to champion school safety.

In addition to the aforesaid 'immediate' priorities, the Agenda outlines the following long-term actions with targets for 2015 :

- Promote exclusive initiatives among children in schools that make them leaders in risk reduction in the community.
- Ensure effective partnership among schools to share risk reduction education and achieve higher levels of school safety.
- Develop, implement and enforce codes with the performance objective of making all new school buildings ready for immediate occupancy following any disaster to serve as shelters or safe havens for the community as well as to restore educational functions in the shortest possible time.
- Implement a systematic plan to retrofit and/or repair existing schools to meet minimum standards for life safety in the event of known or expected hazards. Demolish unsafe irreparable school buildings and replace them.
- Implement routine checks to ensure that schools adhere to minimum standards and safety measures are not undermined.
- Schools to prepare and implement school safety plans, including measures to be taken both within the school premises and in the immediate neighbourhood. This must include regular safety drills.
- Promote active dialogue and exchange between schools and local leaders, including police, civil defence, fire safety, search and rescue, medical and other emergency service providers.
- Schoolchildren must practise safety measures in all aspects and places of their lives.

## Bangkok Action Agenda

Subsequent to the Ahmedabad Action Agenda, the issues were reconfirmed in the Bangkok Action Agenda for Asia Pacific. The Bangkok Action Agenda called for further localization of school safety programme by way of incorporating local traditional knowledge into the education curriculum, and develop minimum standards for safe school buildings with appropriate material available locally.

The Bangkok Action Agenda called for immediate action on ensuring that every new school henceforth be built as a safe school. It further reconfirms the mandatory declaration of schools as 'Zones of Safety' by the UN General Assembly.

## The Islamabad Declaration on School Safety

In the light of the huge loss of lives in the earthquake that struck Pakistan in October 2008 which led to the loss of over 17,000 schoolgoing-age children, the Islamabad Declaration on School Safety drafted during the conference in May 2008 calls for a Resilient School Movement and urges national governments to develop a National School Safety Programme. The underlying message in the Islamabad Declaration is to make school safety part of the mainstream development process.

## Conclusion: Can Words be Translated into Accountable Actions ?

Recent initiatives by decision makers, DRR practitioners, technical communities and citizens at large are indeed encouraging. However, the proof of commitment lies in concrete action that covers every schoolgoing child. How quickly can we act on agenda set before us? How many precious young lives are we able to save in future? These are questions that need to be addressed by the disaster management community not just as experts in the field, but also as responsible members of our families where our children too are going to schools.

In Pakistan, over 80% of schools are unprotected in the face of risks such as the great earthquake that struck in October 2005. The story is the same in the rest of South Asia. In India, over 41 million children go to schools that lie in seismic Zones IV and V, where earthquakes with possibility of causing very high damage can occur. Likewise, there are millions of other children exposed to risks of coastal hazards, flooding, landslides, etc. in the rest of South Asia.

Without forgetting the statement by the little girl from Nepal, we as disaster management practitioners need to hold ourselves accountable for the safety of our schoolchildren.

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## INVESTMENTS FOR A SAFE FUTURE: DISASTER REDUCTION IN SCHOOLS IN SOUTH ASIA

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