

SOUTH ASIA

The Humanitarian Context

In 2014, Monsoon rains were especially intense in South Asia, killing hundreds of people, displacing millions and damaging houses, livestock and infrastructure in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, floods affected 20 districts in the northeast and central regions, including some of the hardest to reach and poorest areas of the country. In India, the state of Jammu and Kashmir suffered the worst floods in 50 years, which also affected six other states, as well as North and East Pakistan. In addition, the Indian state of Odisha was hit by cyclone Hudhud months later, forcing a massive evacuation. In Nepal, while floods and landslides were less destructive than in neighbouring countries, the most affected areas in the mid-West were not prepared for an event of such magnitude. In sum, unexpectedly heavy monsoon rains directly affected 13 million people in India, two and a half million in Pakistan, two million in Northern Bangladesh, and almost 180,000 in West Nepal.

As one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, South Asia is no stranger to natural hazards. Three out of the ten deadliest natural disasters since 1980 have happened in South Asia, including the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the cyclone that devastated Southeastern Bangladesh in 1991, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, and the Nepal earthquake in April 2015. In addition to those large-scale disasters, a multiplicity of medium and small natural disasters has hit the region and continues to do so with increasing frequency. South Asia is also home to protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also to a high number of low-intensity ones.

Although South Asia has suffered the largest number of fatalities from natural disasters in the Asia-Pacific region – more than 1 million people between 1970 and 2014 – there is a consistent downward trend since the year 2000. Economic losses from natural disasters in South Asia are considerable – 0.37 percent of Gross Domestic Product between 1970 and 2013 – and have remained unchanged during the last decade, with floods accounting for most of the damage to infrastructures, houses and livelihoods.

During the last two decades, national and regional natural disaster management legislation has been passed, and relevant bodies have been set up and approved across South Asia. As a result, states in the region adopted a more visible role in disaster preparedness, early warning, and response. In

addition, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation established the Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management, the Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters, and the Disaster Management Centre, following the example of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

This process is taking place in a region that for decades has been the destination of considerable flows of foreign aid, and is home or destination for a plethora of international and national aid organisations, among them some of the largest and reputed Southern NGOs.

**On Authority and Trust:
A reflection on the effectiveness of disaster
management in Bangladesh, India and Nepal¹**

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Introduction

When climate experts gathered in India in April 2014, for the fifth annual meeting of the South Asian Climate Outlook Forum (SASCOF), their task was an extremely difficult one, from both a technical and a political point of view: to produce a rainfall forecast of the summer monsoon that runs between June and September. The so-called Consensus Statement predicted that 'below-normal rainfall is likely over broad areas of western, central and south-western parts of South Asia and some areas in the north-eastern parts of the region', and that 'normal rainfall is likely over broad areas of north-western and eastern parts and some island areas in the southernmost parts of the region'.² In other words, in 2014 the monsoon might bring less rain than normal. Following this typically sensitive SASCOF statement, the meteorological agencies of the eight South Asian countries reacted with their own assessments, balancing meteorological and political calculations for national consumption. The threat of drought in South Asia could trigger a considerable level of anxiety in countries whose economies largely rely on agricultural production. Less controversial was SASCOF's dismissal of the possibility of heavy rains in the region, since 'no part of South Asia has above-normal rainfall as the most likely category'.³

Five months later, heavy rains across South Asia displaced half a million people in Bangladesh, seriously damaged thousands of houses in eighteen districts in West Nepal, and caused the worst floods in fifty years in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), spreading also to six other Indian states and areas of east Pakistan, where 367 people died. In October, cyclone Hudhud hit the Indian state of Odisha, forcing a massive evacuation, and reached Nepal a week later, killing 29 people. In sum, late monsoon rains directly affected 13 million people in India, two and a half million in Pakistan, two million in Northern Bangladesh, and almost 180,000 in West Nepal.

South Asia is home to a fifth of the world's population⁴ – a third of which

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lives in poverty – and includes several of the most populated democracies in Asia. It also has some of the best performing economies in the developing world, with per capita income in the region now 50 per cent higher than that of sub-Saharan Africa, the two having been equal in 1990.⁵ Of course, South Asia is a diverse region, with countries performing differently depending on the criteria used for comparison. As Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen⁶ explain, although India is doing much better than its neighbours in terms of growth of per capita income, countries such as Bangladesh have overtaken it in many social indicators – for example, life expectancy, child survival, immunisation rates, reduced fertility rates and several schooling indicators. Even less developed and stable neighbours such as Nepal, which suffered a civil war not long ago, are closing the gap with India in many socio-economic indicators – life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate, access to improved sanitation and female literacy rate – even when the per capita income of the latter is three times higher. The comparison between war-torn Pakistan and India doesn't show great difference in terms of those indicators either.⁷

As one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, South Asia has suffered considerable physical and material losses in recent decades. Three out of the ten deadliest natural disasters since 1980 have happened in South Asia.⁸ They include not only the Indian Ocean Tsunami, but also the cyclone that devastated south-eastern Bangladesh in 1991, killing 139,000 people; the 2005 Kashmir earthquake that caused 88,000 casualties in Pakistan and India; and the Nepal earthquake in April 2015 that killed 9,000. A large number of big, medium and small natural disasters could be added to the list; several of them can be attributed to the effect of climate change, a trend that, according to the Asian Development Bank, could make South Asian countries lose the equivalent of 1.8 per cent of their annual gross domestic product by 2050, and up to 8.8 per cent by 2100,⁹ as well as bringing about an increase in morbidity and mortality from dengue fever, malaria and diarrhoea, and an increased number and intensity of weather-related hazards.

South Asia is home to well-known protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also to a high number of low-intensity ones. Just in India – defined by some authors as the 'world's most violent democracy'¹⁰ – there are up to forty active conflicts: in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Gorkhaland. Moreover, the Maoist insurgency is active in nine states and more than 200 of the country's 640 districts; more than 4,800 civilians have been killed as a result since 2004, according to the Indian government.¹¹ In Bangladesh, 431,000 people¹² remain displaced by inter-communal violence and conflict, and almost 250,000 Rohingya from Myanmar have sought refuge in the country, although the Government only agreed the refugee status of 30,000. In Nepal, the decade-long civil war ended only in 2006, and the resulting scars are still visible. Regional tensions, often around unresolved territorial disputes, are also a reality in South Asia, with

the intermittent Indo-Pakistani conflict in Jammu & Kashmir as the most notorious example.

The political structures and governance systems of South Asian countries are also diverse but, despite an often turbulent political past and present, today they are recognised as reasonably stable democracies. However, in South Asia 'military rule, monarchy and centralised autocratic political systems are accepted within the framework of democracy'.¹³ Moreover, South Asian countries have experienced 'rampant government corruption, fierce political competition, relatively inefficient bureaucracies, and weak political leadership'.¹⁴ This assessment is confirmed by the *Worldwide Governance Indicators*,¹⁵ according to which South Asian countries' performance in *voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption* is consistently lower than that of countries in East Asia and the Pacific, and similar to the average scores of sub-Saharan countries. Even more important for this study,

Rather than move towards improving transparency in governance and make the executive more accountable, regimes throughout South Asia have become more defensive in their political responses leading to intolerance of criticism not just from their opponents but even from civil society where all criticisms are seen to be politically motivated.¹⁶

For decades, South Asia has received important flows of foreign aid. In fact, India has received more aid than any country in the world since the 1950s – \$100 billion – and other countries in the region have received considerable amounts of aid relative to the size of their economies.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, for decades South Asian countries have been home to or the destination for thousands of international and national aid organisations, from United Nations agencies to international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In fact, some of the biggest Southern NGOs – such as BRAC in Bangladesh – can be found in the region, as well as local members or branches of most international NGOs (INGOs).

Mega disasters like the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 created the momentum for the establishment of national and regional disaster management mechanisms that, among other issues, were expected to strengthen coordination among the plethora of international and local actors that populated the region. During the last few decades, national disaster management bodies have progressively taken the lead in responding to emergencies, as well as setting up early warning mechanisms and preparedness activities, also at the regional level.

In this framework, a redefinition of the terms of engagement among South Asian states, international aid organisations, and civil society is taking place in

South Asia. This conflictive process should not be understood as a mere change in technical roles and responsibilities, but as a deeper shift in which state and non-state governance structures are altered, and international and national actors struggle to protect their space. The consequences of this ongoing process have been visible in the perceived effectiveness of the response to recent disasters in South Asia, as explained in the following section.

More specifically, there are two factors that hinder humanitarian action in South Asia, raised in the majority of the interviews conducted for this study, in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. The first factor is a direct consequence of how authority is understood and exercised in South Asia. Perhaps one of the least understood determinants of the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, the importance of authority lies not only in the fact that an effective response requires the commitment and participation of states, but also in the increasing role played by governments, local authorities and officials of humanitarian action and disaster management in South Asia. As Rehman Sobhan explains, the development of national bureaucracies has led 'to political nepotism in administration, where loyal bureaucrats are used to play a partisan role in the service of the ruling party rather than the people'.¹⁸ Disaster management structures and emergency responses are not detached from these processes.

The second factor – linked to the first – is the lack of mutual trust among the different actors responding to emergencies. Coordination mechanisms of state and non-state humanitarian actors, both national and international, often function under the premise of a mutual trust that in fact is weak or non-existent. Although not acknowledged in public, government departments, UN agencies, NGOs and donor agencies treat each other with mistrust, reducing the extent to which the response can meet the expectations of people most affected by the emergencies.

On emergencies, humanitarian need and response¹⁹

In early September 2014, when the J&K state government confirmed the first ten deaths caused by the heavy rains, the Indian Meteorological Department announced even more rains to come in the days ahead. While the annual average rainfall is around 1,000mm, some areas received more than 350mm of water in only four days. Heavy rains melted mountain glaciers more rapidly, making the rivers flow well above normal levels. Soon, dozens of bridges had been destroyed, roads disappeared under the water and Srinagar, the state summer capital, was almost completely flooded for two weeks.

Following a directive from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's National Crisis Management Committee requested all possible help from government agencies. Almost 15,000 soldiers and dozens of Air Force helicopters were deployed with teams of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and the

J&K State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) to work on the rescue operations. For the Indian government, this emergency was more than just the response to a natural disaster. Of course, the massive flooding would test the government's disaster management capacity, but it would also test its willingness to respond effectively in a region where the Indian Army is perceived as party to a conflict that has been running since 1947 – as well as test the level of acceptance of that help among the Muslim population. The Indian Red Cross and international and national NGOs were also active in the response. Sphere India – a network of over forty international and national NGOs, UN agencies, and the Red Cross – activated the Unified Response Strategy to facilitate coordination of the relief operation among member organisations and with the national authorities, and requested the elaboration of a joint needs assessment. Action Aid, Handicap International, Islamic Relief, Médecins Sans Frontières, Mercy Corps, Oxfam and Save the Children were the few international NGOs with pre-existing presence in the region and some capacity to respond to the emergency, particularly on account of their partnerships with local organisations. For many NGO staff members, this was the first time they had to respond to an emergency in a city, where 'work has to be done house by house', making it harder to reach all of the affected population. Their task was made even more challenging by the poor quality of the data shared by the state government.

The government's efforts to improve its image in J&K started almost at the same time as the first rains flooded the state. Prime Minister Modi visited Srinagar as early as 7th September – five days after the emergency declaration – and announced an additional \$150 million for relief operations. National TV channels and some of the most important newspapers in New Delhi presented the Indian Army as a *band of heroes* – 'the military won't move back to the barracks till the last man is brought to safety'²⁰ – offering detailed information of the relief effort on a daily basis – 10,000 blankets, 150 tonnes of rations, one lakh (100,000) ready-to-eat meals, 400,000 litres of milk, etc. – and images of soldiers rescuing citizens. In a press release dated 19th September, the National Disaster Management Agency provided yet another detailed account of the assistance delivered by the NDRF: more than 50,000 people rescued from affected areas of Srinagar, 7,000 patients treated and thousands of tonnes of food aid, water, and non-food items.²¹ In contrast to this idealised image of the government and the Army, media in New Delhi presented the J&K administration and the local police in a negative light. While the Army continued to be described in impressive terms – 'more than 60 army columns and 13 engineer teams tirelessly working to rescue precious lives trapped in flooded villages'²² –, the J&K state police were described as helpless with 'a complete breakdown of command and control'.²³

The positive picture of the response that emerged from New Delhi media contrasted with the local and international media coverage of the floods in J&K, which was largely negative. Kashmir newspapers were largely critical of

the role of the Army and the New Delhi government, and recognised the role of local communities: ‘On the one hand, it was Kashmir’s young men, risking their lives... on the other, Indian military, though late, using choppers and boats for the rescue purpose’.²⁴ The anger of the Muslim population at a late and badly organised emergency response, together with the failure of the early warning systems, was represented in some of the most important international media outlets.²⁵ For many in J&K and abroad, the national and state authorities, in spite of political statements and press releases to the contrary, were to blame.

A visit to Srinagar in late November only reinforced the impression that – even if a lot had been done – very little was achieved. The waters had receded and the destruction caused by the floods was visible in the city. NGO staff remained in their offices, purportedly for security reasons, until the J&K Legislative Assembly election week was over. With below-zero temperatures and the prospect of a harsh winter, those who had lost their houses or could hardly survive, and those who remained in the area wondered what would happen to them now that almost all the aid had stopped. ‘The government and the Army left long ago and only a bunch of NGOs are still helping us with what they have left; people need warm clothes for the winter and money to rebuild their houses’, said a community member in Srinagar. The fact was that the few active INGOs in J&K were looking for funds for the next year, and all new spending from state authorities was on hold until the new government was elected. Prime Minister Modi had visited Srinagar again in late November to rally support for his party in the coming state elections, promising more support for J&K, but decisions on such issues take time to materialise. Modi needed to ensure his party, Bharatiya Janata, achieved a good result in the state elections. Presenting the flood response to the Muslim majority as proof of New Delhi’s commitment to the people of J&K therefore became the central objective, over and above carrying out a response that was satisfactory to the affected population. Eventually, with a 23 per cent increase in the number of votes, Bharatiya Janata became the second biggest political force in J&K, and set about negotiating a government alliance with the People’s Democratic Party.

The Indian government had tried to strengthen its domestic and international standing, using the emergency response as an opportunity to flex its muscles. In June 2013, unprecedented rains in the northern state of Uttarakhand had killed 5,700 – 4,500 more were missing and presumed dead – and trapped thousands of pilgrims. Indian media quickly paid attention to an emergency that offered shocking images of destruction and Army helicopters dropping assistance and rescuing survivors. It seemed clear that, far from being an unexpected, unpreventable disaster, this tragedy was the result of a combination of man-made factors – environmental degradation, the negative impact of hydroelectric projects,²⁶ ill-functioning early warning systems, and inadequate evacuation procedures, etc. Nonetheless, the Director General of

the NDRF, Dr Mahboob Alam, quickly reacted to criticism saying there was ‘nothing to learn from the Uttarakhand disaster’.²⁷

While thousands died in Uttarakhand, the sharp decrease in disaster casualties across the country over recent years evidences the capacity of the Indian authorities to learn. A look at disasters in Odisha captures this trend. In October 1999, two consecutive cyclones hit Odisha. The first cyclone killed 250 people and did not attract much attention. Twelve days later, a second much more powerful cyclone destroyed more than 250,000 houses, livestock, crops, telecommunications infrastructure, roads and railways and killed over 10,000 people.²⁸ As the evaluation of the Disaster Emergency Committee response explained, these two consecutive cyclones ‘brought much of Odisha, including the State Government, to a standstill’.²⁹ The last cyclone of similar magnitude that local people remembered had happened in 1943, but ‘its effects were mitigated by the better forest cover along the coastal belt at that time’.³⁰ Communication within Odisha and with the rest of India and the world was cut, and with no contingency plan or clear lines of responsibility for the coordination of response activities, an organised response was virtually non-existent until two weeks after. Fourteen years later, in 2013, the alert that super cyclone Phailing was approaching Odisha led to the biggest evacuation in India’s recent history and the deployment of more than one thousand NDRF personnel in Odisha and the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. Fifty-three people died and around 300,000 houses were destroyed or damaged as well as crops and livestock. In 2014, 150,000 people were evacuated when cyclone Hudhud, classified as very severe by meteorologists, swept through Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. This time, Hudhud killed an estimated five people.

Undeniably, there has been considerable progress made in the development of India’s disaster management structures during the last decade. The sharp reduction of the number of casualties seems to have been a priority, and an achievable objective in many cases, including those in Odisha. As one aid worker explained, ‘today in India we now know how to save lives, but we still don’t know how to respect the lives we have saved’. In places like Odisha, which has a multi-dimensional poverty index similar to the poorest countries of Africa,³¹ or J&K, where two thirds of the population depend on incomes from agricultural activities,³² the recurrent loss of food stocks, crops, seeds, tools, livestock and shelter is a tragedy to which Army helicopters or NDRF personnel do not provide relief. In spite of this, the support for recovery and long-term activities is insufficient and in some areas – like rural areas in J&K or hilly areas in Odisha – the situation is far worse than in coastal areas or in the cities.

Uttarakhand is case in point for the lack of investment in the post-disaster phase. With no evaluations available, key questions about the emergency response – why didn’t the Uttarakhand state and district authorities react when they received a warning from the Meteorological Office? – remain

unanswered, but even more important are the doubts about the attention paid to the recovery. As an Indian NGO worker complained, two years after the 2013 disaster in Uttarakhand ‘no organisation is present in the area working on rehabilitation, not even the state authorities; not a single school has been rebuilt, nor a bridge, and those who haven’t migrated are now surviving with very basic means’. In fact, the UNICEF-led recovery plan hasn’t been implemented yet – nor is it even a public document – and the World Bank-funded Uttarakhand Disaster Recovery Project³³ showed minimum progress by the end of 2014.

Monsoon and river floods in August 2014 affected 20 districts in northeast and central Bangladesh, including some of the hardest to reach and poorest areas of the country. According to the Joint Needs Assessment³⁴ commissioned by the Humanitarian Country Task Team, these floods were the worst since cyclone Sidr in 2007 – which swept across 46 districts and affected 16 million people. With almost three million people affected, six out of 20 districts acknowledged their lack of capacity and resources to respond to the most urgent needs, and many expected to have serious recovery needs and not enough local capacity to address them. The government of Bangladesh, in its legitimate desire to handle the disaster response directly, did not appeal for international aid (the last national disaster was declared by the government in 1991 and the last United Nations appeal in Bangladesh was launched for the 2004 floods); instead, it decided to send 8,000 tonnes of rice and allocate \$387,000 for relief operations. This clearly insufficient amount compared to the needs and the number of affected people – less than 25 cents per recipient – was complemented with a quick disbursement from the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) – the largest humanitarian donor in Bangladesh – and the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID). It is still too soon to know whether this assistance was effective or just a ‘stop gap/band aid measure’, as the *Evaluation of the European Commission’s Humanitarian Activities in Bangladesh 2012*³⁵ characterised it.

While most humanitarian actors interviewed in Bangladesh for this study praised the relevance and quality of the Joint Needs Assessment after the 2014 floods – a process fully supported by ECHO and DFID – the main complaint during the interviews in Dhaka had to do, once again, with the way the humanitarian actors coordinated their work. This deficit was mentioned in several evaluations and reports, such as the *ECHO evaluation*. The *Scoping Study on Coordinated Approaches to Needs Assessments in Bangladesh*,³⁶ jointly published by the Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) Project and the Assessment Capacity Building (ACAPS) in 2011, referred to ‘a lack of clarity in terms of roles and responsibilities after a disaster, a lack of clear leadership and the absence of predictability’³⁷. Unsurprisingly, the quality of interventions was questioned by one donor agency in Dhaka who felt that ‘it was obvious

that most agencies don’t communicate with each other before designing their programmes to agree on basic questions’.

There are two ways of understanding this quality deficit. First, it is a consequence of the decreasing size – down to two members of staff in most cases – or even the closure of the humanitarian departments and programmes of most INGOs in Bangladesh, due to the lack of donor funding in the absence of a *big disaster* in the country. As one aid worker said, ‘donor governments aren’t interested in small scale emergencies’; in spite of this, organisations do have to respond on a regular basis to a plethora of medium and small disasters across the country, scattering funds and human resources and ‘skewing the system’. Maybe, as the country director of an INGO said, ‘there is a tolerance in Bangladesh for medium and small disasters and the real meaning of resilience in this country is the capacity of people to remain poor indefinitely’. A second proposition is that the main problem in Bangladesh is the disconnection within INGOs between different departments, the tendency to work in silos, with the humanitarian department being the least relevant from an organisational point of view. The *ECHO evaluation* explained this issue by noting that humanitarian programmes are ‘tailored to a largely development outlook’,³⁸ with actors having ‘little idea or significantly different thoughts on the principles of humanitarian aid’.³⁹ As one donor representative put it, ‘how can the humanitarian department of an INGO say that it does not have nutrition experts when colleagues in the development department are managing a huge nutrition programme in the same country?’ The answer is probably that the reduction of the humanitarian capacity in Bangladesh is leading to ‘minimal (if not grossly inadequate)’⁴⁰ monitoring activities conducted by international and local NGOs.

In Nepal, floods and landslides in the mid-West of the country in August 2014 affected almost thirty thousand families – an emergency that was categorised as having *low expected impact* by the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS). While it was true that – compared to other emergencies in the region – the floods in mid-West Nepal were of a limited magnitude, the fact was that ‘many affected areas weren’t classified as disaster-prone areas, leaving families without knowledge and means to protect themselves’.⁴¹ Moreover, the needs of especially vulnerable groups – children, pregnant women, elderly and disabled people – were not ‘addressed by the immediate response and their situation was not given special consideration in recovery plans’.⁴² The Government of Nepal activated the national response mechanism – Central Natural Disaster Relief Committee, National Emergency Operation Center and Local Emergency Disaster Management Authority – as well as the Army and the Police, and invited the Nepalese Red Cross (NRC), UN agencies and NGOs to coordination meetings. The scale of the disaster was unprecedented for the humanitarian community in Nepal and – unlike the Indian and Bangladeshi governments

– Kathmandu appealed for international support. Around \$3 million⁴³ were committed by the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), Canada, Denmark, ECHO, the Gates Foundation, Luxembourg, Sweden and the US. Even India offered \$500,000 in aid to Nepal.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, when asked about the effectiveness of the response, many organisations voiced concern about two issues. The first was the questionable quality of the data collected by the NRC, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP). Although deemed incomplete, unreliable and outdated – in one case, of the 83 families identified by the official data as affected in a specific area, an NGO could not find even a single one – the District Disaster Relief Committees (DDRC) required UN agencies and NGOs to use NRC data, not their own. The official data favoured a *blanket approach*, according to which all residents in the area would receive help regardless of the level of their needs or their specific vulnerability.

A second complaint referred to the quality of the response and the lack of coordination among different actors involved. First, not all the Chief District Officers (chairs of the DDRCs) were able or willing to fully engage in the disaster response. For some humanitarian workers, the presence of UN agencies and INGOs in the area counterbalanced the lack of experience or commitment of the Chief District Officers. For others, UN agencies often acted as a ‘second government’, willingly adopting the blanket approach proposed by the authorities, and many INGOs based their activities on their own priorities, not on the real needs of communities affected by the floods. As a result, people whose houses were damaged but not destroyed did not receive food aid, even when they needed it; rice was distributed in areas where it was available in markets, and despite the fact that the main need of affected people was money to rebuild their livelihoods and houses. Four months after the floods, the recovery work had not yet started in mid-West Nepal, and more and more people were migrating to India or the Middle East.

On authority – state bureaucracy and regulation

If anything has shaped the evolution of humanitarian action in South Asia during the last few decades, it is the legitimate desire of every state in the region to take control of all dimensions of what has been called disaster management – how disasters are defined, who is involved in responding to them, and what they do. As a consequence of this decision, South Asian states are in the process of redefining the three social domains of response to risk and disaster: the domain of science and disaster management; the domain of disaster governance; and the domain of local responses.⁴⁵ As Dorothea Hilhorst explains, ‘these are the respective domains of scientists and managers; bureaucrats and politicians; and local producers and vulnerable people’.⁴⁶ This

section will focus on the domain of disaster governance, and its often-negative impact on the other two social dimensions, and ultimately on humanitarian effectiveness, in the region.

During the last decades, South Asian countries have made advances towards the institutionalisation of disaster management through the approval of disaster acts, the progressive clarification of roles and responsibilities, and the creation of new governmental bodies. In India, the Disaster Management Act of 2005 established the legal and institutional framework for disaster management at national, state and district levels. The primary responsibility for disaster management resides with state governments, while the national government defines policies and guidelines, contributes funding and technical and logistical support, and the local districts are in charge of operational management. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), chaired by the Prime Minister, is the main body responsible for the design of policies, plans and guidelines, and oversees their implementation by the ministries, state governments and districts. The NDMA directs and activates the National Disaster Response Force in case of an emergency. Although all the ministries have responsibilities in disaster management and report to the NDMA through the National Executive Committee, primary responsibility for disaster management across the country lies with the Ministry of Home Affairs. The State Disaster Management Authorities translate the policies, plans and guidelines of the NDMA into state plans, which must include prevention, preparedness and mitigation considerations, and inform the work of the State Disaster Management Departments, the District Disaster Management Authorities, and the local authorities (municipalities, cantonment boards and town planning authorities).

In Nepal, the Natural Calamity Relief Act of 1982, the Local Self Governance Act of 1999, and the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management of 2009 determine the legal and operational framework for disaster response. As in the case of India, the Ministry of Home Affairs is the lead agency for rescue, relief and preparedness activities. It is the responsibility of the government of Nepal to declare a state of emergency, only if a disaster exceeds national capacities.⁴⁷ Building on National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management, the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium was created by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), and the World Bank, with the aim of supporting the Government of Nepal in developing a long-term Disaster Risk Reduction Action Plan.

In Bangladesh, the Disaster Management and Relief Division has responsibility for coordinating national disaster management efforts across all agencies. The National Disaster Management Council formulates disaster

management policies that are implemented by the In-Ministerial Disaster Management Co-ordination Committee. The In-Ministerial Committee also supervises the activities of the Army and NGOs. The Directorate of Relief and Rehabilitation acts during emergencies, coordinating relief activities through the Disaster Management Bureau, the Disaster Management Training and Public Awareness Building Task Force, the Focal Point Operational Co-ordination Group on Disaster Management, the NGO Coordination Committee on Disaster Management and the Committee for Speedy Dissemination of Disaster Related Warning Signals.⁴⁸ At sub-national level, the District Disaster Management Committee coordinates the disaster management activities at district level, while the Upazila Disaster Management Committee and the Union Disaster Management Committee, the Pourashava Disaster Management Committee and the City Corporation Disaster Management Committee design and implement the disaster management activities within its area of jurisdiction.⁴⁹

With small differences, Indian, Bangladeshi and Nepalese disaster management frameworks follow the same logic. The prime minister's office provides political oversight of emergency declarations and funding decisions; there is ministry-level coordination of all operational actors, especially the armies and rapid response units; and the implementation of the bulk of daily tasks happens at subnational level (states, districts and municipalities). These frameworks are coherent with a larger decentralisation process, carried out from the top down, across South Asia during the last two decades – in India with the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts of 1992 and 1994, in Bangladesh with the reintroduction of the Upazila Parishad Act in 2009, in Nepal with the Local Self-Governance Act of 1999, and in Pakistan with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1987 and the Devolution of Power Plan in 2000. It was claimed that 'these measures would empower people, involve a wide range of social classes in political and developmental decisions by bringing government closer to the people, cut down bureaucratic delays and promote and rejuvenate democracy'⁵⁰ Nevertheless, local governments in South Asia 'are taken as mere administrative extensions of central or provincial governments',⁵¹ and their affairs – including disaster management issues – 'are normally run through ad hoc measures and local bureaucracy which normally consider themselves answerable or accountable to higher tiers of government, instead of citizens they are meant to serve'.⁵²

As Hilhorst points out, based on the conception of disasters as 'phenomena of tropical areas whose insufficiently modernised relationships with nature make their populations vulnerable as a matter of course',⁵³ a hazard-centred, military-style approach to the science and management of responses – often managed by armies themselves – makes for linear, top-down processes. In fact, 'this perception of resemblance of a natural disaster with a war has seeped into the very design being laid for management of disasters in India',⁵⁴ as well

as in Bangladesh and Nepal. In accordance with this conception of disasters – derived primarily from Western thought and practice – local politicians and bureaucrats in South Asia have developed their own understanding of 'the relations between hazards, vulnerability and disaster, picking bits and pieces from science as they deem fit according to their own beliefs'.⁵⁵

Not everything in this process has been a translation of western models or top-down initiatives. In fact, the institutionalisation of disaster management in South Asia must also be understood in the context of patronage, one of the most distinctive features of the region's politics. As Kanchan Chandra explains, in patronage democracies such as India voters do not pay attention to ideologies or electoral programmes, but to the expected material benefits they may get from the authorities.⁵⁶ Politicians make every effort to buy the votes that will secure their privileged positions and progress in the hierarchy. Citizens 'know' that politicians and government officials would always benefit their 'own' people, so they vote their 'own' candidate. A relationship that, for Chandra and many other authors, fuels the marginalisation and deprivation of the poorest but that, for other authors, is in essence a moral formulation of the idea that 'in South Asia differences of rank do not prevent relations, but promote intimacy between parties in distinct and complementary roles',⁵⁷ therefore allowing for stable relations and sociality. There is no reason to believe that disaster management in Bangladesh, India and Nepal is immune to patronage. In fact, political patronage has been identified as 'a key obstacle to implementing comprehensive strategies for disaster risk reduction'⁵⁸ across the world and is certainly a factor in emergency response in the three countries, as it has been in other regions such as the Sahel⁵⁹ or the Philippines.⁶⁰

The first major consequences of the particular understanding of disaster management governance that is operative in South Asia are the common reluctance to appeal for external help and the use of chain of command, soldiers and military assets as *relief agents*, exacerbating the perception of those affected by disasters as disempowered victims. The increasing control and coordination roles played by politicians and government officials relegate non-state organisations to mere service providers – a role they have accepted sceptically,⁶¹ but, in most cases, without openly expressing criticism. Although this change might be understood as a legitimate step towards the exercise of authority of democratic states in South Asia and a fair counterbalance to the 'autonomy fetish'⁶² of UN agencies and NGOs, it challenges the agency of non-governmental bodies⁶³ pushing them to accept a more passive, uncritical stance as subsidiaries of government actors.

In some cases, obstacles to the provision of emergency relief have arisen as a consequence of the strict interpretation of non-disaster related legislation – as in Uttarakhand in 2013, when the Electoral Commission banned the delivery of assistance in order not to influence the vote in the coming state elections. In others, administrative procedures for the approval of non-emergency projects

have had a prohibitive impact on emergency assistance, such as in Bangladesh. More often, the problem lies in insufficiently prepared and engaged local authorities, as in Nepal where district authorities' contribution has often been cited as very poor, insufficiently committed to identifying and addressing needs and more prone to blanket approaches.

Abdul Shakoor Sindhu provides a compelling explanation of the disconnect between the international, national and local levels of disaster management in South Asia:

The national governments are the signatories to international and regional covenants or frameworks including Millennium Development Goals and Hyogo Framework for Action. However the subnational and local governments are normally not consulted or involved by the respective national governments in the processes and decisions with regard to international commitments. Resultantly these lower tiers of governments usually are unaware of such agreements. They neither take the ownership of these national commitments nor consider themselves accountable for their implementation at the local level. This situation creates a serious disconnect between the 'international' and the 'local'.⁶⁴

In addition, government officials have often been characterised as trapped by a culture of punishment of mistakes. As one Nepalese aid worker put it, 'in this country you can be punished if you do something wrong, but never for not doing anything'. On many occasions, the lack of a legal basis and insufficient clarification of responsibilities in policy implementation have reduced the will of national and local authorities to engage in responding to disasters, causing inaction and delayed decisions. As a result, responsibilities are fragmented across different vertical and horizontal levels of government structures, creating asymmetries, limiting the collaboration among departments, and impacting negatively on knowledge and skill transfer and tangible results.⁶⁵

The question remains as to the extent to which NGOs' negative perceptions of the role played by state authorities are based on questions of capacity and performance, or are a reaction to a trend of decreasing autonomy of civil society organisations in humanitarian action in South Asia. As Bradnock and Williams explain, NGOs in South Asia 'are wary of increased links with government for fear of losing their identity and autonomy, and of becoming public service contractors for the state. In some cases, the role of the NGO seems to be to support and legitimise government policy rather than to question it'.⁶⁶

On authority – regional (non-)cooperation

Contrary to what might have been expected considering the regional impact and the magnitude of the 2014 monsoon floods in half of the countries⁶⁷ that make up the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the contribution of the regional organisation to the response was negligible, according to all interviews conducted for this study. This inaction should not be a surprise, because, as Steven Zyck explains, 'SAARC has, among regional organisations, been the least involved in humanitarian issues'.⁶⁸ A quick review of SAARC's work on disaster management during the last decade helps to explain its passivity.

In April 2010, the presidents and prime ministers of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka met in Thimphu – the capital of Bhutan – for the Sixteenth SAARC Summit. Although the main point on the summit agenda was climate change,⁶⁹ SAARC members were expected to adopt the Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters following the recommendation of two expert group meetings⁷⁰ and the decision made during the previous summit held in Colombo in 2008.

A rapid response mechanism was a missing link in the regional disaster management architecture after SAARC had approved the Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management⁷¹ and created the Disaster Management Centre⁷² four years before. In spite of the slower and more erratic steps towards regional cooperation when compared with Southeast Asia, especially in other areas, such as trade, disaster management seemed to be a positive exception – perhaps a sign of a new era for SAARC. Nevertheless, and without further explanation, the Thimphu Summit declaration called for further negotiations and early finalisation of the Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters.⁷³

At first it was difficult to ascertain the reasons for such a deferral, but on a close reading of the agreement that was finally adopted during the following SAARC summit in the Maldives in 2011, they become more evident.⁷⁴ The final version of the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters – hereafter referred to as the NDRRM as it forms the basis of the Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism – was largely an abridged copy⁷⁵ of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER),⁷⁶ signed in 2005. The omissions in the NDRRM document suggest a long watering-down process to adapt the AADMER model, which understandably was the main reference for SAARC members, to the political requirements of the South Asian context.

The guiding principles of the NDRRM agreement could be seen as a translation of the *Panchsheel* principles, a fundamental reference for India's foreign policy and, later, for the *non-aligned movement* since the mid-1950s. The Declaration of Five Principles, commonly known as *Panchsheel* after a

speech by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, were signed by India and China in 1954 to try to improve relations between them, especially tense because of the Tibet issue. The *Panchsheel* principles established mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.⁷⁷ Although the relevance of the *Panchsheel* principles soon surpassed the scope of the Sino-Indian relations – guiding initiatives such as the Bandung Conference in 1955, as well as a declaration of the United Nations General Assembly on peaceful coexistence in 1957 – they became 'the unalterable determinants of India's foreign policy culture'.⁷⁸ For Nehru, the *Panchsheel* not only 'lays down the very important truth that each nation must ultimately fend for itself',⁷⁹ but were intimately connected with the Indian psyche.

Of course, India's interpretation of the *Panchsheel* changed over time in parallel with changes in the country's regional and international standing. During the first two decades of independence, the *Panchsheel* was the justification for India's autonomy and non-alignment. In the 1970s, India soon understood that non-alignment in the Cold War context could mean isolation – hence the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship signed in 1971 as a way to ensure territorial integrity and sovereignty. Since the 1990s the *Panchsheel* has framed the country's bilateral and multilateral relationships with its South Asian neighbours, placing limits on potential initiatives from small countries for further integration.

In light of this evolution, what the NDRRM principles do is reiterate the political limits to any SAARC initiative in accordance with India's conditions. As Arndt Michael explains, India's perception of regional integration has always been positive but uncommitted,⁸⁰ and, therefore, New Delhi has always made clear that all political and security-related issues will have to be excluded from multilateral discussions and be limited to bilateral contacts. In fact, the SAARC Charter, signed in 1985, included India's requirements: no bilateral or contentious issues to be on the agenda and unanimity – not consensus, as in other regional organisations such as ASEAN – as a requirement for decisions. As Rajiv Gandhi – the then Prime Minister of India – stated during the second SAARC summit in 1986, 'ours is not a political association' and, therefore, 'we have consciously decided not to burden SAARC with our bilateral concerns'.⁸¹ Unsurprisingly, the history of SAARC shows little institutionalisation and meaningful implementation of the scarce initiatives that are approved, to the frustration of several of its members.

SAARC established that only natural disasters would be considered by the NDRRM, to the point of avoiding even a basic definition of hazard such as the ASEAN agreement had given.⁸² Considering past and present conflicts and man-made disasters in South Asia, the deliberate limitation to natural disasters in the SAARC agreement sent a clear political message that was

coherent with the history of multilateral relations in the region. Compared to the seven principles in the ASEAN Agreement, SAARC provided a more succinct version consisting of only three points:

1. Each affected Party shall have the primary responsibility to respond to disasters occurring within its territory and external assistance or offers of assistance shall only be provided upon the request or with the consent of the affected Party.
2. The Requesting or Receiving Party shall exercise the overall direction, control, coordination and supervision of the assistance within its territory.
3. The sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of the Parties shall be respected, in accordance with the SAARC Charter in the implementation of this Agreement.⁸³

Moreover, according to the NDRRM agreement, only states will be considered 'assisting parties' in disaster response. So the principle of the primary responsibility of states for emergency response in their own borders would shift to a principle of states as the only legitimate responders. In fact, the only time the SAARC Comprehensive Framework for Disaster Management mentions 'civil society, private sector and other stakeholders' is to present them as service providers, casting them as depoliticised objects of government. This point is especially well illustrated by looking again at ASEAN's AADMER – the inspiration for the SAARC's NDRRM agreement – whose definition of assisting parties includes 'State(s), international organisation(s), and any other entity or person that offers and/or renders assistance to a Receiving Party or a Requesting Party'.⁸⁴ Finally, neither the SAARC Comprehensive Framework for Disaster Management nor the NDRRM mention any of the humanitarian-related United Nations resolutions that are usually referenced by international humanitarian actors – including governments and regional bodies such as ASEAN.⁸⁵ This omission might be understood as an attempt to limit the possibility of alternative expressions of authority within sovereign territories.

A last point of comparison: while all the national parliaments of ASEAN members have ratified the AADMER, overcoming the most difficult political barriers for an agreement of this nature, in 2014 only the Indian parliament has ratified the SAARC Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management.

It is fair to argue that the establishment of a very limited regional disaster management framework, with such an unusually long process leading up to it, was more the result of disagreements than agreements among SAARC members. SAARC's minimal contribution to disaster response and the lack of

purposeful institutionalisation and implementation of disaster management evidences the ‘consistent tensions within South Asia’,⁸⁶ the complicated framework in which humanitarian aid takes place in the region, and, perhaps, a trend towards a particular model of ‘statisation’.

On trust

A classified report from the Indian Intelligence Bureau that was leaked to the press in mid-2014 stated that NGO activities in the country had cost its economy between two and three percentage points of growth in India’s gross domestic product over recent years.⁸⁷ According to the Intelligence Bureau, NGOs – including well-known organisations such as Greenpeace, Save the Children and Oxfam – had been using ‘people-centric’ approaches that led to increasing opposition to development projects that were crucial for the growth of the country. Indirectly, the report accused international donors – the US, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries – of supporting ‘anti-Indian’ activities.

The Indian Intelligence Bureau’s report was a symbolic corollary of the evolution of the relationship between the Indian state and NGOs since the independence of the country. As Siddhartha Sen explains, until the end of the 1950s NGOs cooperated with the newly-formed state in its nation-building efforts; during the 1960s and 1970s, some NGOs started to antagonise the state, engaging in more direct action on pressing issues such as poverty, but the state still perceived civil society organisations as allies; and the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by an increased state control and, therefore, a constrained space for NGOs promoting alternative development models.⁸⁸ In what is defined as an uneasy partnership,⁸⁹ today New Delhi seems to be reacting against organisations it deems untrustworthy and too influential within Indian civil society, and most NGOs have adopted a pragmatic and uncritical – although reluctant – stance towards the state, creating a relationship of respectful mistrust.

Exercising its authority more broadly, India is renegotiating the terms of its relationships with a range of actors, in ways that reaffirm its position as a regional superpower. Aid organisations are included in this. Not by coincidence, on the same day that the Financial Times covered the Intelligence Bureau’s report, the London newspaper also published an editorial piece with the self-explanatory title, ‘India has every chance to outstrip China if it tries’.⁹⁰

In 2012, Justine Greening, the United Kingdom’s Secretary of State for International Development, announced that all financial aid to India would end in 2015. From that moment, Downing Street would consider India – the largest recipient of UK development aid for the last 50 years – a bilateral trade partner, not an aid recipient. For Ms Greening, India ‘is successfully developing

and shows the real, genuine change that is taking place in so many countries across the world’.⁹¹ The move of the UK government was not an exception. Since 2010, US annual contributions to development programmes in India have dropped 25 per cent, to under \$100 million. US government officials, like their counterparts in London, have begun to refer to India as a partner country.

New Delhi also used the term partnership for the new Development Partnership Administration (DPA),⁹² created in 2012 within the Ministry of External Affairs. The new Indian development agency would have a two-fold mandate: it would oversee aid flows to the country to avoid misuse of funds, and; it would coordinate the increasing aid from India to other countries. This was no small task considering that India plans to spend \$11.3 billion in countries such as Afghanistan and Ethiopia over the next 7 years, besides its many contributions to development and relief programmes for over a decade in Asia, America and Africa.

The redefinition of the terms of engagement between the Indian state and aid organisations (including donor agencies) goes beyond legal or administrative considerations; it has a direct impact on how humanitarian action – or, in the more politically correct term, disaster management – is understood and operationalised in the country. Moreover, this process of redefinition, towards a posture that is ‘fully enabling while instilling some discipline to civil society organisations’,⁹³ is not exclusive to India and can be observed in other countries in South Asia, where the deficit of trust between host governments and aid organisations has grown considerably during the past few years.

As Khan and Cunningham explain, ‘if the legitimacy of the state is rooted in part in willingness and ability to provide assistance to its own population, humanitarian action cannot but represent a challenge to the legitimacy of the state’.⁹⁴ Moreover, the principles often invoked by humanitarian organisations are not necessarily understood or accepted by local authorities, ‘resulting in alienation and miscommunication’.⁹⁵ Governments in Bangladesh, India and Nepal often perceive NGOs as competitors with their own agenda, and are not willing to accept their lead in disaster management. NGOs have seen local authorities as incompetent, short-sighted and not always driven by the ‘humanitarian imperative’. Meanwhile, UN agencies take a more diplomatic stance as facilitators, while still placing themselves close to the government, something that some NGOs reject as a compromise of independence.

This tension should not be understood to mean that South Asian states are questioning the existence of NGOs. In fact, the combination of patronage politics and the structural adjustment model, imposed by multilateral financial institutions over recent decades, has made governments in the region discard their ‘responsibilities for service provision and citizen accountability through the ‘franchising out’ of certain key state functions to NGOs and the private sector’.⁹⁶ In Bangladesh, for example, ‘state failure is a commonly

cited explanation for the growth of the NGO sector',⁹⁷ since it became clear that the newly created state wouldn't be able to meet the expectations of the rural communities. Of course, the support provided by foreign donors and the tradition of community organisations and voluntary action in the country were also important factors. However, there have been increased 'state efforts to control what were considered to be subversive and divisive activities of many NGOs, fuelled by Western 'imperialist' funding'.⁹⁸ Currently, Dhaka plans to update the foreign donation legislation with more restrictive conditions for NGOs and civil society, and is already setting in place long bureaucratic procedures for relief activities. Unsurprisingly, this situation triggers misunderstandings and conflicts, such as that experienced by the Humanitarian Country Task Team (HCTT) in Bangladesh after the Joint Needs Assessment was commissioned in the absence of the representative of the government of Bangladesh – the Secretary of the Disaster Management and Relief Division, and co-chair of the HCTT. What was explained by members of the HCTT as an accidental communication mistake, was for the Bangladeshi government a lack of respect and an attempt by aid organisations to bypass the state authority. Perhaps as a result of this, the Secretary of the Disaster Management and Relief Division was 'unavailable' to attend the next HCTT meetings, bringing about the virtual paralysis of a key humanitarian coordination mechanism, and raising doubts about the distance between the government and aid organisations.

Some NGO representatives interviewed considered that the mistrust could be reversed with a more honest assessment of their own capacity, and an acceptance that humanitarian organisations have to accept the government's leadership, not the other way round. So what should be the added value of UN agencies and INGOs in South Asia? Some interviewees agreed with the idea that humanitarian organisations should help set agendas, share technical expertise with government and local authorities, promote active citizenship for preparedness and response, and provide solutions that aren't feasible at community level. Before that, as an Indian NGO worker pointed out, 'NGOs need to have a clear agenda and plans and communicate them to the government'.

Similarly, an honest relationship is not possible when humanitarian organisations do not or cannot speak openly about sensitive issues such as the conflict in J&K and the situation of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, where the local authorities restrict access to certain areas and groups, and set conditions that threaten the impartiality of the assistance provided. As a country director of an INGO in Nepal said, 'advocacy is the missing link of our work'.

Conclusion

While the steady reduction of loss of life in disasters is an extremely positive evolution, the effectiveness of humanitarian response in South Asia has been handicapped by the expansion of dysfunctional state bureaucracies, patronage politics, and the 'de-humanitarianisation' of UN agencies and NGOs.

Emergency responses are often tailored to showcase the capacity of states to save the lives of 'desperate' citizens, to sustain patron-client relationships, and to amplify the perceived – not the real – impact of what often are unambitious programmes managed by international NGOs and implemented by local counterparts. Dysfunctional relationships between state authorities and humanitarian actors only worsen a situation of decreasing funding and capacities, and insufficient prioritisation of preparedness, prevention and recovery. This 'bottle-neck' at the governance and funding level makes it even more difficult for the needs and expectations of crisis-affected people to shape humanitarian practices and norms. As a result, 'the ultimate losers in the whole situation are the communities whose development deficits and vulnerabilities to disasters, shocks and turmoil continue to prevail despite all the good intentions, diplomacy of cooperation and policy euphoria'.⁹⁹

As David Lewis explains in his analysis of the concept of civil society in Bangladesh (also applicable to India and Nepal): 'while seeking to build and maintain strong patronage relationships, and directly or indirectly backed by the military, the state nevertheless remains weak in terms of citizen accountability, its capacities to provide welfare provisions or ensure an independent judiciary, to collect taxes or to represent the interests of the poor'.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, in India, 'the resultant trust deficit or lack of confidence in governance institutions has caused widespread anger and frustration, driving an important segment of the adivasi¹⁰¹ population towards the utopian Maoist ideology'.¹⁰²

The combination of state controls and NGO equivocation between confronting and complementing governments makes emergency response activities less relevant to the needs and aspirations of communities. As one humanitarian worker in Bangladesh explained, 'the relationship [between humanitarian agencies and disaster-affected communities] is still unbalanced' because 'decision-making relies on organisations rather than on affected people'. States and humanitarian organisations often see the needs of affected communities in a different way to the communities themselves. There are no efficient mechanisms to monitor changes in needs, and while communities are interested in the long term, donors only fund short-term projects, with responses becoming a simple matter of following standards. The evaluation of ECHO in Bangladesh even asks 'whether the [humanitarian] INGOs exist in Bangladesh, except in name only, and one or two token international staff'.¹⁰³

Many of those interviewed for this study felt that improved effectiveness of humanitarian action in South Asia is dependent in part on humanitarian

organisations improving their communication with affected communities, helping to empower them by increasing their awareness of their rights and entitlements. However, few believed this would happen as long as a charity approach prevails. Most interviewees agreed that it is key to involve affected communities in decisions so as to make sure assistance is not only about delivering materials to them, but also about helping to foster a hope that can overcome ‘the fear about what will happen with their children and their few properties’, in the words of an NGO worker in Nepal.

When asked if they trusted that the government and humanitarian organisations would help them to fully recover from the floods that destroyed their houses or livelihoods, very few people dared to answer. Perhaps they didn’t trust me either.

ENDNOTES

1. This report is based on field research in Bangladesh (Dhaka), India (New Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, and Odisha) and Nepal (Behri and Kathmandu) in November and December 2014, and a desk review of secondary sources. A total of 46 representatives of 8 local NGOs, 7 international NGOs, 3 UN agencies, 1 government agency and 1 international donor were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Group discussions with affected communities were conducted in 3 locations of India and Nepal. The report also benefitted from the author’s participation in the *South-South Humanitarianism Conference*, organised by the Jindal School of International Affairs (Sonipat, India 26-27 November 2014). The decision to focus the research on these three countries, among the eight that are usually labelled as South Asia, was based on questions of relevance (Bangladesh, India and Nepal were especially affected by the Monsoon floods in 2014), resources, time and security (internal Save the Children travel restrictions prevented the researcher from travelling to Pakistan, as planned initially). The report reflects on issues that shape understandings of effectiveness in Bangladesh, India and Nepal and impact upon humanitarian responses. Both the intended scope of the research and issues of feasibility determined the level of the analysis, placing some limitations on what could be covered but also offering the opportunity to address issues that are usually absent from non-governmental organisations or United Nations documents. The report is neither a systematic analysis of humanitarian effectiveness in Bangladesh, India and Nepal (even less in South Asia), nor a comprehensive review of the responses to the Monsoon floods in 2014. Nevertheless, this paper looks at the response to the floods to try to understand the actions and also the omissions of national and international actors. The report was written before the Nepal earthquake in April 2015, so the response to that emergency is not part of the analysis. Although the report can be read by itself, it is not intended to be a stand-alone document. The South Asia study, together with seven other studies, will be part of, and published with, a wider and more comprehensive study on humanitarian effectiveness. Drawing from the analysis of the seven field studies, the final report will discuss issues that remained unaddressed in this or the other country or regional reports. The author would like to thank Save the Children India and Save the Children International country offices in Bangladesh and Nepal for their support and guidance, the interviewees in the three countries for their time and feedback, and the members of the Steering and Advisory Groups for their valuable comments to the draft. The content of this report does not reflect the opinion of Save the Children UK. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the report lies entirely with the author.
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