RSIS COMMENTARIES

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Networked Resilience:
Moving the Asia-Pacific Forward

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Synopsis

As the United Nations moves towards cementing a Post-2015 agenda with the Sustainable Development Goals, how can Asia-Pacific states best achieve these? It is time to recognise our resources from across society to build stronger communities and more resilient states.

Commentary

SINCE MARCH 2013, the United Nations has worked on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an agenda to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which expire in 2015. At the UN General Assembly in March, the UN working group released a list of existing goals and targets like poverty eradication; preventing pandemics, child and maternal deaths; universal education; access to clean water and sanitation; sustainable cities and human settlements; responding to climate change; fighting corruption; promoting basic freedoms and participatory decision-making.

These are challenges faced across the Asia-Pacific and most pronounced after natural disasters and in the wake of armed conflicts. However, building resilience with the adequate political, social, technical and financial commitment are imperative for many developing countries in the region that may lose gains achieved with the MDGs if communities lose the capacity to contribute to their own development.

Community resilience: The missing link?

Recently, community resilience has entered the policy arena to link empowerment and accountability. It has visibly become the driver for disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation efforts. Community resilience dovetails with human security to focus on preparedness as a way to make sustainable, inclusive and innovative policy responses to the major challenges we face today. Yet there remain several challenges to turning these policy words into action.

A significant challenge and at the same time, a critical element of community resilience, is information and communication. Increasing awareness and communicating risk has become more technologically advanced and complex for people particularly in urban areas that are growing rapidly in the Asia–Pacific. Identifying the proper mechanisms for information dissemination and risk communication are necessary to effectively raise awareness in times of natural disasters and conflict. This is where open data programs like Google Earth, OpenStreetMaps and collaborative projects such as GeoNode, InaSAFE and the Open Cities Project powered

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by smartphones and GPS systems come in.

Maps generated through these participatory mapping programmes were widely used in response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and urban flooding in Indonesia as much as they were used for urban planning in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Many of these open data initiatives are being funded through the World Bank's Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR)'s Open Data for Resilience Initiative (OpenDRI).

Such information needs to be triangulated through dependable media platforms factoring in internet penetration rates – a significant hurdle in the region due to the wide variation in internet access. In some cases the mapping technology has had limited effect like after the 2008 Pakistan earthquake because not enough people were online to generate the necessary amount of data.

Indeed, knowing when a disaster will strike or where the greatest need is, is important. Yet this does not amount to effective resilience. Communities at risk may be located in areas vulnerable to earthquakes or typhoons, and recognising this is important to determine whether relocation is necessary or desirable. Empowering a community to propose their own solutions with government support anchors local knowledge and spurs creativity to generate long-term solutions. Ultimately, deciding to relocate an entire community highlights the need to balance what a community wants with the need to protect it from natural hazards and violence.

Towards responsible and resilient communities

The concept of community resilience focuses on responsibility and empowerment and leads some to argue it detracts away from the impact and importance of national governments. Rather community resilience seeks to redress the balance of responsibility away from government dependence and recognises what many communities are already doing. Indeed recognising the importance of the multiple stakeholders involved illustrates a complex web of decision-makers. It is decision-making at the most appropriate level which determines how resilient a state and its society is.

Decisions made by leveraging on a mix of community, local government, NGO and national government inputs will create more sustainable solutions. Building resilience through this networked approach ensures a holistic response, whether it be to an earthquake or volcanic eruption.

With a large number of natural disasters and conflicts across the Asia-Pacific, there are many crucial lessons and best practices for community resilience already on display. However expanding these lessons and replicating best practices into concrete policies and action still present challenges for resilience-building initiatives. Public-private partnerships are often promoted as a viable solution but in reality they are no panacea for the complex challenges after natural disasters or in conflicts. Indeed, the contribution of the informal sector bridges the gap where the public and the private sectors are unable to meet the immediate needs of communities at risk.

Furthermore, in the face of adversity, communities are already their own first responders administering first aid after an earthquake or distributing food to those in need. Ultimately though, government coordination and support, whether technical or political, is still paramount to successful implementation of an action plan that draws on different sectors and actors. Recasting resilience as networked resilience helps ensure that we recognise the roles and responsibilities of all those needed in better responding to disasters and building stronger communities for sustainable development.

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