

How does local government cope with disaster in Bangladesh?



*Successful coordination is an essential ingredient for Disaster Management. In the first of a two article series on human interactions with environment in rural Bangladesh, **Mohammad Tarikul Islam** examines the coordination in the comprehensive disaster management approach in rural Bangladesh under the auspices of local government (Union Parishad) and potential impediments to this approach.*

Bangladesh is undeniably the world's most disaster-prone country. Repeated natural disasters have destroyed the economic resource base of poor people and disrupted economic potential. Effective humanitarian coordination aims to ensure the best use of resources to achieve the most appropriate and relevant response to the needs of people affected by a crisis. The impacts and vulnerabilities created by disasters could be minimized through proper disaster management planning and by integrating disaster management activities with local and national development plans. It is apparent that effective coordination is an essential ingredient for Disaster Management. In this field, Bangladesh has gained credibility and repute across the world.

Practicing disaster management in Bangladesh

The Government of Bangladesh has taken a number of significant steps during the last few years for building up institutional arrangements from national to Union Parishad (UP) levels for effective and systematic disaster management, facilitating relief to the sufferings of disaster victims. To maintain proper coordination amongst the concerned Ministries, departments, line agencies, Local Government Body and community people, and also to ensure their proper functioning to mitigate sufferings of the people, the Government of Bangladesh has formulated a set of top down mechanisms from national to grass-root levels. For these mechanisms to operative, the [Standing orders on Disaster \(SOD\)](#) act as a guidebook. As per SOD, Disaster Management Committees are found to be in place starting from the National Disaster Management Council headed by the Prime Minister to the [Union Disaster Management Committee](#) headed by the Chairman of the UP.

In accordance with the SOD, the UDMC consists of 36 members while the chairperson of the Committee can co-opt a maximum of three more members and form groups and sub-groups depending on the local situation and special circumstances. UDMC has been given mandate to act as the rural disaster management entity and it is supposed to play role in disaster preparedness, mitigation, emergency response and post disaster rehabilitation. The UDMC must ensure that local people are kept informed and capable of taking practical measures for the reduction of risk at household and community levels and also disseminate the success stories of reducing disaster risks widely among the local people. They hold a hazard, vulnerability and risk analysis at Union level and prepare a [risk reduction action plan](#) (RRAP) and contingency plan for earthquake and other hazards. The UDMC facilitates coordination among the development agencies and service providers through quarterly coordination meetings and takes decisions about the implementation of action plans for risk reduction as well as reviewing the progress of the risk reduction action plan. It also works to raise funds at a local level to implement the risk reduction action plan.



Flooding in Southern Bangladesh Image credit: US Navy, [Public Domain](#).

Issues in inclusivity

Unfortunately, people in rural localities, particularly vulnerable groups have very limited access to UDMC's meeting deliberations and decision-making processes. This also suggests that the local vulnerable group members have very limited information about the role, mandates, and functioning of the disaster management committee on the ground level. There was no evidence of any role being played by [UDMC in a pre-disaster period](#). The general perception from the community level consultation revealed that, disaster risk management is still a secondary priority and not well integrated into different programmes being implemented by Union Parishad. Persons who manage and lead Disaster Management Committees are not expert in Disaster management but the SOD gave them authority to coordinate and manage disaster management efforts. Political leadership at local level is not involved to lead the disaster management and therefore, people's interest and sense of accountability are not reflected.

People who are exposed to greater disaster vulnerability are often deprived and are unable to access vital knowledge regarding what sort of disaster management programmes are planned and executed by the Upazila and District administration in Bangladesh. On the other hand, [Union Disaster Management Committee](#) headed by the Union Chairman has been in paper as chairman and other members are not well trained about the procedure of committee to run. Besides, [Upazila Administration](#) particularly Upazila Nirbahi Officer and Project Implementation Officer are not supportive to make the Union level Disaster Management Committee effective as resource allocated for disaster management is handled by both officer of the government.

Policy suggestions

For effectiveness of the UDMC to address the challenges of disaster preparedness, it must undertake the following measures: organise UDMC meetings on a regular basis both pre, during and post disaster phases; raise dedicated funds for disaster risk reduction; set up disaster warning station in each UP office; construct and maintain disaster shelter centres within the UP complex; form a volunteer team under each UP for emergency response; initiate training on disaster preparedness and emergency response; create social awareness campaign on disaster management; and ensure rapid and timely coordination. Beside these, community involvement in the process of hazard vulnerability and resources assessment, plan formulation and implementation of the preparedness and mitigation solutions leads to effectiveness of UDMC.

The community participation in UDMC activities builds confidence, pride and capabilities to pursue disaster preparedness and mitigation as well as development responsibilities at the local level. Capacity building and public awareness activities through UDMC enables the communities to increase participation and eventually, to sustain even on their own the preparedness and mitigation activities. Concerned government departments including the Department of Disaster Management, NGOs/INGOs, and the policy of including two women in each UDMC, does not go far enough to ensure that the needs and capacities of women are represented. There is no evidence or analysis available on whether women are able to participate and influence the UDMCs. Support and capacity-building of UDMCs is unmapped. There are a number of activities to build the capacity of the Disaster Management Committees but it is not possible to access this information or understand where committees are functioning and where they are not. Elected local government representatives at Union and Upazila levels are key actors for all field level [Disaster Risk Reduction](#) activities where resources are allocated at the national level through district administration. But in this highly populous country with multiple hazards affecting the communities round the year, the volume of allocated resources is not sufficient to support the initiatives.

There is a need to work with the government on establishing good quality information on “disaster events” in order to establish their scope quickly, and any gaps in the government’s capacity to respond. This should include strong advocacy on the importance of sharing information promptly (regardless of the need for assistance) and on the provision of a forum where information generated by non-government actors can be shared broadly. Effort should be made to consider the legitimacy of initiating coordination by mapping out how to trigger a coordinated approach to an event empowering Union Parishad, the first responder in disaster. The [international humanitarian community](#) must also ensure their efforts continue with more community focused interventions that relate directly to preparedness for coordinated response. However there is growing momentum and efforts to address this situation coming from the UN system, the INGOs and the donor community. An alignment of these efforts is also needed.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author



Mohammad Tarikul Islam is the Assistant Professor to the Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh. He previously worked at the United Nations for seven years on projects relating to local governance, democracy, disaster management, the environment and climate change. Professor Islam’s research and teaching interests are in local government, human security, conflict resolution and disaster nexus development. He can be reached at t.islam@juniv.edu