



AAPDA MITRA

A PRIME EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY BASED DISASTER MANAGEMENT



REFORMS THAT TRANSFORMED



NATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY
MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

AAPDA MITRA

FRIENDS IN NEED

Introduction

Aapda Mitra – a force of volunteers from across India trained in disaster response – is becoming a game changer in the field of disaster management in the country. The Aapda Mitra scheme is set to expand from its pilot status to become a people's movement for disaster response and risk reduction, putting India on the global map in the domain of Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction.



Over the last two decades, most community based efforts have been confined to disaster preparedness and contingency planning for the short term.

We need to expand the scope of community based efforts and support communities to identify local risk reduction measures and implement them.

Such efforts reduce risk and create opportunities for local development and sustainable livelihoods. Localization of disaster risk reduction will also ensure that we make the most of traditional best practices and indigenous knowledge.



- **Shri Narendra Modi**, Prime Minister
AMCDRR, 2016





Figure 1 - Aapda Mitra volunteers during a flood search and rescue training in Uttar Pradesh in 2018

Issues and Challenges

Meeting the 'golden hour' challenge

In most disasters, however, outside support cannot reach the affected sites immediately. For example, during the Sikkim earthquake in 2011, response teams could not reach in time because of the difficult terrain and inaccessible conditions. Similar situations have been witnessed in several disasters, where it becomes difficult or even impossible for response teams mobilised from outside to reach the affected sites in time. Even the National Disaster Response Force teams face this situation. Often, response teams from outside have been unable to reach flood-affected regions in good time because inundation of airports, railway lines and roads.

It is well known that effective response in the first hour following the onset of an emergency or a disaster increases the chances of survival of victims. Emergency response within this first hour, known as the 'golden hour', is of utmost importance.

The community as first responder

While communities at the site of disasters are the first to be affected, they are also themselves the first responders. Even if untrained, the fit and unaffected among the community would rush to help those affected around them anyway. Training them can maximise their effectiveness and provide succour to the people till formal aid arrives. As first responders in any disaster, trained and informed communities can play the very important role of SAVIOURS.

The Disaster Management Act came into effect in December 2005. However, after nearly a decade of its enactment, this most important activity of preparing our communities to respond to disasters was realised to require more focused attention.

People, as victims of disasters, are the first to respond, rebuild and disaster-proof their communities and lives. In the case of any disaster or emergency, before any government machinery and support reaches or outside help is galvanised, it is the community which can respond immediately.

As the community plays the role of 'First Responder', it is critical that there is adequate awareness and preparedness at the community level, especially amongst people residing in the most vulnerable areas of the country. The role of trained volunteer forces becomes very important in disasters and disaster-like situations. It has been observed that trained volunteers within the community are best placed to provide quick and effective response.



Figure 2 - Sanitation drives were undertaken in Kottayam district of Kerala in 2020



Figure 3 - Women volunteers of Odisha learning water rescue skills in 2018

Aapda Mitra – a Game-changing, revolutionary Scheme

Recognising the importance of volunteers in the field of disaster management, the Government of India, under the guidance of Hon'ble Prime Minister & Chairman of National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), focused its approach towards strengthening community preparedness. Initiatives undertaken by several countries in the field of disaster management involving community were studied. Several examples from around the world, where volunteerism has successfully contributed towards effective response in disasters, were also examined.

Aapda Mitra – pilot version

After due deliberations and analysis of various examples of community disaster management, Government of India conceptualised a scheme called 'Aapda Mitra' in 2015. The pilot for the scheme was launched in May 2016 in 25 flood-prone states at a cost of nearly Rs.16 crore. The initiative aimed to train community volunteers in the skills they would need to respond to their community's immediate needs in the aftermath of a disaster. These skills would enable them to undertake basic relief and rescue tasks during emergency situations.

Objectives

- To train able-bodied community volunteers in disaster response (flood relief and rescue) at the taluka/block level in each of the project districts.
- In addition to training the volunteers in life-saving skills, the scheme would also train them in disaster response, coordination and relief assistance.
- To create a community emergency stockpile/reserve at the district/ block level, containing essential light search and rescue equipments, medical first-aid kits, etc.

The states covered under the scheme are: Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal.

The training module consists of a combination of lectures, demonstrations and practical sessions over a period of 12 days. By the



“ I took part in the Aapda Mitra initiative in 2018 and received training on how to rescue people during a disaster, giving first aid, etc. During the floods in July 2018 in North Tripura, I took part in rescue missions and organisation of blood donation camps. Now, my team and I also impart training and conduct mock drills in schools to teach children ways to stay safe during a disaster.”

- Faruq Islam,

Aapda Mitra volunteer, Sepahijala, Tripura



Figure 4 - Aapda Mitra volunteers learning first aid techniques in Uttarakhand in 2017

end of the training, Aapda Mitra volunteers are able to act as First Responders during floods, operate flood rescue equipment and organize immediate relief measures.

To design the scheme and draw up specifications for equipment, the National Technical Committee (NTC) was constituted, drawing experts from National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), National Civil Defence College (NCDC), National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM). Other training institutions and experts were also brought in to impart specific practical training in flood relief and rescue.



“Aapda Mitra volunteers have been imparting training to others and are willing to cooperate in different situations. Through this initiative, we are empowering the community and inturn empowering ourselves. These volunteers are an asset, not only to the region, but to the country too.”

- K. Vijayendra Pandian,

District Magistrate, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.



Figure 5 - Women volunteers of Kolhapur district of Maharashtra during flood response in 2019

Girl Power

Women are more vulnerable during natural disasters as gendered norms and behaviours expected from women in most societies leave them with very little opportunity to acquire the skills and access resources to build their resilience to disasters. Empowering women by involving them in the disaster management process is important for



We must train a large number of women volunteers to support special needs of women affected by disasters.



- **Shri Narendra Modi**, Prime Minister
AMCDRR, 2016





“ During the floods of 2019 in Kolhapur district in Maharashtra, with the training that I received via Aapda Mitra, my team and I were able to rescue women and children. I have always wanted to help people and I feel proud to be part of India's first woman rescue force for the community.”

- Shubhangi Gharale,

Aapda Sakhi, Kolhapur, Maharashtra

reducing community vulnerability during disasters. The third point of the Prime Minister's 10-Point Agenda on DRR, under the emphatic heading of 'Women's Leadership: Greater Participation and Leadership of Women in Disaster Risk Management' highlights the same.

Under this scheme, more than 650 women from 16 states have been trained as volunteers. In fact, nearly 50 per cent of the trained volunteers in 'Aapda Mitra' scheme from Gujarat and Maharashtra are women, referred to by term 'Aapda Sakhi'. They have contributed immensely in search and rescue operations during disasters. For example, 'Aapda Sakhi' volunteers from Kolhapur, Maharashtra, were active in saving lives in the 2019 floods in that district and are currently working as COVID warriors, distributing food and educating the community on COVID-19 prevention methods.





Figure 6 - Volunteers of Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh during practical training of Aapda Mitra in 2018

Flood Response and Rescue

States like Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal have reported that the services of Aapda Mitras have been utilised for various disaster prevention activities, in addition to requisitioning of

their help to rescue stranded people during floods. Some select examples of such activities are listed here:

- a) Aapda Mitra volunteers were requisitioned for the Ganga Sagar Mela-2020 for crowd management in West Bengal.
- b) The volunteers were engaged in early warning dissemination and evacuation of vulnerable members of the community - like senior citizens, pregnant women, children, persons with disabilities and patients – in preparation for Cyclone Fani-2019 in Odisha.
- c) Volunteers from Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh saved the lives of 35 people in a boat accident in the district's Gola tehsil on 20 August, 2020.
- d) Aapda Mitra volunteers from Haridwar district of Uttarakhand saved 125 people from drowning in the Ganga river during Kawad Yatra 2018-2019.
- e) During the 2020 monsoon, Aapda Mitra volunteers from Kottayam district of Kerala saved the life of a 95-year-old woman, shifted her to the nearest relief camp and provided her food and medicine.



“ During the Kawad Yatra of 2018, one boy was unable to cross the Ganga river and got stuck in the middle. The public noticed that he was drowning and shouting for help. Luckily, we were there and ready! Along with Jal Police, we (Aapda Mitra volunteers) were able to rescue the boy. Till date, we have been able to save 175 lives.”

- Sunny Kumar,
Haridwar, Uttarakhand

From Disaster Volunteers to Corona Warriors

What started out as a centrally sponsored scheme focused on training community volunteers in disaster response in 30 flood-prone districts of 25 states of India gradually became a holistic programme which prepared communities not only for floods, but even for the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the nation began to be rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic, Aapda Mitra volunteers were ready to fight the crisis and undertook the initiative to prevent spread of the disease. Aapda Mitra volunteers in Kottayam (Kerala), Kolhapur (Maharashtra), Jagatsinghpur (Odisha), Sepahijala (Tripura), Purba Medinipur & South 24 Parganas (West Bengal), Supaul (Bihar), Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh) and Kamrup Metro & Jorhat (Assam) engaged in activities such as community surveillance to enforce lockdown, home delivery of essential items, logistics support in running and monitoring quarantine and isolation centres, and information dissemination and sanitation drives at public places in various districts to combat spread of the disease.



I received training from the Aapda Mitra initiative in 2018, in things such as what to do during an emergency situation, how to rescue people and move them to safer places, etc. This training proved to be extremely useful during the 2019 Kolhapur floods, when my team and I were able to rescue people.”

- **Shubham Katkar,**

Aapda Mitra Volunteer, Kolhapur, Maharashtra

Not only did Aapda Mitra volunteers generate awareness amongst the public regarding COVID-19, they also played the role of good samaritans, going beyond their brief. After three of Shantibala Nath's family members tested positive for COVID-19, her house in Sonai, Assam, was declared a containment zone. When Shantibala breathed her last on 11 July, there was nobody to conduct the last rites. Biprajit Paul Choudhary, field officer of Sonai Revenue Circle informed Aapda Mitra volunteers of the situation. Three of them – Nazom Uddin Choudhary, Sohid Ahmed Choudhary and Rosid Ahmed Choudhary – who knew how to handle burial as per the Standard Operating Procedure, volunteered to enter the containment zone and conduct the last rites for Shantibala.



Transforming the Future – building disaster response capacities in every nook of the country

Having witnessed the exemplary performance of Aapda Mitra-trained volunteers in various emergency situations, states and union territories have expressed a strong demand for upscaling the scheme, extending it to other districts and training more volunteers. NDMA's vision is to upscale the scheme in **350 districts** which are prone to landslide,

Outcomes

- *A country-wide force of trained and certified volunteers having the necessary knowledge and skills to take steps to prepare themselves, their families, their neighbourhoods, for flood relief and rescue.*
- *Trained volunteers able to undertake rescue operations in emergency situations, such as floods, flash-floods and urban flooding.*
- *Trained volunteers able to provide basic first aid to disaster victims affected in various ways.*
- *A 5,500-strong Aapda Mitra volunteer force in current existence, including more than 650 women volunteers.*

earthquake, cyclone and flood, and to train **1 lakh volunteers** across India, with maximum provision for women volunteers.

In order to take forward this approach of promoting volunteerism to strengthen the community, the Government of India has also taken a landmark step in accepting the recommendations of the 15th Finance Commission for creation of a separate funding window for preparedness and capacity-building activities for disaster management. Earlier, there was no such separate funding window. Such a facility can not only boost initiatives for upscaling the Aapda Mitras scheme, but also pave the way for more community-oriented initiatives.



Figure 8 - Women volunteers of Kolhapur district of Maharashtra during flood search and rescue training in 2019

Currently there are more than 5,500 Aapda Mitra Volunteers, including more than 650 women volunteers.

The Aapda Mitra initiative is ready to be expanded to cover more than 350 districts with more than 1 lakh volunteers, preparing the community in India to become more disaster resilient!



“India's motto is
'Reform, Perform, Transform'.”

Prime Minister **Shri Narendra Modi**