The NGO view: upskilling local people to avoid and manage disasters

Interviewer: Gareth Byatt – Principal Consultant, Risk Insight Consulting
Interviewee: Navneet Yadav – Programme Director, Doers

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Navneet,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about the work of Doers in India.
I am keen to hear about your work, and your thoughts about how to respond to the challenges local communities face to avoid disasters, and what more can and should be done to ensure they are equipped and trained to avoid disasters whenever possible and to minimise the impact of events and situations when they happen.

Can we begin this interview with an overview of your background and how Doers came into existence (I know you were founded in 2015), the actions you undertake, and examples of successes you have.

Navneet: Doers was formed in 2015 by a small group of young people who were already rendering voluntary services in the state of Himachal Pradesh in North India.

When the massive [earthquake in Nepal occurred in 2015](#), tremors were felt in this part of northern India (which borders Nepal) and people here in Himachal Pradesh realised they could also be impacted by a major event like this. We formed Doers to look at how we could manage disaster risks at a local level, by ensuring that development practices are risk-informed, rather than risk-blind. We adhere to [the UNDRR campaign of No Natural Disasters](#), and we also have synergy with the principles of the Disasters Avoided initiative.

Doers works in close coordination with the [Himachal Pradesh State Disaster Management Authority (HPSDMA)](#), DDMAs, local communities, civil society organisations and public and private institutions in Himachal Pradesh for a paradigm shift to apply the principles of risk-informed development, and enhance development planning decisions through thematic capacity development. Thankfully, with a growing awareness and sustained efforts in the area of DRM-related capacity development, a majority of the stakeholders in Himachal Pradesh are becoming well-aware of risk-informed development as the need of the hour.

We also know that we can all benefit from each other's knowledge, global and local, and we are all learning all the time. Sometimes we need to take action, sometimes we need to pause and reflect.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, Navneet. The Disasters Avoided team also adheres to the UNDRR campaign of No Natural Disasters.
We appreciate that, whilst local authorities and governments may have policies in place, managing all desired actions for risk-informed development and also what they have to respond to when a major event occurs can be a big challenge for them. The point you mention about agreeing how to implement and maintain risk-informed planning is interesting – it aligns to our Disasters Avoided model factors of "the right mindset" and "good governance".

Can local communities help to self-govern their own local areas, in coordination with local authorities who may be under pressure to keep on top of everything?

Navneet: Local communities have perhaps the most important role in reducing disaster risk and planning for it. There are many factors at play.

For example, a key message we are delivering to representatives of local government in the state of Himachal Pradesh is that we must collaborate to identify key economic sectors that are being hit at the micro-level, and those will be further impacted by climate-linked hazards in the near and longer term, such as extreme precipitation (which is something the state is increasingly at risk of). We are starting with a focus on key sectors to help prioritise what to do with a limited budget. When we can apply risk-informed planning properly, we can identify how to best safeguard lives, and biodiversity, against identified hazards.

To help support this approach we run a programme called 'STEP – Safety Through Emergency Preparedness', which provides training for local communities in essential skills to minimise the loss of lives as well as damage to property, and to assist each other through basic life support. We find that when we begin from a small scale with simple activities, it helps in getting communities together to then mobilise and engage them in larger, more structured processes such as community-led disaster risk management and climate change adaptation. We have applied this approach in different districts of Himachal Pradesh where our #STEP2Resilience workshops in local communities and schools have helped us build rapport with local stakeholders, and now we are planning to implement programmes that focus on key issues such as community-led climate action.

We have compiled relevant case studies of similar work carried out by communities elsewhere in Asia – we showcase these case studies as examples of managing flood risk through effective early warning systems and community preparedness. This helps us in engaging local communities in relevant discussions and emphasizing that just because they have not experienced such a disaster in their areas earlier, it doesn't mean it can't happen in the future.

It's important to show people that threats and hazards exist, and that we need to provide solutions on the ground to tackle things at the local level. Addressing vulnerabilities related to local infrastructure development, for example, can lead to solutions for practical ways of reducing the risks present. Ensuring a risk-informed approach to design and construction of retaining walls, as an example, can make a major difference in mitigating the impacts of floods and landslides on communities.

Gareth: Risk-informed development is also data-informed development, isn't it. Sometimes, small changes in a design can make a big difference. Crucial to making it work is the network of local practitioners and volunteers – the "first mile" of people to involve. Practical technology is good, and it has to be combined with a people-based network to work.

Navneet: A very important aspect of any initiative focused on avoiding a disaster is that we must "learn to count". We need to learn how to correctly measure the amount of exposure and identify the most vulnerable groups so that we can prioritise which groups or individuals we need to focus on. For instance, the top five among the deadliest flooding events in Himachal Pradesh could have been tackled differently had we paid attention to "who" lives "where". If we do a basic analysis of these events, elementary data from newspaper clippings will show us that a majority of people who perished and suffered in these flooding events were migrants. So, a key question is: what do we do to tackle this: how do we make these people visible?

I know that one of the components of the Disasters Avoided model is working with good quality data. We have an approach that we call DEEPRED, which is about creating an ecosystem for effective planning and response for disasters. Doers initiated this soon after the outbreak of COVID-19 in India. There were complaints from migrants saying that their names were not on the lists of affected people, putting them at an increased risk.

We realised that data collection processes and systems were not inclusive and effective (even before we consider the next step of data analysis). We sought to build the capacities of NGOs and government leaders on holistic and disaggregated data collection. It has turned out to be well received, as everyone — government agencies and civil society organisations alike — felt the need for improving the data collection processes.

When we talk about good quality data, agencies and organisations say that they collect it. But it is often too basic and does not provide a complete picture, neither about the exposure nor the vulnerabilities of local populations. We need to have good quality disaggregated data to figure out the real conditions that exposed people are living in. For example, if there is a group of people belonging to an ethnic or religious minority group, it is not just the hazards that put them at heightened risk. There may be several socio-cultural factors leading to discrimination, injustice, inequity and marginalization that are crucial for assessing the type and extent of their risk.

A key point for us is that these initiatives are taking place at the local level, and most of them are completely self-funded.

Gareth: In our work on Disasters Avoided, we attach as much importance to the local-level initiatives as we do to international ones. The self-funding model is a good point, which links to our model aspect on the right investment / funding. The examples of local level self-funding are hopefully relevant to local communities everywhere. When we can do so, linking up with government officials must of course help – it's a question of balance. We know that disaster threats remain, and all ways of finding innovative funding are key.

Navneet: One more thing to add to this. You mention the work of UNDRR. They focus on a [#ZeroClimateDisasters](#) campaign alongside other initiatives. Doers is a supporter of this campaign – we believe that an important aspect of planning for climate-related risk at the grassroots level is to not assume that interpretation and understanding of climate statistics is limited only to experts and top officials. It is important to have accessible tools and resources that can help even local communities and civil society organisations anticipate the risk climate change poses to their lives, livelihoods and overall wellbeing.

As a part of our flagship 'Climate Literacy and Action Program (CLAP)', we are using some really interesting tools and dashboards to help local communities and other stakeholders make sense of the climate data. One of the finest tools we use in our capacity development programmes is [ClimoCast](#) which is an easy-to-use resource developed by the Government of Japan. This tool requires just a little bit of guidance and orientation. When we discuss climate-risk related aspects with district-level officials, we take them through what this tool is all about and how it can be used effectively to anticipate better with the future climate change projections. We ask them to use ClimoCast to visualise what their district is going to experience in the future and determine whether there could be significant changes to how their crops grow and what crops are going to get hit by a changing climate if they don't change existing practices.

The Disasters Avoided initiative highlights examples of proactive action around the world to avoid disasters.   4

To build the knowledge and skills of the stakeholders, we frequently refer to some highly useful resources such as [WeAdapt](#) and [PreventionWeb](#). We also use other resources developed by agencies like NASA, such as [FIRMS](#) and [MODIS](#), which are very valuable to us, particularly in assessing the risks related to forest fires.

We don't need to share everything with local groups, but we can give people at the local level tools and techniques that can add value to their disaster risk management planning.

Gareth: The way we can all use good resources that are made freely available to us is a very good point, Navneet. The providers of tools and resources such as the ones you mention want to ensure that people around the world can use them. Some organisations such as NASA provide training and introductions to what they are about and how to use their solutions. When it comes to climate tools, they are not just for the IPCC and their scientists – we can all use many of them.

Navneet: We agree. Good datasets can make a huge difference at the grassroots level, especially in the context of risk assessment and planning for risk management. It is very important that such open-source tools and datasets are made available to the state and district-level stakeholders (for flood risk or forest fire risk modelling). As the common goal for everyone is to build the capacities of at-risk communities that are living at the forefront of these hazards, we at Doers, are trying to utilise the available decision-support tools and apply them at the local level.

*Another example of **#ICT4DRM** initiatives by Doers is the use of [KoBoToolbox](#), Google Earth Pro and other open-source tools for the geo-tagged Micro-mapping of critical facilities, infrastructure and resources at different levels. It helps in planning for disaster risk management through improving the decision-support related to preparedness and response. We have experienced through our work that we don't always need expensive tools to do this type of micro-mapping and planning; most of them are free / open-source solutions. What matters is how communities use them.*

Gareth: It's a poignant point you make, Navneet, about applying these tools and solutions at the ground level. People in the communities who know their local areas and can provide crucial insights to specific areas. They know what their local vulnerabilities are, and they can use these tools to help prevent and prepare for disasters, and respond quickly and purposefully when something does happen.

Navneet: This is right. When we implement these solutions with local communities, it has a positive effect on their confidence and they feel empowered to take the ownership and responsibility of processes related to disaster resilience and climate action. A good example of this is our work towards the promotion of Mental Health and Psycho-social Support to minimize the impacts of disasters on the communities.

*The program titled as **#MHPSS4DRR** is all about building the capacities of the communities in such a way that they seek psychiatric care to deal with post-disaster mental health issues only after the techniques to provide psychosocial support are not providing to be effective. Due to this, the communities are also understanding the stigma associated with mental health issues and are acknowledging their role in addressing the mental health issues in the initial stages of the problem.*

Gareth: I appreciate that there is a lot of disaster risk work ongoing at the national level in India. Does Doers work with other states in India?

Navneet: We do work in other states through partner agencies and institutions. We facilitate capacity development and training programmes in other states as well. To give you a couple of examples, we initiated a programme about five years ago for the capacity building of students not only from different states in India, but also from overseas, who undergo internships and fellowships at Doers. We also have an initiative called 'Connecting the Dots', which is about generating awareness and promoting dialogue on systems thinking approach and connecting the pieces of the sustainability puzzle. We typically deliver it in the form of workshops to engage young people in understanding the interlinkages between top-level international frameworks and agendas such as Sustainable Development Goals, Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the local-level actions that help achieve the objectives of these frameworks. We have developed various gamified learning activities to make the workshops interactive and enjoyable. We aim to show students how these interconnections are stronger than we imagine them to be.

Gareth: It's a very good point, Navneet, about understanding the strength of connections in an "ecosystem". It's also important that people know they can, if they want to, engage with people in national and international teams, including UN agencies. I know that UN agencies are very committed to supporting the education and involvement of young people.

Navneet: Recently, we held a Professional Development Workshop for young people and we talked about the importance of good case studies and lessons learned from everywhere. We discussed the UNDRR's #NoNaturalDisasters campaign and also cited the work of Disasters Avoided initiative. It's important for the students, especially at the Bachelors and Masters levels, to know how they can align their studies with these approaches and frameworks to build their careers in the fields related to disaster resilience and climate action. At the school-level, we are promoting the 'Comprehensive School Safety Framework' which is a holistic approach towards disaster risk management. The Framework has been developed by the Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector (GADRRRES).

Gareth: Young people can teach practitioners a lot, too. I have been a visiting lecturer for several years, and I always find it valuable to listen to feedback from students. Schoolchildren can help us broaden our perspectives, too.

Navneet: I agree. We typically have discussions with students about all aspects of disaster risks. For example, recently we conducted a 'Connecting the Dots' workshop with the students of Miranda House College in New Delhi and discussed the multidimensional risks related to misinformation and disinformation, which is highlighted in the ['Global Risks Report 2024'](#) published by the World Economic Forum (WEF). I strongly believe that young people can help us think of challenges and solutions that we may not otherwise think of.

Gareth: Talking about the World Economic Forum, we had a piece published by them in March 2024, which we hope people find of interest, called [Disasters will be less devastating if we plan for them](#).

Thank you very much for your time, Navneet. We look forward to seeing continued examples of your work to strengthen the capacity of local communities to prepare for, respond and recover from disasters.