

## COMMUNITY INITIATIVES IN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION:

Sanghamitra Service Society (SSS)  
Krishna Dt, Andhra Pradesh, India

Sanghamitra was founded in 1984 in Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh, India. It has



It has intervened to assist people affected by floods, cyclone and other natural disasters since 1989. In partnership with a number of NGOs in ten districts of Andhra Pradesh (AP) in South India, SSS works in over 100 villages. It was active in disaster relief and mitigation effort in 1993 cyclone which swept away many villages and Tsunami 2004. SSS is officially recognized by the Government of AP.

Almost 90% of Sanghamitra's operational areas and target villages are prone to cyclones and floods. SSS focuses on capacity building of community groups and women to cope with natural disasters by providing training in disaster preparedness and the ability to respond actively in the event of a disaster.

### Community Based Disaster Task Force



After tsunami SSS formed Disaster Task Force to protect the coastal areas and communities. The Task Force has an equal participation of women and men. The task force has developed a Contingency Plan in Telugu and formed an Executive committee to monitor the activities. Now they have the power of

decision making and participating in the entire process. This project is operational in 22 villages of 4 coastal mandals in Andhra Pradesh on community disaster preparedness.

**Involving women:** SSS was focussed on women's related initiatives into mobilising SHGs, HIV/AIDS awareness etc., now this is being expanded to Disaster preparation and mitigation effort. They are providing inputs for trainers on gender aspects.



**Recognition:** These trainers are now accepted, respected by the community and NGOs and they are invited to offer training across AP. Currently they provide training to NGOs, government and communities in Srikakulam, Krishna, West and East Godavari, Guntur and Vizag districts. They receive consultancy fee for these training programmes. 50% of the fee goes to common fund which they want to use it for

future activities and 50% goes for the trainers.

Women play major role in providing training, monitoring and sustaining the initiatives. The task force is recognised by govt/community/NGOs. During emergencies such as cyclone or flood these task forces help the communities and Government to respond effectively.

The training is practical and user-friendly. Government invites these task force teams for meetings, relief camps, relief distribution and *mandal* meetings. They are known in Government circles as good managers of emergency. Their effort is being appreciated by Relief Commissioner. They can train any batch of community leaders anywhere in the world. SSS is having a plan of federating the emergency task forces.

#### **Disaster Relief Fund (DRF):**

SSS has introduced an innovation to reduce the dependency. A disaster relief fund has been established that can be used in times of disasters. Their approach has an element of sustainability. They keep big tin boxes in shops and everyday shopkeepers and community members put a handful of grains every day into it. Once it is full they sell it and keep the money in the bank or use the grain in the time of emergency.

#### **Relief Fund in HIV/AIDS**

SSS also introduced Disaster Relief Fund in to their HIV/AIDS programme. This is the first time in Andhra Pradesh, any NGO has introduced relief fund for HIV/AIDS patients. Here peer groups collect food and other materials to the affected people. This fund is functioning for the last four years.

#### **Rating of Trainers:**

There is a system for rating trainers. This is an exercise for improving the standards and to provide a healthy competition among the trainers. At the time of writing this note, SSS was negotiating with District Authorities to issue identity cards for these training teams.

### **Improving Cyclone shelters**



Numerous Cyclone shelters were built with the support of the Commission of the European Community but fell into disuse due to total lack of maintenance and involvement of local communities. Therefore, SSS decided to repair and involve community and elected Panchayats to maintain and sustain these centres. They have a proper agreement with community and Panchayats to continue the programme for using these centres and maintaining them. In Krishna district SSS has repaired 4

such shelters. They are adding extra features like solar light, rain water harvesting etc. The repair work was done by community members themselves.

### **Partnership**

SSS has developed partnership with likeminded NGOs in coastal 10 districts. AP Coast Net is an effort by SSS that provides a platform for NGOs to come together on disaster mitigation effort. Their future plans include creating greater awareness in the villages where they work

and to continue this process in more villages, involving different stakeholders in this initiative.

### **Training Children**

Involving school children for responding to disasters is another key activity of SSS. Task forces are formed in schools and children are given proper training on how to respond in the event of any disaster. They get basic knowledge on First Aid and other kind of rescue and relief efforts. SSS sensitizes school authorities and facilitates the trained children and teachers to share their knowledge with other children and teachers.

### **Changing the Role of Women**



After involving in Disaster Task Force as trainers women keep leading the group by showing their sincerity and commitment. Even the men's groups admit that women have gained higher respect in the community and people are good listeners in their programmes.

Take the case of Malleswari, a good leader who has risen after the formation of task force. She had not attended any meeting in her village earlier. After involving in this initiative, she is very much confident; is respected in her own community and outside. Earlier women were not coming outside of their houses. After seeing Malleswari and other women leaders, women are slowly coming out of their shell. They now attend meetings, speak out, visit various villages, etc.

Approach of traditional men leadership in the village also has changed considerably. They are slowly accepting women's role in society. They recognise women are more effective than men and they understand women's role in society is changing and they have to give way to women to provide them an opportunity to lead from the front. Men's groups acknowledge that women have more patience and skills than men.

### **Eco-system Rehabilitation and Livelihood Reconstruction**



Developing mangrove with the community involvement to reduce the dependency of fisher folks using for fuel, wood, foliage and cattle is a good initiative taken by Sanghamitra. This project was started two years ago and it covers 30 hectares of degraded land. It formed mangrove protection committees and has given the responsibility to the villagers to protect the environment. To reduce the dependency on mangroves, women have been given guidance about alternative forms of income

such as fish vending, pickle making, salt making and trading, along with gender-awareness training and entrepreneurship development.

By constructing houses for the fishermen, SSS also has taken another step to ensure that fisher folk would not use Mangrove for their day to day needs and for constructing their houses.

This initiative emphasizes restoration of critical eco-systems which support livelihoods while simultaneously providing economic security to the coastal communities. Awareness generation on conservation and management of coastal resources are at the core of the work of SSS in these areas. This programme focuses on mainstreaming gender needs and targets *Dalit* communities in designing and implementing these initiatives. Through SSS motivation and awareness camps, approximately 5000 people have been made aware of the importance of mangroves.

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