School Safety Programs in Sikkim – an RCE Srinagar Initiative

Sikkim is small landlocked state nestled in the eastern Himalayas of India. As with most Himalayan states, Sikkim is vulnerable to multiple natural hazards. One of the most devastating natural disasters to strike the little state was the earthquake on 18 September 2011 measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale. Ever since, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) has found new meaning and relevance for the people of Sikkim. It has attracted renewed focus and interest in enhancing capacities and reducing vulnerabilities for future safety. Keeping in mind the lack of awareness about DRR in the state of Sikkim, RCE Srinagar along with CEE North-East, the Kanchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC), the Sikkim Government Department of Education and two interns from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), sought to facilitate education and communication processes in the field of DRR in Sikkim.

Awareness programs have been completed in two of the four districts of the state and will soon be carried out in the other two districts as well. Programmes were conducted at Government Secondary School, Yuksum, Palkhan Academy, Gangtok, and Tashi Namgyal Senior Secondary School, Gangtok on 24th Feb, 1st March and 29th Feb, 2012 respectively. The programmes received overwhelming response from students and teachers alike. Over 400 students from Yuksum and 670 students from the two schools at Gangtok eagerly participated in the programmes. The programmes followed a well-defined structure addressing the multi-pronged approach towards disaster management and risk reduction.

The students were first asked to share their understanding of hazards and disasters and the difference between the two. They were then introduced to these concepts by the CEE team. In addition, they learnt about the fragile Himalayan ecosystem, types of disasters, their occurrence, the movements of tectonic plates, basic 'dos' and 'don'ts' in disaster situations, disaster management and preparedness and finally, school safety programmes. The students agreed that while they could not control disasters, they could definitely be better prepared to deal with the aftermath of such events. This belief led them to participate enthusiastically in a series of DRR exercises. Some of them are:

Fire safety drills: focusing on types of fires, components of fires, techniques for using fire extinguishers and the use of water / sand to treat different types of fires.

Safety mock drills: to practice the 'drop, cover and hold' drill, to learn how to differentiate between hazards and 'what kills', to understand about weak construction and structural hazards, to learn how to manage time, chaos and panic in emergency situations.

Preparation of school maps and evacuation routes: participatory maps, using local resources, were drawn to identify emergency evacuation routes.

The maps helped the students to identify safe locations within the school and also analyze their school locations to decide whether or not their locations and building were safe. In addition, they learnt about handling panic and stampede situations.

Emergency lifts: students learnt about simple stretchers and safe lifting techniques to carry the injured. They learnt that untrained methods can intensify injuries. They practiced the methods with their friends and had the opportunity to rectify mistakes.

Health during emergencies: focusing on first aid administration, first aid kit, its composition and significance.

Simulation of emergency situations: these were used to learn about various essential aspects such as food, water availability, need for search and rescue operations, damage assessment, communication and co-ordination, medical emergencies in the absence of medical services etc. The students also decided to form emergency response teams for future safety.

Water and sanitation: students learnt about personal hygiene, the use of soap and water, and precautionary measures to be taken during emergency situations when there is acute crisis and resources need to be consumed wisely. They also learnt about water-borne diseases.

Installation of *nuki-ita*: a simplified extensometer for detection of the landslide displacement vector. It is suitable for rapid installation and even can be very useful in emergency response. During the investigation of the school periphery some cracks were found on the hill slope and accordingly a *Nuki-ita* was set up with the help of students to monitor the cracks.

Information, Education and Communication (IEC) material on disaster education developed by CEE Himalaya was shared and distributed to the schools. Teachers were advised on how to use these materials and it was interesting to note students' reactions to the colorful, animated cartoons and stories regarding disaster preventions in the DRR education kits.

The programmes were successful in sensitizing and educating children as well as school teachers and management boards in understanding the scope of DRR in their lives. The schools have decided to work on 'school safety plans' and form 'disaster management teams'. They have sought assistance for the same. ***Nuki-ita*** is now a social science practicum for tenth standard students in one of the schools. It is hoped that the IEC material (Risk land, CO2 Pick Right!, Disaster Prevention Planner and a manual on Earthquakes) that they have received will aid learning and arouse curiosity to delve deeper into the subject of DRR for a safe and prosperous future.

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