

Abstract

Session name: Urban resilience and climate change adaptation strategies in South East Asia

Title of the paper: Challenges in disaster recovery and water and sanitation development in Northeastern India.

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This research paper explores the crucial impact of recurring and multiple disasters on drinking water and sanitation facilities and recovery of services post-disasters. This paper addresses a significant research gap in the understanding of community recovery priorities and changes in behavioural practices in water and sanitation. This understanding contributes to the existing government schemes and humanitarian NGO response programmes. This research explores approaches for building community resilience in WaSH during recovery using a case study from North-eastern India, Assam. Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) tools, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, photographs and documents are used to gather qualitative data. The analysis provides an understanding of WaSH during recovery at different scales including households, communities, governments and humanitarian agencies.

The empirical findings show that changes in hygiene practices, access and availability of WaSH facilities can be improved through learning and participatory processes initiated and sustained through agency support. Another significant finding is that during recovery water supply was prioritised over sanitation and hygiene, overlooking gender aspects and menstrual hygiene. The government and agency action overlooks rehabilitation of water and sanitation facilities post-disasters. Thus an opportunity during recovery to influence WaSH practices and to address open defecation challenge is missed. Moreover the communities do not prioritise water and sanitation as important needs such as shelter, land security and protection of farmlands, livelihoods and homesteads from floods are unmet.

This research argues for increased attention towards community recovery and longer-term development post-disasters. Concentrated efforts and focus on water and sanitation will help in transforming pre-existing WaSH practices and attitudes towards sanitation. This thesis concludes that recovery programmes should consider the pre-disaster practices, recovery and development plans for building community resilience. This revised and integrated outlook towards disaster recovery can help in tackling the existing social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges faced in the north-eastern India.