



Building construction practices prevalent in Afghanistan are based on unengineered and non-reinforced mud, and lack adequate strength. This applies to school buildings too, thus putting school children, particularly in the earthquake prone northeastern parts of the country, at grave risk.
Photo: SEEDS, Bamiyan, 2004.

School safety as part of post-conflict reconstruction

Community based disaster management, Afghanistan

Introduction

Afghanistan frequently experiences disasters such as earthquakes, floods, sandstorms and extreme winter. What makes the response and recovery processes difficult is the low capacity left after more than two decades of wars and internal conflicts. As part of the community, schools and school children suffer from both disasters and post-conflict hardships. School buildings are weak, old and poorly maintained. Infrastructure is very poor, and there are hardly any resources with the local administrators to improve things. Most crucially, knowledge resources on mitigation and preparedness are extremely scarce.

In 2003, under the arrangement with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Department of Disaster Preparedness (DDP) of the Government of Afghanistan, SEEDS carried out the consultation process for the preparation of National Disaster Management Plan for Afghanistan. The following year SEEDS worked with UNAMA and DDP for dissemination of the National Plan towards Community Based Disaster Management in Afghanistan. The dissemination activities included awareness and capacity building of line ministries, provincial and district governments, and schools. The school component was important as this was viewed as the critical link between government plans and community initiatives.

Project brief

The school safety activities were held in Nangarhar High School in Jalalabad in 2005 as part of a larger community based disaster management programme. The activities were effective in raising general awareness of safety issues related to disasters and specifically about earthquake safety in schools. More importantly, the initiative generated much interest in the government machinery and local NGO and education community. SEEDS has subsequently produced a range of educational material for school safety for wider use in Afghanistan. This is currently being disseminated through national government and NGO partners.

The objectives of the project were to:

- introduce concepts of disaster management to school teachers and students
- orient teachers and students on their role during a disaster
- form a Search and Rescue Team of students and provide training to students on various rescue methods
- form a First Aid Team of students and provide training to students on first aid
- develop an evacuation plan for the school and train the teachers and students to implement it

The sequence of activities followed in at the school level is as follows:

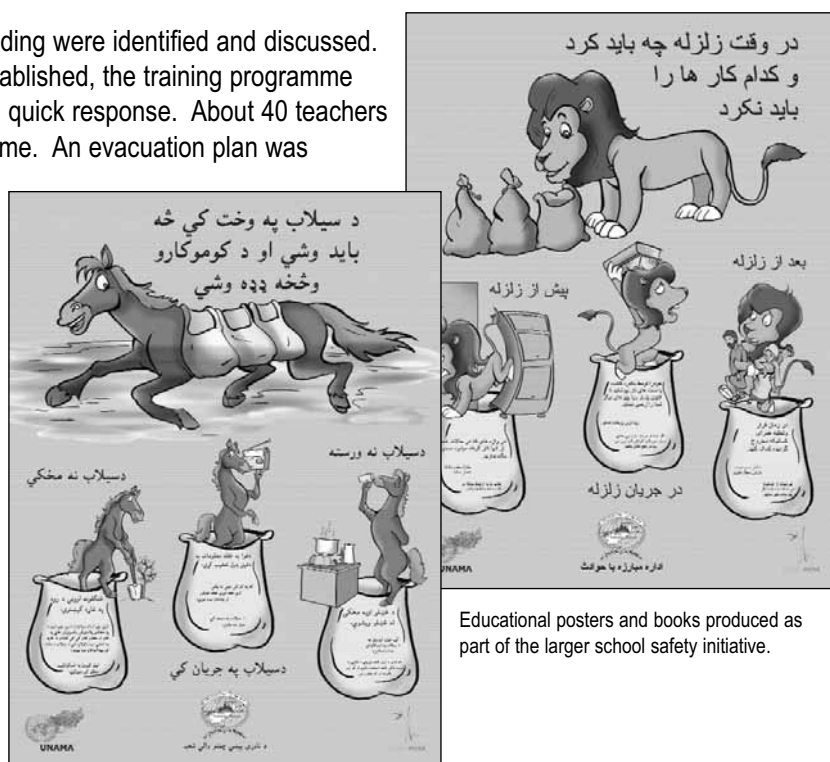
- Survey of the school buildings and preparing a disaster evacuation plan
- Providing orientation and training to teachers
- Providing orientation and training to students
- Formation of a Search and Rescue Team of students and providing its members training in appropriate tools and techniques
- Formation of a First Aid Team of students and providing training
- Conducting rehearsal of evacuation
- Final demonstration of evacuation, search and rescue and first aid by students

The structural and non-structural hazards were identified in the school building and were discussed with the school administrators, teachers and students. The major hazards identified in one specific school building in Nangarhar are listed below:

1. The main gate of the building has door shutters that open inwards. This can cause casualties due to crushing in the eventuality of a mass exit when it may be difficult to open the doors quickly
2. The main gate of the building is narrow, which can constrict mass exit
3. The second door in the building exists at the end of the corridor, but the door is usually kept locked and blocked. It is necessary to keep this door open and unblocked for using as an emergency exit. This makes it inoperational as an emergency exit
4. The class rooms are overcrowded, accommodating almost twice their seating capacity. This creates an imbalance in the number of occupants and the capacity of the evacuation system
5. Class rooms have only one door each. This is inadequate as there will be no means of exit if falling material blocks the door
6. Outer walls have wide windows. Wide openings in wall reduce the strength of wall against earthquakes
7. In some class rooms the beam is positioned very close to the window. Such beams are vulnerable to earthquake shaking

Structural and non-structural weaknesses of the building were identified and discussed. Once the need for appreciating such issues was established, the training programme was conducted. It covered hazard identification and quick response. About 40 teachers and over 1,200 students participated in the programme. An evacuation plan was prepared for the building, and the students were trained in systematic evacuation. Ten students were trained in light search and rescue and ten in first aid. It is expected that the awareness provided to the students will also reach their parents.

A wider awareness programme was launched for addressing school safety needs. Posters and books on school safety were produced in different local languages, and are being disseminated to about 2,000 schools across the multi-hazard provinces of the country. A Radio programme on "Disaster Awareness for Schools" is also being developed for a wider outreach.



Educational posters and books produced as part of the larger school safety initiative.

Lessons learned

Community based disaster management forms the backbone of any disaster management initiatives in societies with low government capacity, as is the case in post-conflict situations. The only way for Afghanistan to be able to better respond to and be prepared for disasters is to build the capacity of its people along with its government systems. Schools are one of two nerve-centres of the afghan community, the other being the Shura, or community council. Disaster mitigation and preparedness messages going to schools will not only help make schools safer and communities wiser, but will also aid the overall recovery process and help the community emerge from the trauma of over two decades of violent conflict. The current project covered only 1,200 students, which is a very small number considering the population that needs to be reached out to, but it is a beginning that holds promise of change. In the absence of such work, schools will continue to suffer from disasters and will take decades to recover from the effects of conflict. The involvement of the national government and its will to take up school safety as a large scale programme is a positive element.

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