

# Citizens of Delhi lead resilience action<sup>1</sup>

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## Keywords

Governance, Urban resilience, Youth engagement, ICT for disasters, Citizens action, Urban risk management

**This paper forms part of a the DRR2DEV programme including a range of case studies, discussion and analysis and inviting further participation in thinking critically about how to do development differently and better.**

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## Summary

The city of Delhi, India's national capital is exposed to range of risks on account of its location in a river basin and proximity to an active seismic fault-line. Risks cover a number of vulnerabilities – population growth, unemployment, social in-equity, poor quality housing and public services leading to 'everyday disasters' that cumulatively contribute to greater loss and suffering than sudden onset events.

To address the challenge through a comprehensive approach, SEEDS mobilized a citizen's *Disaster-Watch Forum*, key influential individuals in the most vulnerable East District of the city. These individuals comprised representatives of existing local neighbourhood associations, academicians living in the area, retired government officials and youth.

The Forum engaged with local government through positive collaboration, and action. As run-up to the engagement process, a number of activities were undertaken, with SEEDS providing technical and hand-holding support. Activities included - baseline/risk analysis, vulnerability, capacity assessment followed by development of a road map. A number of workshops and meetings were held with different existing groups such as women groups, elected leaders, elderly and neighbourhood associations. Community action groups as sub-groups within the Forum were mobilised. These action groups would focus on efforts in a smaller neighbourhood or area. A cadre of youth volunteers was mobilised and provided with special skills on risk reduction tools, including use of ICT.

A bottom-up "pressure" was created on various line departments of the local government through a pro-active approach, where citizens took upon themselves part of the civic services. Media, especially social media, was smartly used to confront the Government when needed.

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The premise of forming the Forum was to facilitate a dialogue between the local government and citizens to bridge the gap between policies and practices at the district level. A healthy partnership is now in place. There are regular interactions leading to improvement in service delivery, improvement in grievance redressal and mutual support activities in public programmes

It took considerable time for the Forum to take shape and take lead on the agenda. Initially, mobilising citizens to come together for Forum and its objectives was a huge challenge; this was even more difficult with youth and children. Once the Forum came in place, the next big challenge was to be able to earn the trust of the local government. Looking back, the process and investment has yielded more than the desired results. Through the citizen’s forum, we have been able to build a strong awareness and interest around risk reduction issues, even evolving to influence large developmental issues.

### **The Study Context – what was the challenge faced?**

New Delhi, India’s national capital city is a typical microcosm of India’s burgeoning urban population representing the challenges and opportunities that are associated with a developing economy.

The city also has its fair share of exposure to risks on account of its location in a river basin and close to an active seismic fault-line. The definition of risks takes a broader dimension in such a context, however, as a number of vulnerabilities – population growth, unemployment, social in-equity, poor quality housing and public services lead to ‘everyday disasters’ that cumulatively contribute to greater loss and suffering, than, for example rare sudden onset events.

The city is divided in twelve administrative districts of which the East Delhi District is at highest risk. This district is highly prone to floods in the River Yamuna. The flood plains, that were a ‘no-go’ area fifty years ago, witnessed rapid development with squatter settlements taking over the vacant land. Corrupt public systems allowed this to happen until population reached un-manageable proportions. Currently, the area has among the highest residential densities in the world; there is no regard to safety in buildings and infrastructure. Public services are inadequate and often overstretched. This has led to poor levels of public health. Every year there are large number of cases of vector-borne diseases like dengue, malaria and diarrhoea. The high density of population coupled with socio economic backwardness increases the vulnerability towards various disasters. On the other hand, the local governance structure is made up of a complex web of agencies with overlapping jurisdictions and powers. This has created a scenario where response from the public agencies is mired with knee-jerk responses, and pass-the-buck syndromes. The fact that much of East Delhi is “unauthorised” since people had initially settled without “buying” land, becomes an alibi for local government to provide less than optimum services. Communities are un-organised, poor and with large scale under-employment. This often reaches tipping points with incidents of crime and abuse.

<b>Hazards</b>	<b>Major Occurrences</b>
Earthquakes	
Floods	1924, 1947, 1955, 1956, 1967, 1971, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1988, 1995, 1998, 2008 and in 2010
Fire Accident (Causes)	2004 (3 incidents), 2005 ( 7 incidents)
LPG Cylinder Blast	2004 (1 incident)
Chemical Fire	2004
Earthquakes	1992, 1993 (2 incidents) 1994, 2004 (4 incidents), 2007
Floods	1980, 2008
Building collapse	2008, 2010

Epidemics	1955-56(Infectious Hepatitis ) 1996 (Dengue); Cases of Chikenguniya, Diarrhoea, Dengue now reported every year
Road accidents	Current figure not available
Metro Mishaps	2008

## Enabling Citizen-Led Action for risk reduction and resilience

For SEEDS as a non-profit organisation working in the sector, addressing risk related problems in an urban setting posed a challenge. Unlike urban areas, rural communities, besides being small and defined by geography are also homogenous and better organised. In urban areas, besides complex governance mechanisms, citizens have migrated at different points in time, coming from different locations and prioritize employment at the cost of sub-standard living conditions and associated risks.

Establishing a citizens' forum to address local risk related problems was an experiment. It had not been attempted before in the country. The idea took inspiration from successful elements of community managed disaster risk reduction projects in rural contexts. Also, similar urban examples of "Rotary Clubs" and other such institutions provided some guidance on the distinct nature of organised citizen groups in urban areas.

Moreover, risk reduction and disaster prevention is not an exclusive portfolio or department in local governments. At best, it is counted as a "preparedness" exercise by public emergency services.

Hence, setting up a collaboration process between communities and local government was the most logical way to address challenges especially around extensive risks that cause every day disasters.

In October 2010, following a detailed stakeholder analysis, the "Purvi Dilli Apada Prehari" (*English Translation: East Delhi Disaster-Watch Forum*), was mobilised by identifying a few key influential individuals in the East District of Delhi. These individuals comprised representatives of existing local neighbourhood associations, academicians living in the area and retired government officials. The venue of the first meeting for the Forum was deliberately chosen at the office of the head of the local government.

Thereafter, a series of meetings were organised with other local groups and local government officials to shape the Forum in the district. Continuous efforts were made through discussions and interactions with members of the Forum to build a common understanding on risk related issues and its relevance in society for local actions. Secondly, efforts were made to build a perspective on building citizen and government partnership for leveraging and directing public resources to minimise locally assessed risks.

In the initial setting-up stages the following key processes were taken up by the Forum, with technical support from SEEDS:

- Baseline/risk analysis, vulnerability, capacity assessment. This helped in people understanding that combating risk related issues provided a strong protection for their daily livelihood and living.
- Developing a road-map of actions based on the risk analysis. This was done through a series of action planning workshops
- Actively seeking involvement of existing women groups, elected leaders, elderly and neighbourhood associations.

- Identifying of community action groups as sub-groups of the Forum. These action groups would comprise members of a selected small neighbourhood within the East District, and would focus on efforts in their area, under the larger road-map developed by the Forum
- Making citizens aware of risks and how to address them through actions within their homes
- Creating a cadre of youth volunteers and providing special skills on risk reduction tools, including use of ICT

Overall, the process ensured there is a positive collaboration between citizens and local government. On behalf of the citizens, the Forum was able to articulate specific needs where risks were high, and provided credible evidence for the same; the Government on their part created a listening and engagement space for such citizen action, and dovetailed their existing budgets and programmes to address highlighted needs.

A bottom-up “pressure” was created on various line departments of the local government through pro-active action, where citizens took upon themselves part of the civic services. Media, especially social media, was smartly used to confront the Government when needed.

A healthy partnership with the local government and citizens is now in place. There are regular interactions leading to improvement in service delivery, improvement in grievance redressal and mutual support activities in public programmes.



### **Mobilising the community**

#### **What was effective**

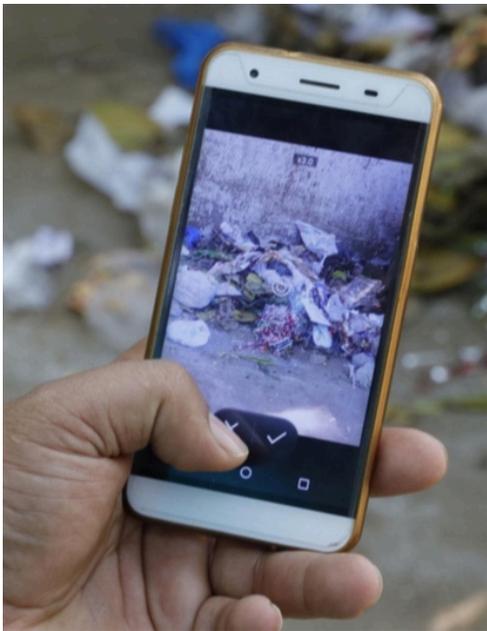
The premise of forming the Forum was to facilitate a dialogue between the local government and the citizens to bridge the gap between policies and practices at the district level. The deliberations through convergence workshops and other bilateral discussions have strengthened the connection between the citizens’ forum and the district government; ensuring inclusive developmental agenda with integrated risk reduction measures. The local level actions both by communities and government have set a good practice of the local level partnerships and level of complementarity.

Continuous hand-holding was carried out by the SEEDS team. Technical inputs were provided; training workshops were organised with Forum members, for example, on the use of legal mechanisms on accountability, e.g. making use of the Right to Information Act, to extract information from local government on their budgetary allocation for public services.

There have been useful spin-offs as the initiative has helped create an alliance of aware citizens, who have recognized the need to address underlying vulnerabilities, prioritizing actions that help in reducing stresses.

The alliance is benefitting 50,000 citizens in the area. This includes 90 members who are active in the Forum.

The 214 youth volunteers provided the “hands and legs” to Forum’s agenda. They quickly absorbed learning from specially organised training programmes on preparedness and prevention. Invisible risks – that of bullying, street-side violence, and even domestic violence became part of the discussion. The youth became active providers of credible geo-tagged evidence that formed the basis of addressing areas such as poor public service delivery and safety and security issues for women.



**App for youth reporting**

### **An App for Advocacy**

Local youth came together on a virtual platform through a specially adapted mobile application. The application served as a social media platform except that it was a closed group with membership open to those whose were pre-verified. As a user, they could take pictures of potential high risk areas in their neighbourhood. Pictures would get geo-tagged automatically. They could add their notes on what they saw in form of a blog attached to the picture. Specific time-bound campaigns were carried out to address one type of problem at a time. A successful intervention was around loose hanging electricity wires that had led to a number of cases of accidental electrocution in the past. When data from a number of different users in the same area was consolidated - it provided a strong evidence both visual and narrative and locations clearly marked. In this case - the city’s electricity company took it seriously initiating immediate action. And yes, they thanked the youth for bringing the problem to their attention.

The 140 members of the Community Action Groups act as torch bearers to identify local risks and mitigate those risks in their own localities. These groups include women, children and youth; who are the most vulnerable of these communities.

SEEDS team, with funding made available from its donors, provided seed funding to the Forum to implement tangible ideas on risk reduction. The Forum came up with demonstration projects like Closed Circuit Television cameras being installed in public spaces, to be used for surveillance in neighbourhoods that reported frequent incidents of violence against women.

Overall, the bundle of activities carried out with the Forum has helped to bring in cohesiveness amongst the communities combating the common problems of urban stresses. Other local organizations have also joined in. Local cultural groups, sports clubs have associated themselves with activities of the Forum, reinforcing the credibility and outreach of the Forum and its activities.

## **Looking Back: Challenges and Lessons Learnt**

When interacting with communities - a large number of them having migrated to the city for work – it has been extremely difficult for the team in SEEDS to mobilize individuals who could devote time for the

### **Building Bridges**

Bringing disparate community groups, that have arrived in the city at different points of time, was a challenging task. For SEEDS team members, it meant having innumerable one-on-one meetings with locally recognised leaders of each community group. It also required understanding their culture, their preferences and possibilities for cooperation with other groups in the same neighbourhood. We observed, groups came together when they realised they had common set of civic problems to share. And that solving a civic problem that affected them required a larger group effort. Small group meetings led to creation of a group of committed influential leaders, who became prime mobilisers for a greater citizens' platform.

community activities. The team made considerable efforts in having one-on-one dialogue with key individuals in their homes. This was followed with small group meetings, where local influential leaders were invited.

Ice-breaking and motivating youth and children was a challenge. A number of socialising activities were planned before the project related agenda could be taken up. Exposure visits, fun activities, friendly discussions, art and craft workshops were all part of trust building work.

Getting a favourable response from the local government and line departments was a challenge. The public officials wouldn't take efforts by citizens' seriously until specific engagements and meetings were planned and results demonstrated. Further, with change of the local government officials, the relationships had to be re-established thus delaying further action. Mutual understanding and trust was gradually built when the Forum members stepped in to support Government's efforts where needed. E.g. crowd control during major public events. This was well received and reciprocated by the public officials by recognizing citizen efforts.

### **Citizen Pressure and Government Action**

Citizen pressure has led the Municipal Corporation becoming pro-active in their solid waste management and cleanliness programmes in the area. A huge problem otherwise and a major cause for epidemics such as Dengue and Chikenguniya every year and occasionally leading to local flooding. Neighbourhoods are cleaner and waste disposal is better managed this year. SEEDS team provided technical assistance and tools in articulating needs and solutions. The citizen forum advocated for these needs and offered to jointly monitor attendance and performance of municipal workers in their neighbourhood. The forum even publicly recognised and rewarded public officials who performed well. Access to Mayor's office and other elected representatives was leveraged to clear bottlenecks in the system and expedite service delivery. "Naming and shaming" was effectively used to build accountability in public service leading to better delivery.

Creating alliance of citizens has been challenged by the reluctance of the citizens to take up ownership of the Forum. To continuously maintain their interest requires Forum to prove its worth through initiatives based on commonly felt needs. Local vested groups played their role in disrupting unity of the Forum and

its actions. There were also fears that the Forum may become too political thereby losing its USP as a constructive collaborator with technically sound credible group of citizens. The Forum required strong and self-less leadership to overcome biases. For this, leadership training was essential part of the handholding exercise carried out by SEEDS. Elections were conducted by the Forum and the new leadership has been much more responsive to needs of the citizens. Lately, the Forum has been able to charge a subscription from its members contributing in part to its financial sustainability. In the process the Forum has evolved as a strong and credible people's institution that can work independently, making the role of 'outsiders' such as SEEDS redundant.

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### **Reflecting on Action**

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Thanks to all the donors and partners who provided resource support, the SEEDS team could commit to a necessarily long and slow process. It took some time for the community to move from "I" to "We" to "Our"

Creating an environment of positive bottom-up engagement with the government has built greater trust and accountability. Citizens used well-documented evidence as the basis, and well articulated plans to engage with line departments. This provided legitimacy and credibility

The power and energy of young citizen volunteers was well harnessed to provide good outreach, and practice on the ground.

Overall, we felt that by building awareness on risks to everyday disasters, we are able to get traction on larger intensive risks that require policy approaches and other systemic changes. Such an approach has also opened the possibility of aiming at broader goals of sustainable development using resilience, risk reduction and protection as entry points.

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