



Episode 9: Early Warnings & Noodle Networks: Innovative Strategies for Disaster Response | A Conversation with Manu Gupta Disaster Resilience Expert

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Hisham Allam

Hello, everyone and welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues, where we delve into the heart of humanitarian efforts shaping our world. I'm your host, Hisham Alam.

Today, we are honored to be joined by Dr. Manu Gupta, a distinguished humanitarian worker and executive director of [SEEDS](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to disaster risk reduction and post disaster response in Asia. Hello, Dr. Manu. It's a pleasure to have you on our podcast.

Manu Gupta

Thank you, Hisham. It's a pleasure speaking to you.

Hisham Allam

Dr. Manu, what is a post disaster response mean?

Manu Gupta

A post disaster response is usually, the actions taken by humanitarians, such as us, to respond to the needs of people who have been hit by crisis. So, they could start by providing immediate relief assistance, that can meet their needs for food, shelter, clothing, and so on. And then look at recovery, in helping them coming back to their feet, helping them restore their livelihood, education, and their day to day living. So of course it is divided in several stages of intervention, but that is usually the gamut of what a post disaster response would typically look like.

Hisham Allam

Your journey in humanitarianism has been marked by significant moments of a challenge and resilience. Can you share a pivotal moment from your experience during the Gujarat earthquake that shaped your understanding of disaster risk reduction and post disaster recovery efforts?



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Manu Gupta

Oh, certainly. 2001 Gujarat earthquake was in some way a turning point in my life. This was an earthquake that hit the western part of the country and more than 13, 000 people had lost their lives, in this earthquake. When I was there a few days after the earthquake struck, as a relief worker doing relief assistance, a lot of lives that were lost, could have been avoided. Simply because the buildings they were living in were not strong enough to withstand an impact of an earthquake, even though the region was already marked as a zone five, which means that it has had experience of, earthquakes, of magnitude five and above. In spite of that, people's houses were not strong enough and a lot of lives were lost simply because their roof and their walls collapsed on them.

So, while immediate relief was what we did, a lot of survivors there, some had lost their family members, and it was really heart wrenching to see, the state they were in. But what was more important for me was the recovery process. We felt that, when we do the rebuilding work in the same communities, the houses need to be strong enough, communities, people should know what is the potential impact of an earthquake. So, we began our three-year journey in the same state, starting with staying in a village that had lost about 250 homes.

We literally stayed there for nearly two years and one by one helped each family rebuild their homes. It was a lot of learning for us, in terms of their preferences, their family sizes and their own traditional ways of building homes. And we as engineers and architects, were there to help ensure that while they followed their own traditional practices, they also follow, designs and principles that will ensure that these homes were safe.

So, it was a long journey, where we were involved in immediate relief, then helping people recover, but also using the recovery as opportunity to do disaster risk reduction, which is very much about preventing the next earthquake or any such crisis hitting them adversely. So that was my journey.

Hisham Allam

Yes, sorry for the interruption, but did you duplicate this experience in other places that would potentially have a similar disaster?

Manu Gupta

Yes. I mean, we were able to use this experience in a number of other, similar geographies where, such, kind of earthquakes could happen in near future. So, as you know, India has the very active seismic belt along the Himalayas and we took this message, this lesson to communities in the Himalayas, and worked again at a family level at village level to tell them that what has happened in Gujarat in the Western part of the country should not happen to you. And therefore, let's be more prepared. Let's reduce the risks. By starting to look at how buildings, their own homes can be strengthened, how they can be retrofitted against future earthquake impacts.



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Hisham Allam

And what was the people's response to this raising awareness campaigns?

Manu Gupta

Yeah, so that's an interesting question Hisham. Initially nobody paid any attention to us, they thought we are wasting their time. There were also this indifference saying that we'll see when it happens. You know the usual mindset problems, uh, so it struck us that maybe if we get somebody who was impacted in the western part of the country in Gujarat, come over and speak to these people, perhaps that would send a much stronger message.

So, it will be like a people-to-people message, and so that's exactly what we did. And that that worked. That worked. Oh, yeah. And when people listen to their own, you know, likes from another village in the earthquake hit Gujarat, they started taking the message very seriously and that kind of triggered a series of activities where, you know, we could convey and communicate the message of what can happen in an earthquake.

Hisham Allam

Transitioning from Gujarat earthquake to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. Could you take us back to that time and share a personal story that deeply impacted you and shaped your approach to disaster response?

Manu Gupta

Yes, it was a terrible time in 2004. It was year-end holidays and yes, we all remember the great Indian Ocean Tsunami. It impacted almost the entire world. Not just those 17 countries where the water entered their coasts, but also people from other parts of the world who were holidaying, who were touring. In the small islands on the coast, around these, affected countries. It was, an experience that taught me many lessons, about black swan events that can happen, to the COVID has been one such black swan event in recent history, as you very well know. This was an event that had never happened to that scale ever before in known history. So naturally there was a lot of trauma, a lot of despair among people who were directly hit. I was working in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands where I reached three days after the tsunami struck these islands in the Bay of Bengal.

And in certain islands in this cluster of islands, we saw that the water had actually entered from one side of the island and crossed over to the other, taking with it, homes and trees and everything, alongside and obviously, a lot of people also lost their lives, and were never to be found. I was working, in the capital island of Port Blair, where a lot of survivors from smaller islands were being evacuated by ships to evacuation camps that was set up in Port Blair and one of the things that one learned about these, from the experience that of spending time with these communities was the lack of awareness about such kind of events and how unprepared we are as a society to such kind of disasters, even though sometimes we are aware that, we are in a geography, we are in a location that can have, hazards and disasters like these.



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Hisham Allam

How are you treating with traumatized people, during the disasters?

Manu Gupta

Yeah, this is an important question, Hisham, the trauma, especially of such huge events like the tsunami and sometimes big earthquakes is very high. Some of the communities where there are, let's say, you know, women headed households, we find that the trauma is even more, and that, kind of trauma not only, deters us from doing response activities smoothly, but it also becomes a difficult challenge for us to address in people, you know, the way to do it, especially with, you know, with children and women and the elderly is to start making small efforts that can help ease that trauma, ease that pain. And so, we do have counselors and we do have counseling camps set up for people who are going through that trauma to talk to them. But with children, what we do is, you know, allow them to express themselves through the paintings and through drawings and through, playing with other children and gradually they're able to overcome that trauma, that they are going through. But I feel in the long run, the best ways to help is to educate and build that awareness about potential disasters, as well as what are the potential impacts of disasters that they can address. So, it's like training in first aid. If you know you're training in first aid, you may not be so adversely traumatized as you would be otherwise.

Hisham Allam

Is it what you call a post disaster recovery?

Manu Gupta

Oh, trauma management, as we call it, is very much part of the post disaster recovery, it happens almost immediately after the disaster, and it happens more with families who have lost a family member in that disaster. Yeah.

Hisham Allam

So, what are the other elements of both disaster response and recovery.

Manu Gupta

So besides, mental trauma, we have to look at, how quickly people are able to get back on their feet, which basically means, how can we restore their jobs? Can we get them busy again? You know what I mean? When people start participating in their own recovery, not only they are able to recover from their trauma much more quickly, but they are also able to rebuild themselves with that awareness that they will now be more strong, more robust against and more prepared against future disasters.



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Hisham Allam

Dr. Manu, what lessons do you carry from one disaster to the next.

Manu Gupta

Oh, so I think each disaster teaches us something new. We are in a state now where we are seeing impacts of climate change. We are seeing new types of risks like the COVID pandemic, which we had never experienced. So, there are lessons that we draw from previous disasters, but we are always adding something new. But the basic principle, remains the same. And that's the kind of lesson that I carry. Awareness is the ownership and the agency of affected people themselves that has sustained throughout no matter what kind of disaster has hit people.

When the most kind of affected people, are at the center of, you know, the post disaster recovery or the risk reduction that we do with them, then the intervention not only stays with them, but then they also innovate. They also evolve. They become almost like what we call the first responders, you know, to be able to help their own friends and neighbors if there is a disaster. So that's one lesson that I have only, you know, gained more conviction in each time I am there in a humanitarian situation.

Hisham Allam

How can you get yourself prepared for, catastrophic and disasters?

Manu Gupta

Each type of disaster is very unique and brings its own characteristics, and we need to be prepared accordingly. For example, we know when the cyclone strikes, it will have very high-speed winds that can blow away my home and my immediate surrounding so I would want to anchor my roofs. I would want to board up my homes and, so things like that can be very much part of the preparedness exercise. So usually what we do is when we work with communities, we do assessment of what kind of hazards or what kind of disasters can strike them that's number one. Once we do that, we say, okay, what is your capacity to be able to sustain the impact of these kinds of disasters? So, we look at what kind of training already exists. Do they have people trained in first state? Do they have homes that are strong enough? All these are indicators for what kind of capacity people have.

Once we have mapped out their capacities and also their weak spots, we then train them to become strong, and be better prepared sometimes providing information in advance is one area that can help them prepare better, you know, like an early warning that can come. So, we look at all these kinds of measures, based on, a very local level assessment of what are the risks. What are the vulnerabilities? What are their capacities? And accordingly, prepare them.



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Hisham Allam

Could you, provide your disaster relief efforts under any other umbrella? What encouraged you to found SEEDS?

Manu Gupta

Of course, I could do that with many other organizations and initially that was my experience as a volunteer, I actually, went to various emergency situations, working for relief with other organizations. The reason why we set up SEEDS, was, because I'm a trained, urban planner, a city planner. I felt that, you know, SEEDS can actually work in building strong communities and not just do relief because most of the humanitarian organizations that I came across were only concerned about what happens immediately after a disaster and how we can support people in helping them, recover immediately.

My interest was in seeing that there should not be any loss in the first place and there are, affordable, reapplicable solutions that can help such people, and that has been our mission in SEEDS, which we really enjoy doing we really want to spread, to other parts of the world as well.

Hisham Allam

Major catastrophic events often necessitate swift and coordinated responses. Can you walk us through a particularly challenging situation where SEEDS had to adapt its strategies to address the unique needs of affected communities?

Manu Gupta

So, we have had, a whole range of experiences, but I remember the Nepal earthquake in 2015. This was an earthquake that affected almost half the country in Nepal and being in the heart of the Himalayas many of the affected communities were at very high elevations. It sometimes took us six hours by, going through narrow mountain ranges to be able to reach to those communities.

So, when we were involved in recovery strategies in recovery and in rebuilding their homes, we realized that we had to act very quickly because people were without a roof on their heads, and yet it was so difficult to reach them quickly because of the logistics that were involved. So, it was very heartening to actually, have a partnership with a noodle manufacturing company in Nepal who had a very robust supply chain of supplying, you know, these noodles to far reaches of the country and they, and they have been doing that for years, so we, partnered with them and we could use their own logistics, which was already well established to actually reach building material like, bamboos and roofing material to these far corners of the country. And, within three months, we could actually, build over 3, 000 houses, all over the place. And that I think was a huge number. Yes, and thanks to this noodle manufacturing company, Hisham, and a lot of these private sector people who could help us achieve that.

Hisham Allam

Community based disaster management lies at the core of SEEDS approach. Could you share a success story where local leadership and engagement played a crucial role in mitigating the impact of a disaster and facilitating recovery efforts?



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Manu Gupta

Oh, yes. This has been my conviction from my initial experience about how the most affected family and their own friends and neighbors really can reach out before anyone else can in an emergency. And that forms the core of this community-based disaster risk management work that we have been doing.

I particularly remember major flood that took place in Bihar in the eastern part of our country in 2008. It was a devastating flood because one of the major rivers, Gossie, that is fed by a glacial, melt overflowed and overnight over 500 kilometers of area was flooded and, we, of course, were providing immediate assistance, but then we realized that so many houses needed to be built so we followed what we called a house owner centered approach in reconstruction, which basically meant that we would build a few pilot houses, like demonstration houses ourselves. And then we train local construction workers, local house owners to say that, well, if you want a safe house, here's a core seed money.

And here's an example of a demonstration house. Now we will help you rebuild your homes yourself. We will provide you technical assistance. Help you monitor how it is built, but you need to build it yourself and in a very short time, people could rebuild their homes, using their own, resources, using their own, material, with just the technical assistance and some hand holding support from us. So, I've always believed that communities, when enabled properly with the right kind of knowledge with the right kind of support, can help scale the kind of, you know, impact we want to create.

Hisham Allam

Reflecting on your journey what have been some of the most valuable lessons you have learned or perhaps unlearned about effective disaster response and community resilience?

Manu Gupta

If I were to list a few of the top, lessons that I've learned, one is of course, restoring the agency of people after a disaster, is so important I cannot underscore that more, which is not taught in our formal education systems in our engineering courses or medical courses. The second, I feel is about, the importance of awareness and proactive action in areas where we know there is a likelihood of a disaster. The importance of disaster risk reduction is very, very critical. Third, I feel is the importance of the traditional knowledge that people exist, so sometimes we go with our own understanding of how a disaster would have impacted people and, how they would have been feeling. But, you know, some societies are very resilient, you know, they, they are well prepared because they have been going through crisis after crisis.

So sometimes we have to learn from them. And if we keep that room with us that, okay, there is something we have to give, but we have also to learn from communities. I think then we form the perfect equation of a successful post disaster recovery. So, I think these are three top lessons that come to my mind, Hesham, at this point.



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Hisham Allam

Okay, so you are encouraging communities to actively participate and lead efforts in strengthening their own resilience, how does SEEDS empower communities and what role do you see local knowledge and leadership playing in effective disaster risk reduction?

Manu Gupta

In any disaster, the local leaders have a very important role to play because first, they are trusted by their communities. Second, they are from those local areas, so they know what are the strengths, what are the vulnerabilities, and therefore they can help us shape the kind of external assistance they can provide. So, our way of empowering local communities is to work through such leaders. We call them also sometimes the change agents. As the word suggests, they are the people who will help influence change in mindsets, change in behavior, leading to more informed, action that can prevent the losses from disasters.

So, a lot of our efforts go in empowering these local leaders' local community-based organizations, so that they in turn are able to influence larger communities to be well prepared against future disasters.

Hisham Allam

At the national level, you have been instrumental in co-founding alliances and the collaborative initiatives focused on adaptation and disaster risk reduction. Could you tell us more about these initiatives and their impact on policy and practice in India?

Manu Gupta

So, this was a learning going back to 2004 Tsunami and many similar large-scale emergencies, where we noticed that it's it cannot be the effort of just one single organization in an emergency.

It requires many SEEDS and many organizations to be able to reach out and particularly so in the Indian Ocean tsunami, impact was, as widespread as Indonesia on one side and Madagascar on the other side, the entire stretch. It was impossible for one organization. So, we have always believed in building alliances of likeminded organizations who can reach out much faster. And agility is always the key USP in any disaster, how quickly we can reach out. So rather than one organization trying to mobilize forces across a huge, diverse population, why not have smaller organizations who are closer to their communities. Act quickly as long as we are able to share a common understanding on how to respond, what are those common tools and methodologies that may be used. So, I've always, have a strong belief in building local alliances of organizations and these organizations have sustained a network called the Asian Disaster Risk Reduction Network that is now active in more than 19 countries in South and Southeast Asia and we often share our knowledge and experiences and every time we do that, we all feel stronger. So, it is always very helpful to have these alliances in place. At some point, also these alliances, uh, help us influence policy much better than a single organization trying to do so, when many of us come together, governments listen, you know, other agencies listen much better.



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Hisham Allam

With the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters, how do you see the role of disaster rescue reduction evolving on global scale?

Manu Gupta

Now the rate of temperature change having doubled since the 1980s, we would be witnessing almost five to six disasters every single day around the world. And that's a very serious situation. It will require, uh, entire communities to be better prepared against these new risks and, be able to act so that losses can be avoided.

Of course, there are, certain parts of the world that are already over the edge, which means that no matter what you do, they will still suffer. But risk reduction has a very important role in trying to prepare communities better. So, a major area of work, which I feel needs to be stepped up, locally is around provision of early warning to communities that are going to be impacted and this is especially so because climate change has led to disasters that are very quick to impact. And, there is very little time that is available to prepare. So, very effective early warning would be one such way of taking risk reduction at scale.

Hisham Allam

Dr. Manu, your dedication to this field for over 30 years is truly remarkable. What initially inspired you to work in disaster rescue reduction and humanitarianism, and how had that inspiration evolved over time?

Manu Gupta

Thank you for that, Hisham. I still get up every day in the morning excited about what more I can do. There is so much suffering, as we see in the world today. And I just feel, this is something, that is needed by many more of us. So, I spend my good amount of time trying to train new young people to be able to serve better the communities who are in distress. My original inspiration was also like a young volunteer when I was just about 28 years old, you know, backpacking and going to remote areas, trying to learn from communities and one such incident was in 1998 when, there was a cyclone that, hit you know, the western part of our country.

It wasn't a major cyclone, a category two, but a lot of lives were lost. And I realized that the major cause for life's loss was that the houses could not sustain even a Category 2 cyclone. A little deeper study revealed that a simple J-hook that can hold a roof down was not even known to people and just because there were no J-hook that could hold down the roof these roofs flew away like missiles, you know, and they were hitting people. I felt a slap on my face being a trained architect and planner. That I have the best knowledge of the world, yet people are dying because they don't know about these simple measures that can save their lives.

And so that really was an inspiration for me to, start the work much more seriously and in a more sustained manner as part of SEEDS. And this has been very much part of me, ever since all these 30 years.



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Hisham Allam

Thank you, Dr. Mano, for sharing your invaluable insights. What final thoughts or advice would you offer to listeners who are passionate about making a difference in disaster affected communities?

Manu Gupta

My message to all who are passionate about this work of helping communities that are impacted by climate change and disasters, please spend and invest your time in seeing how we can spread basic education, the awareness about what kind of impacts people are going to witness and of course, when you are there, don't forget to reach out to that last family who may be completely cut off, who may be just looking for a friend to sit with them, have a little cup of tea or coffee or whatever they like spend the time. Their smiles are what going to inspire you to do more and to continue to do more.

Hisham Allam

To our listeners today, we have had the privilege of speaking with Dr. Manu Gupta, a true champion in the field. Stay tuned for more enlightening conversations until next time, this is your host Hisham Alam signing off. Goodbye.