

# Exploring the Opportunities and Challenges of Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction Measures into Social Protection Programmes for Building Community-Based Resilience in South Asia



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## Research Overview

Keywords: Disaster Risk Reduction, Social Protection, Community-Based Resilience Building, South Asia.

The relationship between poverty and disaster risk is complex and multifaceted. Disasters significantly impact food security, livelihoods, health, and other critical development indicators, disproportionately affecting impoverished families and communities who often reside in high-risk areas with limited resilience capacities. Conversely, poverty constrains their ability to recover, further exacerbating vulnerability and deepening cycles of risk. While some countries in the region are advancing in socio-economic development and disaster risk management, South Asia remains home to the world's second-largest population living in poverty and is among the most disaster-prone regions. Integrating disaster risk reduction (DRR) measures into social protection programmes is essential for building resilience. However, the integration of these two 'communities of practice' remains insufficiently explored in a region where recurrent sudden-onset disasters, such as floods, cyclones, landslides, and earthquakes, frequently disrupt livelihoods and undermine development gains. Although existing studies highlight examples of integration, such as shock-responsive social protection and the use of social assistance mechanisms for early warning and anticipatory action, it remains unclear whether these represent isolated and fragmented efforts or a systematic and holistic approach. Addressing this gap is critical for developing comprehensive strategies that deliver both immediate relief and long-term resilience for vulnerable communities across South Asia.



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## Research Objectives

1. Assessing the significance of social protection programs in addressing the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of impoverished communities in South Asia.
2. Examining the potential of social protection services in enhancing community-level awareness and preparedness, while mitigating hazard risks faced by impoverished and vulnerable communities in South Asia.
3. Understanding any existing major challenges in the design and implementation of integrated disaster risk reduction and social protection programs in South Asia and determining optimal strategies for addressing these challenges.

## Study Design

I applied a qualitative descriptive methodology for this research. I conducted interviews with key informants who were experienced practitioners from international humanitarian organisations, with expertise in DRR, food security, livelihoods, and social protection programming. Practitioners were selected based on their professional roles within international humanitarian organisations, including Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Oxfam, the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP), Save the Children International, and Trickle Up. These organisations were chosen due to their long-term presence in South Asia and their implementation of emergency response and development programmes encompassing DRR, food security, livelihoods, health, nutrition, and social protection.

Research participants were identified through professional networks and referrals. The selection process prioritised technical programme managers and technical advisers with many years of experience in designing and implementing DRR and social protection projects in South Asian countries. A key inclusion criterion was that participants had a minimum of five years of professional experience in these domains. In total, eight practitioners participated in the key



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informant interviews. Their years of professional experience varied, ranging from a minimum of 13 years to a maximum of 40 years.

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the AUT Ethics Committee (reference number 24/104). All interviews were conducted online using platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Semi-structured interview questions, developed in advance of the sessions, were used to guide the discussions. The duration of each interview varied, with the shortest lasting 50 minutes and the longest 70 minutes. The first interview was conducted on 17 July 2024, and the final interview on 22 August 2024. All sessions were recorded with the participants' permission. The data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodological framework.

## Key Findings

Social assistance, also known as the social safety net, is not sufficient as a standalone solution for addressing chronic socio-economic vulnerabilities. For most impoverished people, social assistance can only help prevent them from 'falling too far' or 'hitting rock bottom'.

For social protection systems and programmes to effectively address underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities and poverty-related challenges, they must adopt a comprehensive, holistic, and adaptive approach. Social protection programming should extend beyond short-term financial assistance to support families and communities in transitioning towards sustainable livelihoods.

In a rapidly changing landscape of disaster risks and evolving vulnerabilities, social protection systems must be adaptive and designed with long-term, multi-faceted perspectives. Such an approach would equip impoverished and vulnerable groups with the capacity to withstand disasters and emergencies more effectively.



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The integration of DRR into social protection is occurring in the South Asian context; however, these efforts remain ad hoc and largely underdeveloped. There has been a growing focus on shock-responsive social protection programming. While these initiatives demonstrate potential for integrated programming, the findings emphasise that integration is primarily limited to addressing immediate shocks. This approach lacks the depth and sustainability required to address disaster risks as a long-term development issue.

The development and implementation of DRR-integrated social protection programmes remain hindered by fragmentation and siloed approaches among agencies and organisations. The lack of a cohesive and integrated policy and planning framework further exacerbates this issue, as actors often operate independently rather than collaboratively.

Meaningful integration between DRR and social protection requires moving beyond short-term, shock-responsive approaches to the development of systemic and long-term strategies. This involves addressing deeply rooted structural issues, for instance, the technical and operational limitations of development programmes, which are often not designed to adapt rapidly to emerging risks.

## Research Impact and Applications

The research findings indicate that social protection systems and programmes must be flexible and adaptive. Policymakers should embed adaptive capacities into programme design from the outset, rather than treating them as secondary or add-on features. It is essential that programmes effectively target those most in need, with beneficiary selection criteria informed by community-defined understandings of poverty and vulnerability. Lists of beneficiaries should be regularly reviewed and updated to maintain accuracy and relevance, thereby enhancing trust and credibility. Addressing perceptions of inequity in targeting is critical, as such concerns can undermine community confidence and programme effectiveness.



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The integration of DRR into social protection must prioritise community participation throughout all stages including planning, design, implementation, and monitoring. Communities should play a central role in identifying local risks, developing response strategies, and assessing programme effectiveness. Furthermore, effective integration requires coordinated action across social protection, disaster management, and related sectors. Governments should establish formal mechanisms and platforms for cross-sector collaboration, supported by clear mandates, operational protocols, and accountability frameworks. Strategic partnerships with public agencies, humanitarian organisations, and financial institutions can strengthen the exchange of information, resources, and technical expertise.

## Student Reflection

This research journey has been enriching experience, both academically and personally. In addition to gaining new insights into disaster risk reduction and social protection programming in the context of South Asian countries, I developed a deeper understanding of the current status and challenges of integrating these two communities of practice. Equally important, I learned a lot about the academic research process itself. How a research project is conceptualised, designed, and implemented, and how scholarly work is structured and written? The research process helped me to think more critically and learn more about academic writing and analytical works. I believe these learnings will certainly remain useful for my future academic and professional pursuits.



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## DRMD Graduate Profile



**Ahmad Ali Rezaie**

Emergency Management Officer,  
New Zealand Red Cross, Wellington

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“The primary reason I chose AUT was the structure of the master’s programme itself. I was particularly drawn to its multidisciplinary approach, which allows students from diverse academic backgrounds to enrol. I also liked that the programme extends beyond a narrow focus on emergency management and includes courses that build an understanding of both emergency management issues and development topics that are crucial for effective disaster risk management.”

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