

# Mainstreaming put to the test – one official's experience in Bhutan

## Case Study

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**THIMPHU, Bhutan** – As a Planning Officer in Bhutan's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MoAF) Mr. Sangay Chopel, understands that Disaster Risk Management is essential for the overall wellbeing of the Bhutanese people.

Influenced by an ADPC training course on Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Management, Mr. Chopel has taken it upon himself to devise a Mainstreaming strategy for the MoAF to propose in Bhutan's 11th Five Year Plan.

"In Bhutan natural hazards can be devastating. Storms, flash floods, landslides and earthquakes can destroy a farmer's entire crop yield. Many people here rely on agriculture for their livelihood. If you take away their crop, you are taking away their means to survive," he explained to ADPC in a recent interview.



## Bhutan - The Land of the Thunder Dragon

Upward of 40% of the population rely on agriculture and forestry for their livelihoods, food security and economies. For people in Bhutan, subsistence agriculture is a way of life.

Agriculture depends heavily on the climate of a particular region. Each agricultural product in Bhutan, whether it is rice, corn, root crops or citrus, has its own climatic requirements. Abnormal deviations from these requirements have adverse effects on yield.

Bhutan is known as the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon' for the violent storms that blow in from the Himalayas. Here, climate change and weather hazards have always been point of vulnerability. Besides Himalayan storms, glacial melting can also cause flash floods. Frequent landslides during the rainy season and seismic activity further increase risks for farmers.

## Disaster Risk Management critical for farmers

Accurate and timely information on natural hazards is, thus, critical for farmers in making important decisions to maximize their crop, particularly, in setting up protective mechanisms and scheduling inputs and activities.

The successful development of Bhutan's agricultural economy is, therefore highly dependent on the use of climatic and seismic information, particularly on weather hazards.

Needless to say, disaster preparedness in Bhutan's agricultural sector needs to be a priority. While people cannot avert natural hazards caused by climatic extremes, Disaster Risk Management can reduce the impact of such hazards in terms of productivity and human suffering.

“ Bhutan has made a significant effort to modernize and sustain agriculture for national food security,” Chopel notes, “however, without the ability to proactively assess the dynamic of seismic and weather manifestations, we cannot hope for this progress to bring about the expected returns. ”



## Tackling cross-sector natural hazards – Mainstreaming an option

The process of Mainstreaming refers to the process of integrating Disaster Risk Management into the development process of a ministry. Effective Mainstreaming can ensure that the necessary planning occurs for adaptation, management, prevention and mitigation in the case of natural hazards.

Since 2009, Chopel has worked as Bhutan's Department of Disaster Management (DDM) focal person for the MoAF. He recognizes the need for Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Management in MoAF most of all.

"We work in a very ad-hoc manner," states Mr. Chopel referring to the, at times, tedious nature of his work as a DDM focal person, "Whenever there is a disaster, there is coordination for response and relief. We receive a disaster assessment from the DDM; we make our own assessment from the Department's; we compile and submit the assessment to the DDM; and only then do we present the assessment at the national level in terms of total damages, quantity of seeds and needs of communities."

"There is a lot of frustration," he added, "when we cannot deliver quickly it can be stressful because lives and livelihoods are in danger. With mainstreaming our system could be more effective and efficient from the beginning."

When funding has to be approved at the national level on a case-by-case basis, quick response times are an issue. More importantly, such reactionary funding leaves little room for investing in Disaster Risk Management, which aims to mitigate the effects of a disaster before they happen rather than deal with the consequences of a disaster after they happen. However, there is a reason why things are the way they are.

"One problem we face is that when disaster strikes, the government asks us to divert budget from regularly planned activities to reconstruction," explains Chopel in regards to funding for Disaster Risk Management.

As there is no specific budget for Disaster Risk Management in MoAF, funding diverted for Disaster Risk Management restructures MoAF's entire budget. Such changes undoubtedly warrant attention at the national level.

That is not to say that funding for Disaster Risk Management has not been obtained from outside sources.

Mr. Chopel noted that in 2009 the UN and AusAID acted as donors to provide compensation for the loss of crops. However, "this compensation modality will not sustain in the long term," he reflects.

## A Five Year Plan ahead – addressing Disaster Risk Reduction

In Bhutan's 11th Five Year Plan, the latest in a series of national economic development plans devised by the government to guide Bhutan's economic progress, the Gross National Happiness Commission has issued a mandate to look specifically into Disaster Risk Reduction.

"We have initiated to draft a chapter within 11th Five Year Plan, which will outline the importance of Mainstreaming as well as rationalizing why it is important," Chopel stated. ADPC has been working with Mr. Chopel to develop this Mainstreaming strategy.



## Mainstreaming effectiveness?

How effectively Mainstreaming is implemented, however, remains to be seen. There is little experience in Bhutan when it comes to Mainstreaming policy.

Chopel explains his concerns; "sector specific Mainstreaming is really difficult, because as a focal person, the ministry asks us to come up with proposals. Of course we have neither experience [in the matter], nor academic background, thus it is difficult to do."

To tackle this issue Mr. Chopel has taken the initiative to approach ADPC in drafting an effective Mainstreaming strategy for MoAF.

That being said, MoAF's implementation of Disaster Risk Management Mainstreaming is certainly a step in the right direction for reducing disaster vulnerability in Bhutan. Mainstreaming will allow for effective disaster response and better disaster preparedness, minimizing damages to Bhutan's agricultural sector.

"I am anxious to see the Mainstreaming strategy in action," Chopel adds enthusiastically, "the Bhutanese people stand to gain a lot if it is effective, particularly in food security. Hopefully MoAF can be a role model for the other ministries in this regard."

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