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Community Participation for Disaster Risk Reduction

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Floods and landslides caused by torrential rains in Sri Lanka in May 2016 have left 71 people dead, 127 missing, and over 319,000 displaced from homes while over a 427,000 people are affected by the adverse weather. This is the latest experience in Sri Lanka where the frequency and the intensity of natural disaster has shown a drastic increase over the last decade.

With the impacts of climate change and destruction of natural eco systems it is expected that natural disasters going to be a frequent phenomenon. If Sri Lanka fails to adapt to this situation quickly the damage for the security of the people's lives and overall progress of the country will be irreversible.

Our current approach in preventing and responding to disasters is largely based on top-down, command and control approach with very little space for affected communities in decision making and implementation. As shown by the previous experiences this has led to more unrest among communities hence worsening the situation. Similarly, with the increasing challenges a centralized single authority will no longer in a position to respond to all the disasters in an inclusive, effective and sustainable manner.

As seen in many occasions, local governance structures have played a significant role in disaster situations. But there are some serious questions we have to find answers. Do these local governance structures have the capacities, resources or space in playing a major role in disaster prevention and responding? Do the affected people, especially most vulnerable groups including women, ethnic minorities and disable, have the space in participating decision making and implementing processes? Are we ready to accept the affected communities as dignified citizens who have a right to have proper support rather than being mere recipients.

Therefore, this paper has intended to shear the outcome of stake holder consultation to find solutions to those questions and build a system which based on effective participatory governance structure we will be better prepared in responding to the unavoidable natural disasters in future.

Key words: *Community Participation, Disaster Risk Reduction, Sri Lanka*

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