

# Prospects for strengthening EU-India engagement in the field of natural disasters

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In the past few decades, the approach to natural disasters has been transformed: rather than simply reacting, it is understood that better preparedness coupled with better early-warning systems can help mitigate their impact. Moreover, the frequency and impact of weather-related natural disasters appears to be increasing,<sup>1</sup> potentially as a result of climate change and certainly as a result of population increases and environmental degradation.

South Asia is susceptible to cyclical disasters such as earthquakes, floods, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, avalanches and cyclones. A 2018 study by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) calculates that India suffered economic losses equivalent to \$80 billion in the two decades between 1998 and 2017 as a result.<sup>2</sup> These risks are compounded by population growth, unplanned urbanisation and environmental degradation.

Following the 1999 Orissa Super-Cyclone and the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, and notably since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, India has taken wide-ranging steps to improve its capacity along the disaster cycle – improving its predictive capabilities through the development of early warning systems and its response following disasters and its mitigation efforts through, for instance, the construction of cyclone shelters. These capacities have also been extended within its neighbourhood, with Indian forces assisting, for example, in the response to the catastrophic 2015 Nepal earthquake. Substantial progress has been made, though capacity does vary by state – correlating not with levels of development but with vulnerability to disaster.

The EU has a number of instruments at its disposal to fund disaster relief efforts. The European Commission's proposal to strengthen the Union's collective response to natural disasters, known as rescEU, entered into force in March 2019. This upgraded the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) – coordinated by the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), an instrument which although focused on Europe, can be activated worldwide. The EU has also supported New Delhi in the development of its disaster-related capacities, engaging with state and district level and with civil society through a number of programmes since the 1990s.

As entry points for greater engagement, our research explored those areas in which EU capacities and Indian needs converged. This precludes some issues: for instance, India has made clear its objection to foreign assistance in response to disasters *within* India.<sup>3</sup> In similar vein, India is confident in its ability to act as first external responder to disasters within South Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> "Weather-related Disasters Are Increasing", *The Economist*, August 29, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2017/08/29/weather-related-disasters-are-increasing>; Université catholique de Louvain, "EM-DAT: The Emergency Events Database", [www.emdat.be](http://www.emdat.be).

<sup>2</sup> Pradeep Thakur, "Disasters Claimed Economic Losses Worth 80 Billion in India Between-1998-2017: UN Report", *Times of India*, October 10, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/disasters-claimed-economic-losses-worth-80-billion-in-india-between-1998-2017-un-report/articleshow/66154037.cms>.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Kazmin, "India's Rejection of \$100m Foreign Flooding Aid Sparks Anger in Kerala", *Financial Times*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/86e4bb4e-a785-11e8-8ecf-a7ae1beff35b>.



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One area which appears to hold untapped potential for greater cooperation in the event of natural disasters could be in the use of satellites. While efforts have been undertaken by specialised organisations such as the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) in this area - including the availability of satellite imagery in support of predictive weather patterns ahead of potential disasters through the Global Observing System (GOS)<sup>4</sup> – the EU has also demonstrably developed its own satellite capacities in recent years.<sup>5</sup> The Copernicus Service in Support to EU External Action (SEA), a ‘European geointelligence service which assists the EU and its Member States in its operations and interests outside EU territory’ is one such development.<sup>6</sup> With the EU Satellite Centre (SatCen) as the ‘Entrusted Entity’ for its operational management, Copernicus SEA has proven to be an effective tool in supporting EU external action, including humanitarian aid and disaster relief: as a response to Hurricane Irma, the EU activated both the Copernicus satellite system to assist populations in Haiti and the Dominican Republic in 2017, for example. A tool to distribute such products is the geospatial portal developed by the SatCen in a collaboration project with European Defence Agency (EDA). It can be used internally within the EU and also be opened to external partners, e.g. in situations of humanitarian distress. Immediately following the Nepal earthquake on 25 April 2015, SatCen activated this portal for international support to international operations.<sup>7</sup>

Although India has signed up to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction – and, to that end, released a National Disaster Management Plan in June 2016<sup>8</sup> – the fact remains that much of the hard work involved in building resilience and resistance will have to take place at the state level in India. Few states have put in the required effort to create a comprehensive plan – as was tragically made clear in the recent floods in Kerala, one of India’s best-managed states. Paradoxically, Bihar - generally short of capacity produced the first comprehensive state-level plan.<sup>9</sup> The EU’s engagement with state governments should focus on capacity and expertise. States are trying to improve their analysis of community needs (‘Post Disaster Needs Assessment’, or PDNA) on the basis of the 2008 joint declaration between the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), the EU, and the World Bank on post-crisis assessment. The 2008 declaration explicitly committed the EU to ‘mobilise our institutions and resources to harmonise and coordinate post-crisis recovery frameworks’. This has traditionally been activated at the national level. The PDNA framework – in particular, training under the PDNA – could be made available directly to state governments.

For India within its neighbourhood, the sense that India would wish to gain credit and recognition for its bilateral support is likely to remain strong.<sup>10</sup> Disaster preparedness – in particular early-warning systems – is therefore likely to provide an easier area in which to explore synergies than response. There are several initiatives intended to develop better early warning systems within South Asia, and the EU has supported several initiatives intended to boost the connectivity of early warning systems. In addition there is scope for trilateral EU-India-ASEAN cooperation in the field of disaster management.

## Recommendations

- While the EU and India have agreed to engage more comprehensively in relation to disasters, there are limits to potential cooperation. For instance, as India transitions from aid recipient to donor it is increasingly reluctant to accept foreign assistance in disaster response.
- Domestically, some Indian states lack the capacity to enforce standards and regulations in relation, for instance, to the construction industry. The EU could explore the possibility of extending support for specific disaster-related training initiatives.
- The use of satellite imagery could be explored through EU-India crisis-simulation workshops spanning the disaster cycle, from early-warning to response. This could provide a means of better understanding respective capacities, and of how satellite data is utilised by the EU and India.
- The potential for engagement with regard to disaster response in third countries might be higher outside of South Asia. Regional early warning systems and triangular engagement with ASEAN offer alternative avenues to explore.

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<sup>4</sup> World Meteorological Organisation, Global Observing System (GOS), <http://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/www/OSY/GOS.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the EU also cooperates in its own right with the WMO, as do a plethora of intergovernmental bodies. For more, see: <https://public.wmo.int/en/our-mandate/how-we-do-it/partnerships/agreements-and-arrangements>.

<sup>6</sup> Copernicus SEA, <https://sea.security.copernicus.eu/about-copernicus-sea/>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see: [www.satcen.europa.eu](http://www.satcen.europa.eu).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, “India Puts Sendai Framework into Operation”, June 1, 2016, [www.unisdr.org](http://www.unisdr.org).

<sup>9</sup> Government of Bihar, “Roadmap for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015-2030”, [disastermgmt.bih.nic.in](http://disastermgmt.bih.nic.in).

<sup>10</sup> While not the focus of this paper, this is equally true for evacuation from conflict situations: India has taken a leading role in evacuating its own citizens, other South Asians and in some cases Europeans and North Americans from several conflict zones in the Middle East and again, appears unlikely to want to dilute the credit it receives for doing so.