



Task Force 7
Towards Reformed Multilateralism: Transforming Global
Institutions and Frameworks



MULTILATERALISM AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: A CASE STUDY FOR THE G20

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Abstract



Disaster risk reduction is now part of the G20's areas of cooperation. This provides India, the current G20 presidency, a unique opportunity to draw upon its experience to develop disaster management at the multilateral level and spearhead this initiative at its formative stage. Of significance are the challenges India has faced while developing regional disaster management within the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, and the lessons that can be learnt to

overcome these problems from a more functional multilateral organisation, much like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. These experiences from a disaster-prone region in the Global South are an ideal case study for the G20. This policy brief uses this case study as a basis to generate recommendations for the G20 Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction to collaborate more effectively. Principally, it recommends the development of a mechanism for sharing best practices among the member countries.



The Challenge



1



The transnational threat of natural disasters, which affects lives and livelihoods, is gaining strength with the onset of climate change. Partnerships in disaster management are, therefore, becoming a necessity between like-minded countries across the world. Under India's G20 presidency, disaster risk reduction (DRR) has been added to the group's areas of cooperation. However, cultivating disaster management at the multilateral level will confront certain challenges, such as the erratic nature of the threat itself and the sovereignty of the involved countries, which can complicate matters of cooperation.

As India spearheads this initiative in its formative stage, it is advisable for it to draw upon its experiences of forging multilateral collaborations in disaster management. Accordingly, the aim of this policy brief is to identify the challenges that India has encountered in developing multilateral disaster

management within the Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC),^a the regional organisation exclusive to the Bay of Bengal, and the lessons that can be learnt to overcome these odds from a more functional regional organisation such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).^b Together, this holistic set of cautions and good practices in developing multilateral disaster management from the Global South will serve as a guiding case study for the G20 Working Group on DRR.

The Bay of Bengal is infamous for its turbulence, and the frequent cyclones wreak havoc in its coastal states. The close proximity of the Bay to the Andaman-Sumatra subduction zone^c further makes the region vulnerable to tsunamis. Between 1996 and 2015 alone, approximately 317,000 people were killed in disasters that struck the region, 16 million people lost their homes, and substantial economic losses were recorded.¹ However, despite this

a India leads the BIMSTEC's disaster management sub-sector.

b As the ASEAN lies in close proximity to BIMSTEC, it shares some of its geographic vulnerabilities, making it easier for BIMSTEC to learn from its multilateral system of disaster management.

c The Andaman-Sumatra Subduction Zone is the northern-most part of the Sunda subduction zone. It is one of the most seismically active areas globally due to the jostling Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates.



degree of disaster vulnerability, and the BIMSTEC's long existence, efforts to build a functioning multilateral system of disaster management has borne little fruit.² The challenges that have prevented BIMSTEC from emerging as a robust forum for multilateral disaster management are as follows:

The culture of ad-hocism in disaster management

Unless a disaster of great magnitude takes place, natural disasters become a part of life for the affected communities in most of the world's natural disaster-prone zones, such as the Bay of Bengal. However, due to the rarity of large-scale disasters, efforts to develop disaster preparedness at the regional level, or formulate multilateral frameworks for long term and sustainable disaster management, slacken over time. A culture of ad hocism emerges instead and collective concrete initiatives to build regional DRR are no longer prioritised. This is manifest in the BIMSTEC, where although the sub-sector on disaster management was adopted for cooperation after the 2004

tsunami, it began to lose momentum within a span of two years. As the memory of the tsunami began to fade, the sector took a backseat, especially as the members were not bound by any agreement on disaster management.³ Subsequently, in the event of severe disasters, it became a practice amongst the member countries to seek humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR)^d bilaterally, thereby perpetuating ad hocism and preventing the adoption of long-term multilateral DRR initiatives within BIMSTEC.

Erratic nature of disasters leading to stunted initiatives

Linked to ad hocism, another challenge in building concrete multilateral cooperation in disaster management is the erratic nature of natural disasters itself. While the occurrence of a natural disaster of severe magnitude spur the affected countries to undertake collective initiatives on disaster management and risk reduction, these are usually short-lived. Over time and in the absence of recurring disasters of such magnitude, such initiatives

d Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) is the help that is provided by an agency (usually government) to the victims of a disaster. Most commonly, it includes conducting search and rescue operations and providing relief assistance in the form of food, clothing, and medicines.



often tend to lose their vibrancy, and existing endeavours get entangled in long-term bureaucratic procedures, leaving the multilateral initiative in a state of stupor. For example, within BIMSTEC, a series of vibrant initiatives were undertaken immediately after the adoption of the disaster management sector in 2005, such as the creation of the BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate Change (proposed in 2005 and established in 2014), a workshop on regional cooperation among BIMSTEC countries for disaster risk reduction and management (2006), and preparing an agenda for action for effective regional cooperation (2006). However, this rush of activity was short-lived. Establishing the climate centre proved to be a long procedure and its initial objective of collaborating with other relevant regional institutions has remained unfulfilled.⁴ BIMSTEC's purview of cooperation in disaster management has therefore been very limited owing to no continued stimulus.^e For the G20, apart from growing consciousness about climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic has

served as an urgent stimulus to begin cooperation in DRR. It must therefore ensure that its multilateral initiatives in DRR do not decelerate over time in the post pandemic era.

Inability to gather national best practices into a regional pool of expertise

For any multilateral collaboration on disaster management to succeed, it is crucial to share knowledge and best practices among member countries. However, the individual best practices of each member country are often not tapped into due to the lack of regional impetus, complications in inter-country relations, or the dominance of one country in a multilateral order. This prevents the creation of a regional pool of not only expertise but also resources, thereby hindering the effective functioning of a multilateral DRR system. In the context of BIMSTEC, efforts to share knowledge among member states have been few and far between. For example, after an initial workshop in 2006, where presentations

e BIMSTEC exercises in disaster management (held in 2017, 2020, and 2021) are a recent phenomenon and owes its origin to political interest among its littoral states to re-engage by themselves, especially given the growing strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal. Even then, these exercises are yet to be regularised.



were made by the member countries on the different aspects of disaster management, subsequent workshops were held only in 2019 onwards.^{f5} It was only in the first meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Disaster Management Cooperation held in May 2022 that it was agreed upon to develop an action plan for improving disaster preparedness in the region by combining the expertise of all its member states.⁶

Initiatives confined to government levels and armed forces limit effectiveness of multilateral disaster management

As vulnerable communities are often the worst affected and the first ground actors to respond to any disasters, it is important to involve them in the process of disaster management. However, at the regional level, initiatives in disaster management often remain limited to the level of government officials and armed forces, and do not involve the empirical

experience of the NGOs or the expertise of academia and the private sector. This dearth of multi-layered engagement prevents the culture of DRR from taking root in the region, and compromises the effectiveness of multilateral initiatives on ground. BIMSTEC initiatives have been confined to the government level and the exercises are carried out by armed forces. Naturally, BIMSTEC's efforts in disaster preparedness have not percolated to the ground. Initiatives such as the meeting amongst financial experts for the BIMSTEC Development Fund (2022)⁷ or among think tanks working on BIMSTEC⁹ are recent developments.

Sensitivity towards sovereignty complicates creation of a regional disaster response force

In situations where disaster-affected countries are sensitive about their sovereignty, such as in the Bay of Bengal region, they often reject HADR assistance offered by the

f A BIMSTEC workshop on risk-informed urban planning was held in 2019, and another workshop for the BIMSTEC countries on disaster risk governance during COVID-19 was held in 2021. The recently begun BIMSTEC disaster management exercises also provides a platform for knowledge sharing.

g Exchanges between think tanks which are working on BIMSTEC, have been organised by independent think tanks. For example, RIS (Research and Information System for Developing Countries) India, founded the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks. Five editions have been held till date; 2010, 2015, 2017, 2018 and 2020. Vivekananda International Foundation, India has also organised the BIMSTEC Think Tank Dialogue on Regional Security, in 2018 and 2019.



armed forces of donor states they are apprehensive of. As members of a multilateral organisation, this sensitivity to sovereignty also prevents these countries from combining their armed troops to create a unified regional disaster management force. However, HADR from a multilateral agency that is not country specific is likely to be more acceptable in the hour of crisis. For the multilateral organisation itself, such a disaster response force will help strengthen interdependence among member states and thereby promote its efforts of disaster preparedness as well.

This sensitivity is manifest in the BIMSTEC countries, as in crisis situations, its members continue to

rely on bilateral assistance outside the purview of this regional organisation. Naturally, without a disaster response force, BIMSTEC has not been able to respond to any natural disasters occurring in the Bay of Bengal region.

These challenges faced by BIMSTEC in formulating a multilateral system of disaster management are a set of cautionaries for the G20 against difficulties it may encounter in curating its own system of DRR. As the climate menace worsens, the G20 has an important role to play in ushering a culture of proactive disaster management across the world.



The G20's Role

2



Many of the G20 countries are vulnerable to natural disasters, with five member countries appearing in the 2022 World Disaster Risk Index’s list of 15 nations with the highest disaster risk in the world (see Table 1).

Two among the G20 member countries—Japan and India—were also ranked in a list of 10 countries most affected by climate change in 2019 (See Table 2).

Naturally, there is a growing awareness among these countries to ensure climate protection and reduce the risk of natural disasters within their territories. The 2023 Climate Change Performance Index¹⁰ ranks the climate protection performance of G20 countries as: high—India, the UK, Germany; medium—the European Union, Egypt, Spain, Indonesia, France, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand; low—Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, Argentina; and very low—Japan, China, the US, Australia, Canada, Russia, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia.

Figure 1: Disaster Risk Index of countries with highest disaster risk worldwide (2022)

Countries	Disaster Risk Score
Philippines	46.82
India	42.31
Indonesia	41.46
Colombo	38.37
Mexico	37.55
Myanmar	35.49
Mozambique	34.37
China	28.7
Bangladesh	27.9
Pakistan	26.75
Russia	26.54
Vietnam	25.85
Peru	25.41
Somalia	25.07
Yemen	24.26

Note: The five G20 member countries in this list have been highlighted.
 Source: “Countries with the highest disaster risk worldwide in 2022,” Statista 2023.⁸

Figure 2: Climate Risk Index of 10 most affected countries in 2019

Countries	Climate Risk Score
Mozambique	2.67
Zimbabwe	6.17
The Bahamas	6.5
Japan	14.5
Malawi	15.17
Afghanistan	16
India	16.67
South Sudan	17.33
Nigeria	18.17
Bolivia	19.67

Note: The two G20 member countries in this list have been highlighted.

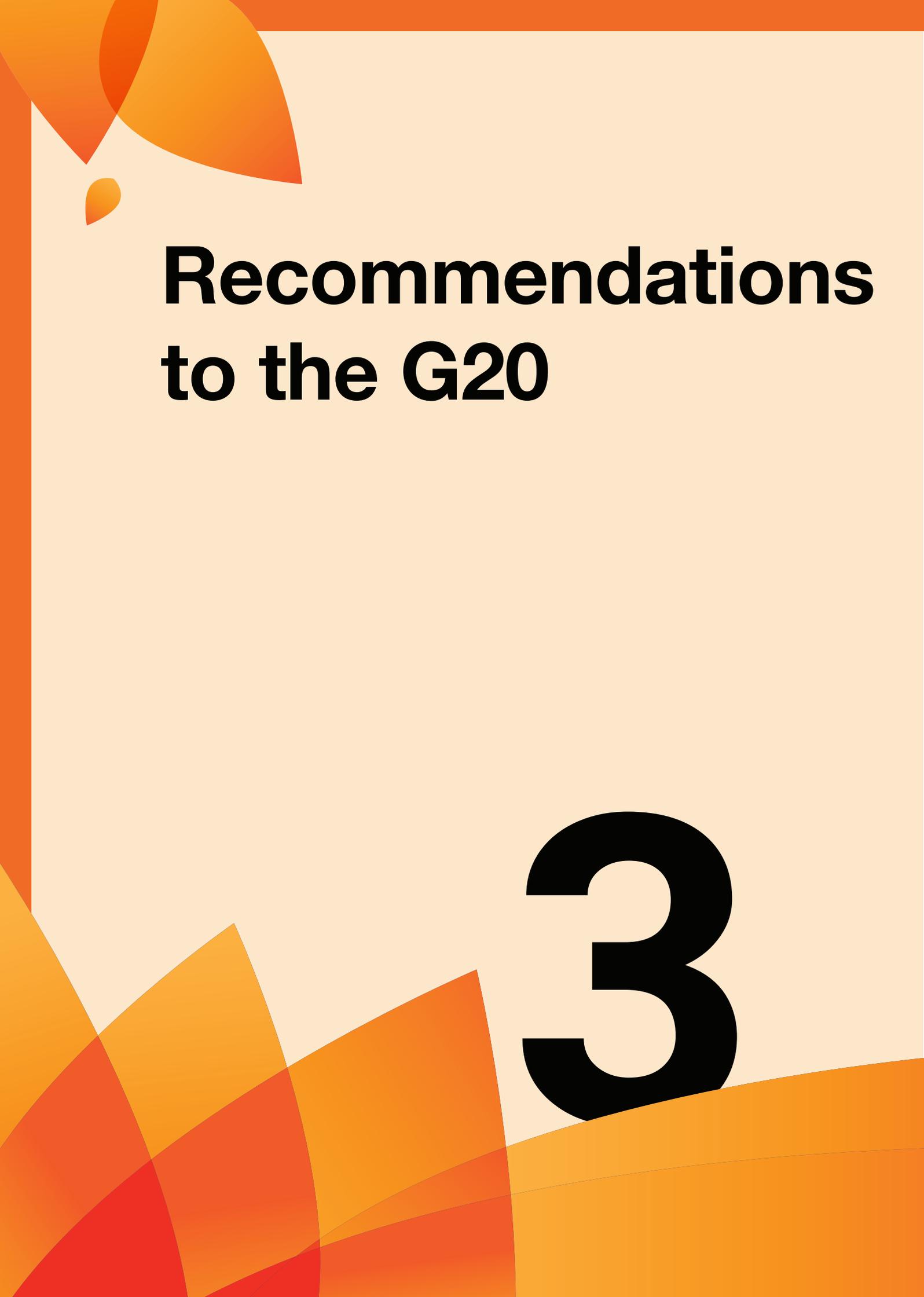
Source: Global Climate Risk Index 2019: German Watch.⁹

All the G20 member countries also adhere to the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction.^h Further, fuelled by the disastrous impact of the pandemic, this commitment has led to the adoption of DRR as an area of cooperation under the G20 and the formulation of a working group. Indeed, the United Nations already stated: “We need to start investing now to protect long-term development against climate and other disaster risks. To achieve that, the support of the world’s largest economies is indispensable.”¹¹

Accordingly, the working group is undertaking discussions on building

global coverage of early warning systems, disaster resilient infrastructure, stronger financial frameworks, disaster response systems, and increased application of ecosystems-based approaches to DRR. It intends to include considerations for the Sendai Framework’s mid-term review, inform future global policies and initiatives related to DRR, and renew multilateral cooperation at all levels.¹² In this effort, a holistic case study of cautionaries and best practices in building multilateral disaster management from the global South (which is highly prone to disasters) is essential for the G20.

^h The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) provides its signatories with concrete actions to protect development gains from the risk of disasters.



Recommendations to the G20

3



The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, one of the deadliest disasters in modern history, triggered a rethinking of disaster management in the Indian Ocean region. It triggered the BIMSTEC's involvement in disaster management, and also proved to be the catalyst for ASEAN's current multilayered system of disaster management, involving local, national, regional, and international actors. While there are still areas for improvement within ASEAN's overall regional disaster management structure, it can serve as a starting point for the G20, acting as a reference for the development of the grouping's multilateral disaster management structures.

However, it is as important to be aware of potential problems as it is to acquire best practices. Accordingly, the following recommendations on multilateral disaster management are based on challenges faced by the BIMSTEC and their corresponding lessons from ASEAN. It is aimed to help the G20 working group on DRR to cooperate more effectively.

Formulate a disaster management agreement

To pave the way for collective DRR through the G20, there is a need to formally develop an agreement that can serve as the backbone for multilateral engagement. With disasters intensifying in intensity and frequency — and frequently causing transboundary impacts — ad-hoc bilateral practices, as exists in the BIMSTEC region, may no longer be as effective in managing disasters. As such, a more institutionalised approach is necessary. The G20 Troika—currently comprising of Indonesia, India, and Brazil—that came together to fuel efforts to achieve targets set by the Sendai Framework,¹³ needs to take the lead in formulating this agreement.

For example, in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) forms the foundation of the region's disaster management ecosystem. By formalising Southeast Asia's disaster management practices in such a manner, ASEAN has been able to institutionalise a collective response to disasters in the region, in turn enhancing the sustainability of its disaster management mechanisms.



Ensure that the G20 disaster risk reduction framework is plugged into international frameworks and protocols on disaster management to avoid stagnation

To ensure that the G20's DRR measures continue to evolve according to the rapidly changing risk scape, the grouping must ensure that its initiatives are plugged into the broader global disaster management frameworks and protocols. This will enable the G20 to not only keep track of its various initiatives, but will also contribute to the global disaster management ecosystem with specific priorities, outcomes, and targets. Furthermore, this will uphold the momentum that was generated by the creation of the G20 DRR working group.

For example, disaster-related initiatives by ASEAN have a connection to the AADMER and are therefore 'plugged' into an overarching regional framework.¹⁴ Moreover, to ensure synergy with the global conversation on disaster management, this document also incorporates relevant global agreements related to disaster management such as the Sendai Framework.¹⁵ Similarly,

such a provision in the G20 to cohere to present and future global protocols on disaster management, will ascertain a buy-in not just from its members, but from other partners as well.

Develop a mechanism for sharing knowledge and best practices amongst the member states

Sharing of knowledge, information or technical know-how between member states is an important practice for multilateral organisations. With the G20 establishing a DRR working group with the aim of "encourage[ing] collective work by the G20, undertak[ing] multi-disciplinary research and exchange[ing] best practices on disaster risk reduction,"¹⁶ there is a need for a mechanism through which members states can work together to share knowledge. This will help it advance on its priorities of global coverage of early warning systems, making infrastructure systems more disaster resilient and help in building stronger national DRR financial frameworks.

In ASEAN, knowledge sharing is practised through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting



(ADMM) and the ADMM Plus.ⁱ They act as an effective platform for practical cooperation between ASEAN member states and its dialogue partners.¹⁷ Through working groups, militaries in ASEAN member states have been able to work together to leverage their niche capacities in areas such as logistics, building infrastructure, transportation as well as distribution of relief items to support humanitarian responses.

Develop a civil-military interface and Track 2 level engagements for initiatives to be relevant on the ground

Government and military aside, civil society actors, academia, private sector, and local communities also play a vital role in facilitating multilateral disaster management. As such, there is a need to develop cooperation in civil-military relations in times of peace such that they are able to interact alongside each other in times of humanitarian emergencies. A cooperative relationship between these actors has several characteristics including the ability to communicate information from one actor to another, as well as use this ability to operate

alongside each other. ASEAN is no stranger to civil-military coordination, as seen by its inclusion in the ASEAN Standby Arrangements for Disaster Relief and Emergency Response (SASOP). Established by the AADMER, the SASOP provides member states with the procedures for joint disaster operations including the “facilitation and utilisation of military and civilian assets and capacities”.¹⁸

While the UN Office for DRR is already supporting the G20 DRR working group, there is also a need to further include national and local civil society groups. Similar to the AADMER partnership group in Southeast Asia, such a mechanism that includes civil society will act as a bridge between the G20 and local communities, ensuring greater on-the-ground knowledge.¹⁹

G20 must invest in a mechanism for multilateral disaster response

With several countries in the G20, including Australia, Indonesia and India, at risk of increased disasters, there is a need for member states to further define

i The ADMM Plus refers to the platform for ASEAN and its eight dialogue partners—Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the US (collectively called ‘Plus’), to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region.



their role as regional humanitarian actors – particularly in terms of a response force. However, it is critical to keep the issue of sovereignty sensitivities in mind when devising the creation of such a force. The militaries of member states should be able to operate as part of a multilateral response, while still upholding their national identities. The G20 must be especially mindful of this, when working on its objective of strengthening national and global disaster response system.²⁰

In this regard, as per the ‘One ASEAN, One Response’ policy, ASEAN supports its member states using both their national flag as well as the ASEAN flag during disaster response operations. Effectively, this affirms each ASEAN member states’ sovereignty, while still maintaining a ‘One ASEAN’ response during disaster operations.²¹

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