

A report bringing out -

Community response to the recent catastrophe due to massive flash floods and landslides causing severe damage to land, life and livelihoods in the Uttarakhand Himalayas.

Massive cloud bursts caused severe flash floods and landslides in different parts of Uttarakhand Himalayas on the 15th and 16th of June this year. This year the damage and loss of life, livelihood, land and property has reached an alarming level. The active landslides continue to haunt the mountain communities living in the lap of the mighty Himalayas. The system responded to this massive emergency and did whatever was possible to rescue stranded tourists from the mountains but for the local communities living there, the nightmare still continues.

Many volunteers from all over the world came forward in solidarity and support for the victims of this tragedy and are still working hard to provide immediate relief to the stranded communities. Many friends and coworkers of Himalaya Seva Sangh and HIMCON have joined hands in this process. In the process we also visited and talked to several men and women from among the local communities to understand what needs to be done to bring peace and harmony back in nature. We would like to share the highlights of a spontaneous response from a section of the affected community that gave us some food for thought.

- Most people saw this catastrophe as a warning signal from nature to all of us, challenging the present pace of human interventions, developments and lifestyles which is disturbing the fragile ecology and environment of the growing Himalayan mountain systems.
- A wise old man said that such a crisis is an opportunity for any society to sit back and rethink our priorities while making a paradigm shift and may be take a few steps backwards in order to save ourselves.
- A lot of them said that the increased pace of blasting for various construction activities in the fragile Himalaya ecology has activated so many landslides that have become a cause of continuous damage and destruction to the land, water, forests, property, people and livelihoods of the mountain communities. One woman even commented that what are we going to do with the roads and modern concrete structures if our farm lands, water sources, springs and forests are destroyed by these increasing landslides every year. She said that it is time we revert back to our traditional housing system that went with the rhythm of these mountains and were constructed with locally available materials.
- A lot of them saw massive soil erosion and destruction of farm lands caused by these landslides as a major threat and challenge for their life and livelihoods.
- Someone said that although relief, rehabilitation and reconstructions after such a catastrophe has to be done at several levels but the biggest priority is to find out ways and means to stop the increasing landslides while putting a break on the highly mechanized developmental activities.

After making a detailed analysis of all the inputs that we got while talking to the affected communities we found that the major challenges and threats have been wisely defined by the local affected communities and they point out towards an ecologically sustainable action program to be taken up by all concerned. Some of the suggestions and recommendations from the community that we found doable are as follows:

- Community wants to study and find out the reasons for increased landslides causing massive destruction to their farm lands, life and livelihoods in the Himalayan region.
- They want to reclaim and save their farm lands getting destroyed by the increasing landslides.
- There is strong felt need to understand and find out ways for stopping landslides and soil erosion in the mountains.
- People want to revive and rejuvenate their springs that are getting affecting due to excessive human intervention and landslides.
- Some people strongly felt that mountain communities should go back looking in to the traditional practices of house construction using locally available construction materials following the traditional wisdom of identifying stable spots where construction should take place.

We will continue to explore and take small steps according to our capacities and resources available along with the affected mountain communities to work for this agenda that the community has given us during these times of crises. We will be happy to get comments and suggestions from all concerned for developing a positive direction for this action program.

We invite likeminded friends, volunteers, activists and organizations interested in joining hands in this venture with the Himalayan communities.

You can write to us at :

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With solidarity and support.

Manoj Pande

On behalf of the mountain communities.