6th International Wildland Fire Conference:

Regional Statement of the South Asia Region – An Input Paper to the Conference Statement

13 October 2015

General Fire Assessment

In the South Asia region almost all fires are human-induced, some of which are linked with livelihoods of the people. Wildfires, among other natural disasters, have been emerging as a significant threat during the last decade, adversely impacting socio-economy and environment in the region.

Recently, the South Asia region has experienced a number of increasing incidence of unprecedented large and disastrous wildfires affecting forests and other natural vegetation, and an increasing vulnerability to communities and secondary effects of fire; e.g. accelerating sediment-related disasters (e.g. soil erosion, landslides, floods etc.) and impacts of fire and smoke pollution on human health and security. Particularly, the forests of the Hindu Kush-Himalaya region are more vulnerable to wildfire due to increasing human interventions in the fragile mountain ecosystems. In addition, wildfire incident management is extremely difficult due to steep mountain landscapes that are difficult to access, have scarce water sources; poor communication and a lack of infrastructure is a challenge. This is further aggravated by the lack of national capacity and resources to assist in fire response in remote communities and in large fire situations. With the consequences of climate change, notably the dwindling mountain ice and snow cover and thus decreasing water supply, the overall development is entering a vicious cycle in the region, resulting in serious threats to human lives and property, the destruction and degradation of valuable forest ecosystems and natural and cultural heritage sites each year. The combination of wildland (vegetation) fire emissions, including agricultural burnings, with industrial emissions generate the "Asian Brown Cloud", a major regional environmental pollution phenomenon.

Most of the countries lack fire management capabilities, including early detection, monitoring, early warning, response, impact assessment, and agreements for cross-border cooperation in fire management. Moreover, transboundary fires and smoke pollution are evident and call for enhanced international cooperation in sharing of technological and financial resources for capacity building in wildland fire management.

In many instances, wildfire prevention and mitigation activities are only indicative at the level of implementation. Firefighting is entirely ground-based with limited availability of advanced technologies such as aerial firefighting assets. The key stakeholders, for instance government organizations, regional organizations / institutions, are often working in isolation and need to create synergies for collective actions aimed at increasing resilience of communities and nations to wildfire disasters and climate change adaptation.

In this scenario, the community-based fire management approach is strategically becoming accepted in the region. Experiences of participatory community fire management initiatives from Nepal can be an example for sharing with neighbours as was demonstrated in the "Regional Pan-Asia / Pacific Consultation on Building Advanced National and Regional Capacities in Integrated Fire Management based on Participatory Involvement of Local Communities" held in Lalitpur, Nepal, in November 2012. Both capacity building of local communities and international exchange of expertise in fire management, has been facilitated by the UNISDR Regional South Asia Wildland Fire Network in the spirit of the recommendations of the 4th and 5th International Wildland Fire Conferences of 2007 and 2011.

Conclusions

The increasing threats to ecosystems, economies and people in South Asia, require targeted responses by developing fire management policies and local to national fire management capabilities.

As the UNISDR Regional South Asia Wildland Fire Network is playing an increasing role in providing an informal but efficient platform for policy dialogue and communication, information sharing and technology transfer through project implementation in the region, the Network should be formally recognized as a key

partner and be supported by the United Nations and other donors including international cooperation agencies working in developing countries.

It should also be noted that it is important to encourage the key stakeholders for cooperation and collaboration, for instance government organizations, international/regional organizations/ institutions (e.g. UNISDR, GFMC, FAO, ITTO, SAARC, ICIMOD, AFoCo, etc.) in the Asian region to get involved in and support the UNISDR- South Asia and Pan Asia Wildland Fire Networks. The International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism (IWPM) offers an international platform for sharing expertise in fire management.

Recommendations

For the implementation wildland fire management activities in the South Asia region, it is recommended to:

1. Enhance existing national / regional capability in fire management, including early detection, monitoring, early warning, fire response and impact assessment;

2. Enhance cooperation among countries within the region and at inter-regional levels, aimed at sharing technology, expertise and data exchange in fire management; the activation of the International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism (IWPM) may offer an appropriate opportunity;

3. Integrate fire as a component of land use and forest management tool by giving emphasis on:
    • Improving participatory / community-based fire management approaches and institutional and technological capabilities at all levels;
    • Building capacity to 'wise-use-of-fires' for habitat management and biodiversity conservation;
    • Promoting education and awareness-raising programmes on wildland fires;
    • Supporting countries to conduct national fire and fire management assessments, formulate legal frameworks and strategies, build sustainable fire management capabilities and institutions, develop fire management plans and human resources;
    • Developing policies, strategies and action plans aimed at building capacities in local, national and transboundary forest fire management.

4. Implement the mandates and objectives of the UN-ISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group / Global Wildland Fire Network and Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) and to support implementation of building fire management capability at both local and national levels, as well as through bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements;

5. Follow the examples of Southeast Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia and establish a Regional South Asia Fire Management Resource Center, which will serve as a regional center of excellence for capacity building and a facilitator of cross-boundary cooperation in fire management, operating as a decentralized regional center of the GFMC within the Global Wildland Fire Network;

6. Create an enabling environment from all possible donors including national, international, bilateral, multi-lateral and private foundations for financial, technical and other resource support for wildland fire management; and

7. Call for North-South, South-South regional cooperation in fire management to support fire management without borders in emergencies: Development of global principles for collective action.