

# Poverty of policies

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**Rather than focussing on post-crisis relief and rescue alone, Pakistan needs to evolve an integrated disaster preparedness and management system with focus on hunger reduction and investment in human beings.**

“What was the worst form of poverty that you ever experienced?” About 20 of us belonging to various walks of life had to answer this question in a meeting on ‘community of practice for poverty reduction’ organised by Swiss Development Corporation couple of months ago. Everyone was reluctant to share their experiences in public. To break the silence, the moderator started by narrating his personal experience and then everyone was narrating his/her experience. The crux of the matter was that poverty was a state of helplessness, hopelessness, humiliation, lack of choices, lack of freedom (all sort of human freedoms), marginalisation and isolation.

I personally felt extremely poor, when last year my mother was in coma due to multiple organ failure before she passed away. She was in one of the best medical institutions, under the treatment of best physicians. I could feel her breath, but doctors were telling me that she had undergone an acute septicaemic shock and it was useless to put her on ventilator. It was the worst form of helplessness for me.

Today I am trying to imagine the helplessness and poverty of those who could see their dear ones, buried alive in rubble and debris of collapsed buildings. Pity, they could hear the screams and cries for help but could not do much to provide rescue. Rescue requires preparedness, and we were never prepared for any disaster. We have witnessed Tsunami, Katrina, and Rita in recent past, thinking that nothing like them can ever occur to us.

To me, the difference between ‘natural calamity’ and ‘disaster’ is that of planning, preparedness, and having ‘shock absorbers’ intact. It is true there is a limit to which one can avoid a natural calamity. However, with right prioritisation, anticipatory planning and political will to act, one can stop a natural calamity turning into major human disaster.

Our lack of planning proved how important it is to build safe hospitals and schools in disaster-prone areas. Many schools were damaged during the earthquake with the result that children were buried alive under the rubble. It is true that the earthquake was of an exceptional magnitude and the strongest in living memory in Pakistan, but the Himalayas, where the epicentre of the quake was, are located on a tectonic plate and have long been identified as a region at risk by earthquake experts. Our policy makers and planners should have kept this warning in mind. Reinforcing buildings in disaster prone areas is essential.

Loosing hospitals (because they were not built to withstand earthquakes) has become a ‘double disaster’, a disaster in that they are destroyed, but also in that their equipment and their staff are no longer available to rescue other victims. The destruction of schools means the loss of a whole generation. New structures, therefore, need to be built safe and old ones need to be systematically reinforced or retrofitted to avoid future disasters.

We (South Asians in general and Pakistanis in particular) as a society believe in reactive planning. We like to wait for the crisis to happen and only afterwards try to do post-crisis management. Our ruling class has its own style of post-crisis management. It has put a price tag for every mishap. Instead of investing money in remove the likely cause of an accident, our rulers announce monetary compensation (it is extremely cumbersome process to receive that compensation and sometimes these are just the political announcements that never get materialised) for the victims/survivors after an accident has taken place.

This monetary compensation cannot be a substitute for rescue operation. A rescue operation in mature societies consists of more than just pulling out the dead bodies and picking up the debris. Unfortunately despite attaining the age of 58 years as a country, we are still not mature enough to think beyond pulling out the dead bodies. We never give attention to preparedness and like to keep the people dependent on external help.

One can learn from one's neighbours. In India 'Disaster Risk Management Programme' is set up with the main goal to build capacity of the local communities to respond to a natural calamity, since local communities are invariably the first ones to respond to a calamity. Had we concentrated on building the shock absorbing capacity of local communities, people waiting in far flung areas for rescue might have been more prepared to help themselves.

In Pakistan, too, the UNDP has proposed a five year programme to the federal government to be executed by the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) within the structure of the Emergency Relief Cell. It was in this connection that UNDP commissioned an independent review of disaster management policies and systems in Pakistan. The report of the review, launched in January 2005, describes Pakistan's disaster management approach in these words: "There are no long-term, inclusive and coherent institutional arrangements to address disaster issues with a long-term vision. For instance, the Emergency Relief Cell is mandated to deal only with post-disaster scenarios. Disasters are viewed in isolation from the processes of mainstream development and poverty alleviation planning. Some of the large-scale development projects are bringing new forms of disaster and adding to the vulnerability of at-risk communities. The Left Bank Outfall Drainage (LBOD) project and link canals are significant examples in Pakistan".

Some of the disaster management agencies in Pakistan include Emergency Relief Cell (ERC), Pakistan Meteorological Department, Federal Flood Commission (FFC), National Crisis Management Cell, Civil Defence, provincial relief departments, provincial irrigation departments, provincial health departments, provincial agriculture and livestock departments, provincial food departments, Communication & Works, Planning & Development, armed forces, Police, Dams Safety Council and SUPARCO.

According to the review report, disaster management bodies in Pakistan lack knowledge about hazard identification, risk assessment and management. The officials of the two important organisations for disaster management — ERC, headed by cabinet secretary and FFC — are not given adequate training. Disaster and relief departments remain under-sourced, untrained and are not given required importance. There is no linkage between disaster management, development planning, and environmental management. It is perceived that absence of a central authority for integrated disaster management and lack of coordination within and between disaster related organisations is responsible for ineffective and inefficient disaster management in the country.

The review report further adds that applied disaster management policy sometimes carries strategic biases that are aimed at protecting locations and infrastructure of greater economic, political and strategic significance at the cost of areas and communities with lesser influence and importance. This has proved true in the current relief efforts. The grief and sorrow for the losses due to recent

earthquake in Pakistan was felt equally for all affected sites, be it in Margalla Towers Islamabad or in Balakot. However, the relief response by the government was not the same for both sites. In some areas there were no signs of any relief/rescue operation even after five days of the tragic earthquake.

Same holds for relief provided by non-governmental actors. Though highly appreciable, in general it has lacked coordination and integration and seems to be supply driven rather than demand driven.

Reconstruction and rehabilitation take me to the issue of survivors of this tragedy. Most of them have lost their loved ones. They are emotionally shattered, physically injured, and economically helpless. Once they start rebuilding their lives, we will be witnessing a massive displacement, accompanied by all sorts of social and economic side affects that particularly target women and children. How prepared are we for this massive displacement? What are our plans for the survivors' rehabilitation? As international aid is pouring in, how are we planning to undertake the reconstruction and finally what are the alternative livelihood options in the urban areas that we can offer to the displaced population? To answer these questions, one needs to take an anticipatory planning approach. UNDP's review report has already warned that state-level disaster preparedness and mitigation measures are heavily tilted towards structural aspects and undermine non-structural elements such as knowledge and capacities of local people, and the related livelihood protection issues.

Disaster management and rehabilitation has never been a priority in our national policies. The five year plans, in place since 1957, remain silent on preparedness for and management of natural calamities. Some of these plans, though, have identified mismanagement and scarcity of water resources, poor health infrastructure and flood threats at few stages of planning and implementation during the last three decades. But the strategies and solutions they have proposed are either relief-driven or event-based without having an integrated disaster management plan.

It is a coincidence that today (October 16) is the World Food Day, a day when international community reaffirms its commitment to reduce the world's hunger to half by 2015. Owing to lack of disaster mitigation and preparedness policies, the number of the hungry in Pakistan is bound to increase with many from 5-7 million earthquake affected people joining in.

Also while relief operation in Pakistan is going on, international community observed International Day for Disaster Reduction on October 12. The lesson our policy makers must draw from October 8 earthquake was encapsulated in this year's theme for the day: "Invest to prevent disaster." We cannot stop natural calamities, but we can and must equip individuals and communities better to withstand them. Those most vulnerable to nature's wrath are usually the poorest, which means when we reduce poverty, we also reduce vulnerability.

But do government policies address the issue of poverty as it should be? Sadly, no. In an attempt to reduce poverty and hunger, the government has come up with a World Bank funded poverty reduction strategy paper in December 2003. In the paper, the government has recognised that poverty is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond the notion of income and encompasses social, economic and political exclusion.

So far so good. The problem arises when the paper suggests ways and means to address these problems. The official vision of poverty reduction strategy is based on four pillars. It says the poverty will be reduced through accelerated and broad-based economic growth while (i) maintaining macroeconomic stability, (ii) improving governance and consolidating devolution, (iii) investing in human capital and (iv) targeting the poor and the vulnerable.

Under the strategy, the whole focus seems to be on 'accelerating' economic growth at any cost. But though we are achieving impressive growth rates (more than 8 per cent for the current fiscal year), we will soon be unable to maintain macroeconomic stability. Increasingly fuel prices, inflation, and the aftermath of the earthquake will go a long way in destabilising Pakistan's macroeconomic environment. The second pillar — that is, governance — is deteriorating fast. Had there been good governance, faulty buildings such as Margalla Towers and poorly constructed school buildings could never have been there in the first place. Likewise devolution has been very cleverly used to turn non-party elections into PML-Q supported elections. The third pillar of the strategy — investment in human capital — is being completely ignored. Of course, the above mentioned factors have turned the fourth pillar upside down, resulting in the poor and the vulnerable getting targeted by natural calamities (turned disasters).

It is about time that we learn our lessons. Poverty in all its forms reduces people's resilience and threatens their livelihood making them more vulnerable to external shocks. Let us not only invest but invest in 'human beings' to prevent disasters. Human dimension of development is a must but it should not be restricted to the development of few selected human beings alone.

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\* From The News Weekley:

<http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/oct2005-weekly/nos-16-10-2005/pol1.htm#4>

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