

How beggars can be choosers

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Apprehensions about the official rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in the quake-hit areas abound. A comprehensive, participatory and professionally prepared plan for rebuilding may help remove some of them.

Despite the fact that October 8 earthquake is a national tragedy, it is well nigh impossible to imagine the grief of those who lost their beloved relations, properties, and/or places to which their memories belonged. Unfortunately, those who are most affected from this tragedy have least or negligible say in planning and implementation of remedial measures. After losing their major assets, now they are being deprived of freedom of choice as well. Their miseries would have lessened to a certain extent, had there been a system of effective governance in place.

While the earthquake jolted structures even with strong foundations throughout the affected areas, it adversely affected something that neither has been on a strong footing, nor has a strong foundation. I am referring to the 'state of governance in Pakistan'. Shaky foundations of governance are evident from the lack of preparedness, slow mobilisation of rescue operations and poor coordination among different relief agencies, price gouging and lack of transparency.

Under these circumstances, it was fortunate that the international community immediately came to our rescue, trying to fill in the vacuum created by the lack of preparedness in Pakistan. However, the magnitude of response of the international community is generally inadequate. In many cases the verbal commitments have not materialised whereas in other cases the loans are being extended by international financial institutions (IFIs) in the guise of disaster assistance. The government authorities as well as the United Nations bigwigs are pleading for more and more funds from donor community and are convening a high profile donors forum in Islamabad which would be attended by Kofi Anan among other international leaders. A similar effort (without much output) was carried out in Geneva last month. But one should learn from the partial success of the Geneva conference and ponder on the reasons for donors' cold response.

As an individual, would you be willing to extend any charity to someone who is a known 'professional beggar'? And I am not talking of street beggars only. I am applying the literal meaning of a beggar — someone who lives by asking people for money or food. I have tried to figure out the possible reasons why professional beggars did not deserve my charity. Here are the few reasons I could think of. Perhaps a feeling that professional beggars are forced to beg by some one who would take away their alms; or a feeling that they would misuse my money (for drugs, arms etc); or a feeling that they already have enough resources but they just like to ask for more and more; or a feeling that if they don't curtail their unnecessary spending and a lavish life style then why should I give them my hard earned money.

Now just think if I am a conscious representative of a donor, also answerable to my tax payers, would I be willing to throw unlimited money in response to the appeal made by a government whose human development as well as transparency records are one of the worst on table of nations? Would as a donor I be impressed with the centralised nature of the response which does not allow the

national airline to carry my donation free of cost unless it is addressed to 'President's Relief Fund'? Would as a donor I get impressed with the fact that relevant stakeholders and representatives are excluded from planning and materialising the remedial measures? Finally what would be my response to the government's unwillingness to re-orient its priorities, such as deal for military aircraft SAAB, shifting of the military's General Headquarter, and the lavish style of working? I am not sure if the presidential eleven is ready to answer some of these questions in the forthcoming donor's forum.

Some people may say that it is not the right time to talk of these things and we should not raise fundamental questions such as the role of the army and the 'banned' religious outfits in relief activities. I was even told that lack of transparency in remedial efforts should not be questioned as it may affect the donors' commitment. "Even if 50 per cent funds are misused, we should still be optimistic that at least half of them are being used to help out the people who are in real need," said a speaker at a seminar the other day. You may or may not agree with these arguments. I certainly do not buy this point of view.

While I don't want to undermine the urgency of relief measures, I still believe that ends cannot justify the means. Unfortunately one cannot convince our policymakers on this point as they have witnessed and are bound to follow the US policy of justifying the means by ends in the 'war on terrorism'.

International community had to accept the otherwise banned religious organisation as well as Pakistani Army in a leading role during the relief phase. However, most of them have directly or indirectly showed their concern on an 'extended' role for Pakistan Army and its exclusive involvement in the reconstruction operations. According to reliable sources, the rescue team of the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) moved into quake affected areas after negotiating that the army authorities will give reconstruction activities a civilian face.

As for as banned religious groups are concerned, they have regained credibility among people through this disaster, a fact that has disturbed progressive Pakistanis as well as the United States and its allies in war on terrorism. No wonder, it is commonly perceived in Pakistan that the main purpose of a NATO contingent's presence here is to keep an eye on the activities of Al-Rasheed Trust as well as Jamaatud Dawa. "If NATO forces did not come for rescue during tsunami and the US forces were not spared to provide immediate relief to Katrina victims, then what is special with Pakistan earthquake that led NATO to move into Pakistan?" This question may have nothing to do with the reality but it is the word of mouth everywhere.

The army and the jihadis are not the only concern for the major donors, who are also concerned about the governance issues at large. When the representatives of major donors had a meeting with the government officials at the Economic Affairs Division last week, one of the issues raised by them was 'The New Murree' project and its related expenses. The donors questioned whether it was wise to carry on with the spending of Rs 60 billion on the project in the wake of the earthquake. They also asked why these funds could not get transferred towards the reconstruction activities.

Lack of public trust in the transparency of the spending on relief and the lack of attention to the grinding poverty in the affected areas is another major concern. For instance, there is a strong concern on the non-transparent modality of making compensatory payments to the affectees.

The World Bank (WB) as well as the government of Pakistan are separately assessing the cost of reconstruction in quake affected areas. The World Bank has estimated that 2.651 billion dollars would be required for reconstruction and rehabilitation, whereas the government is putting forward a figure of 5.6 billion dollars for the same purpose. I do not want to imply that the government is

exaggerating the cost by three billion dollars, however, I would like to caution that in the absence of any transparent mechanism for spending, this is what a laypeople is bound to perceive. This may be another factor which will adversely affect the donors' commitment.

The international community has already witnessed reconstruction after tsunami. So far, the post-tsunami reconstruction has turned into the development of commercial sites in the name of the poor. What is the guarantee that we would not follow the same approach? My worry is that our focus will also be on developing hi-fi shopping malls and business areas in major cities whereas the rural areas will remain neglected.

Disparities have also been witnessed in tsunami relief efforts. Many areas were bypassed to provide relief to major cities. Our government, therefore, needs to show a strong political will so that reconstruction is unbiased and non-discriminatory.

Still another concern is the danger of reconstruction on seismically inappropriate sites, using inadequately revised building codes without proper oversight. By doing so the authorities will create a false sense of security among the relief victims. But it will be a criminal negligence that may lead to another tragedy in future.

Finally, the lack of involvement of representatives of all stakeholders in relief and reconstruction agencies is a major factor affecting the credibility of all efforts at the government level.

One way to overcome all these apprehension may lie in planning fool proof reconstruction and rehabilitation. A comprehensive reconstruction strategy covering seismic, livelihood, environmental, cultural, psychological and social aspects should be presented in the forthcoming donors' forum so that the donors are able to find answers to all their questions in it. They help in eliciting more meaningful commitments from them.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) and civil society outfits have already proved their worth in relief activities. They should be formally invited to give their input in planning for reconstruction and rehabilitation. Last week an Islamabad-based organisation convened a meeting of the like-minded individuals to devise a strategy about the reconstruction. It was during this meeting that a Citizens' Commission was formed to facilitate independent monitoring and evaluation of the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities.

The primary objectives of the commission were identified as follows:

1 To ensure a much higher level of preparedness for future emergencies including much faster and better coordinated relief measures and the clear delegation of responsibilities.

2 To ensure the delivery of fair compensation to all eligible affectees, especially women and children, and to help file claims on behalf of those losing lives and assets due to legally culpable violation of due regulatory procedures.

3 To ensure transparency in the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts including public disclosure of all plans, receipts and expenditures.

4 To ensure that the reconstruction is just, sustainable, participatory and supportive of the dignified restoration of livelihoods.

5 To ensure that the reconstruction conforms to the best practices relevant for construction in the ecology of the disaster affected areas. 6 To hold all organisations and agencies involved in the recovery process accountable on behalf of citizens.

7 To foster a better understanding of the systemic socio-economic and political reasons for the unduly excessive loss of lives and property compared to the comparative shocks elsewhere.

As the primary vehicle for monitoring the rehabilitation and recovery process, the commission has agreed to issue, in collaboration with the NGOs active in the earthquake affected areas, regular fact sheets and consolidated three-monthly reports on the state of the earthquake affected Areas detailing stated targets and actual achievements with identification of major gaps and recommendations for remedial actions.

It is hoped that the government appreciates the positive intentions of civil society groups in forming the commission. A constructive partnership between the government and the civil society will indicate that as a nation we are not professional baggers and do have a mechanism of working for sustainable disaster mitigation measures. It will not only enhance the government's credibility at the domestic level but also help to elevate its image among the donors who may as a result provide a meaningful assistance towards rehabilitation.

P.S.

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<http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/nov2005-weekly/nos-13-11-2005/pol1.htm#1>

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