

# **Disaster management in Pakistan**

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Pakistan is one of the most disaster prone countries in the world. Generally divided into natural and man-made, all disasters are managed by a systematic process of disaster management that aims at minimising the damage and restoration of people to their normal state. Pakistan is well familiar with disasters which have caused a heavy toll in terms of men and material.

However, due to its inadequate preparedness to manage disasters, it has failed to effectively cope with them. Though, after earthquake-2005, a systematic effort was geared up to develop a viable structure of disaster management evolving into establishment of NDMA, it has yet to achieve the required standards. The heavy floods of 2010 exposed its unpreparedness and frail management resulting in unprecedented proportion of losses and damages. Since, the magnitude of implications is too heavy to bear; the efficient disaster management comes, on the priority, second to none of other needs. Therefore, it is necessary to formulate an organised disaster management system to cope with disasters that may break out in future.

Disaster is defined as "a catastrophic event that brings about great damage, destruction and devastation to life and property." The damage caused by disasters varies depending upon geographical location, climate severity and above all, the types of disasters. Disasters have

been classified into two categories - natural disasters and man-made disasters. Cyclones, tsunami, floods, droughts, earthquakes and volcanoes are a few examples of natural disasters; and wars and nuclear accidents fall in the category of the man-made disasters. All these calamities and catastrophes incur heavy toll on man and his habitat. However, the disasters can be mitigated and losses can be minimised with efficient preparedness and management.

Disaster management is the mechanism of coordinating and utilising available resources to deal emergencies effectively, thereby saving lives, avoiding injuries and minimising losses. This also deals with strategic and organisational management processes used to protect vital assets from hazard risks in such emergencies.

As mentioned earlier, disaster management is a systematic process, consisting ostensibly of four main phases: response, recovery, relief and rehabilitation. However, it remains incomplete without mitigation and preparedness, which are basically pre-disaster management phases. All these phases are crucially important in managing disasters. Mitigation, the very first phase of disaster management, is a sustained action that reduces both short-term and long-term risks to people and property from the hazards and their effects. It involves activities like scientific hazard analysis, vulnerability analysis, risk assessment, avoiding construction in high risk zones, launching awareness campaigns, training and capacity building of responders and managers, etc. Mitigation, therefore, is a persistence effort to lessen the impact that disasters may incur.

Preparedness, the second phase of disaster management, is defined by Global Development Research Center as "a set of steps that enhance the ability of communities and government to respond to a disaster." The steps included in this phase are the maintenance of resource inventory, stockpiling, logistic planning, evacuation planning, communication planning, and needs assessment. The key to effective disaster management is readiness to provide a rapid emergency response. It entails everyone to be prepared to respond to extreme situations.

Response, the next phase of disaster management, includes the action of responding to an emergency. It aims to provide immediate emergency support to a community to maintain health, safety and morale until a permanent solution can be put in place. The steps involved in response phase are situation analysis, crisis maps, information communication, evacuation and shelters, dispatching of resources and early damage assessment. Besides, trained and equipped personnel are required to deal with an emerging crisis.

Recovery, finally, is the process of returning to normal. Recovery phase may be short-term as well as long-term, and it begins after the disaster commences. Recovery phase is overlapped by reconstruction, rehabilitation; spatial planning, infrastructure building, housing, livelihood, social security, transport, clean drinking water, communication and agriculture.

Previously, Pakistan has fallen victim to disasters many a time. The earthquake-2005, Hunza landslides and Floods 2010 are some of the incidents. The available data suggests that Pakistan suffered heavily at the hands of these disasters owing to the lack of efficient disaster management.

Recently, the spate of floods that began late in July of 2010 dealt a serious blow to Pakistan. The floods with such a magnitude had never been witnessed in the history of Pakistan. Torrential monsoon rains in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab were primarily responsible for the floods. The heavy rains also affected Indus river basin. Almost one/fifth of Pakistan submerged in water. Moreover, almost 20 million people were

directly affected by the destruction of property, livelihood and infrastructure. And the death toll rose to about 2,000 people. Had there been no institute to deal with this natural calamity, the damage caused by floods would have been much more.

However, despite establishment of National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) the response was too slow to meet the magnitude of challenge. The purpose behind its establishment was to change national response to emergency situations from reactionary model to an active mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery model. NDMA is the executive arm of the National Disaster Management Commission (NDMC) headed by Prime Minister. Also, NDMA supervises Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMA) and District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMA).

The National Disaster Management Authority has been assigned the task of coordinating the disaster risk management at the national level, implementing disaster risk management strategies, mapping the hazards, developing guidelines, ensuring the establishment of disaster management authorities and Emergency Operation Centres (EOCs) at provincial, district and municipal levels, providing technical assistance to concerned departments, organising training to personnel, serving as a lead agency for NGOs and international cooperation, coordinating with the federal government through National Emergency Operation Centre (NEOC) and requiring any government department or agency to make available needed resources and personnel.

Despite establishment of this organisation assigned with apparently multifarious tasks, disasters in Pakistan are hardly managed effectively. Its preparedness and response during recent floods were found inadequate. "For 10 days, the flooding was only in this province. But we didn't hear from the NDMA and nor did we see any NDMA official. No one even contacted us," said Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Information Minister Iftikhar Hussain.

Disaster management, particularly preparedness in Pakistan has largely remained unsatisfactory. The underlying factors responsible for its inefficiency, besides insufficient resources, are lack of proactive approach and transparency. Moreover, this agency has yet to prove its credibility, strategy and efficiency of infrastructure which lie at the very heart of these critical situations. Another factor that hampers the smooth functioning of disaster management process is duplication of efforts which arise due to the lack of integration between various agencies and organisations involved in the process. Consequently, these multiple factors render management process weak and, therefore, people bear the brunt on their shoulders.

Weaker disaster management, nevertheless, accounts for the damages caused by floods uptill now; as International Monetary Fund (IMF) puts it, "Floods which have devastated Pakistan will present a massive economic and political challenge to its government and people." Apart from economic and social losses, looming food crisis, ravaged infrastructure, multiple health related problems and increased chances of proliferation of extremism are but a few adverse impacts of weak disaster management.

Speaking of the food crisis, almost 17 million acres of agricultural land submerged under water. According to Daily Finance, "A major concern was that the farmers would be unable to meet the fall deadline for planting new seeds in 2010 which implied a loss of food production in 2011 and potential long-term food shortages." Additionally, seven lac acres cotton crops, two lac acres sugarcane, two lac acres rice, five lac tonnes of stocked wheat, three lac acres of animal fodder and stores of grain were lost besides two lac livestock.

In addition to food crisis, outbreak of various diseases further aggravates the situations.

Scores of people have been affected by the fatal diseases like gastroenteritis and diarrhea due to the non-availability of clean drinking water and proper sanitation facilities. Also, the eruption of cholera and multiple skin diseases along with malaria has added to their suffering. Apart from these diseases, there is a sheer dearth of maternity care for thousands of pregnant women. Thus, these victims need medical attention on war footings to save invaluable human lives. The authorities were not prepared to deal with such situation. Even though, the floods were moving gradually ahead, they could not take precautionary measures in the prone areas.

There has been a huge loss to infrastructure. According to Ball State University Center estimate, around 3916 km highway and about 5646 km railway track has been damaged. Their repair costs are expected to be at least \$158 million and \$131 million, respectively. On the other hand, public damage accounting to almost \$1 billion resulted in response to floods. The sorry state of affairs was revealed when authorities were unable to rather incapable of restoring the cut off routes and breaches in river banks. Resultantly, country received a serious economic jolt. In this regard, International Labour Organisation (ILO) said that almost 5.3 million people became jobless. Therefore, "productive and labour intensive job creation programmes are urgently needed to lift millions of people out of poverty that has been aggravated by flood damage." Furthermore GDP would decline from overall 4 per cent to -2 to -5 per cent. Crop losses have stubborn impact on textile industry: the largest manufacturing industry of Pakistan.

Besides, the implications include growth in militancy and crime. 'As soon as Pakistan Army diverted from fighting militant insurgents in the north-west to help in relief efforts, Taliban militants were given a reprieve to regroup', observed the Associated Press. Over and above, the jobless, desperate and dejected youngsters from the affected areas are an easy prey to militant recruitment and criminal activities. It may aggravate the security situation given the inefficiency of the government to address the problems of the victims.

If observed politically, public may perceive the government inefficient thus giving rise to an episode of political unrest. Not only people, the outside donors have also become skeptic. More than that, migration of internally displaced people (IDP) to urban areas incited urban sectarian discord which further hindered the process of management of disaster.

In the light of above facts, it is evident that Pakistan is in dire need of an organised disaster management programme to face the emergency situations and their implications. So far, disorganised and ad hoc methods had been in practice in disaster management system. It is because of this that the country suffered more. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Government of Pakistan to strengthen its policies of disaster management.

In other words, disaster management should be amongst the top priorities of government. NDMA can be strengthened by proper allocation of funds, research, equipment, training and maintenance of transparency. In this regard, effective communication between concerned agencies and with people is a must. Embankment of rivers, disaster proof housing and infrastructure, early warnings, rapid evacuation, nomination of danger zones prior to disaster, establishment of rescue centres and creating public awareness about disasters and safety techniques with their inclusion in curriculum will surely pay dividends.

Disasters often come without early warnings, recent floods in Pakistan, however, took a gradual course. But lack of sound disaster management and unpreparedness policies and their implementation has resulted in grave damages to Pakistan in all the previous disasters. Therefore, the onus lies upon the Government of Pakistan to revisit its policies and strengthen institutions to not only tackle such situations but making them to our best

use. It is high time that the government as well as every citizen of Pakistan plays its own respective role to bring about a positive change.

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