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Pakistan's Floods: How Not to be Caught Off Guard

By Irene A Kuntjoro

Synopsis

The Pakistani government and the international community's response to the recent floods has been heavily criticised for being woefully inadequate. While a national disaster management framework is in place, the government must investigate ways to empower all stakeholders to improve coordination, responses and future preparedness to natural disasters.

Commentary

OFFICIAL RECORDS show that the unfolding flood disaster in Pakistan has led to the deaths of nearly 1,500 people and affected over 15.4 million lives. Despite floods being a regular occurrence in Pakistan, the latest devastation has overwhelmed the government. This fact has largely been blamed on the unprecedented intensity of the monsoon rains. However, it has highlighted serious shortcomings in the state's disaster response system known as the National Disaster Management Framework (NDMF). The framework is comprehensive and covers both national as well as sub-national levels. Its pillars are the National Disaster Management Authority (NMDA) and the Disaster Management Authorities (DMAs) at sub-national levels as lead implementing agencies. If the framework was implemented and the roles of the implementing agencies strengthened, Pakistan would have been more prepared to deal with the current flood disaster. So will it be for future calamities.

Human insecurity and natural disasters

The recent flood has been designated a humanitarian crisis by the United Nations. It is a crisis that reflects how human insecurity can have an impact on the political and security conditions of the state. This humanitarian crisis is affecting communities, infrastructure and the economy and has exacerbated the political crisis faced by the government.

The loss of farmlands and crops in Punjab province, which is the agricultural heartland of Pakistan, has destroyed livelihoods and caused food prices to soar. Survivors have to struggle with potential water and airborne diseases, as well as inadequate food, clean water supply and safe shelters. The flooding has also displaced millions of people from their homes as well as Afghan refugees in the country. In addition, the flooding has damaged power plants that supply electricity to parts of the country. The scale of devastation wrought by the floods is partly due to poor infrastructure. This has been recognised as one of the challenges of disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the NDMF. Unfortunately, the extent of the devastation has yet to be realised by the international community. This provides a significant constraint in addressing human insecurities resulted

from the flooding.

While strategies, working groups and training activities on DRR have taken place, the impacts of the floods reflect the gaps in mainstreaming DRR into development planning. The NMDA and MDAs need to play stronger roles not only in handling responses at the time of disasters but also, more importantly, in coordinating efforts across various sectors to reduce disaster risks. The government should prioritise budget allocation to support these activities. It has been acknowledged in the NMDA Annual Report 2009 that these agencies have been relying heavily on financial support from international donors.

National disaster management framework

The 2005 earthquake, which affected 3.5 million people in Pakistan, led to a shift in its disaster management approach from a reactive to pro-active one and the adoption of the 2006 National Disaster Management Ordinance. The NDMA is the lead agency for the coordination and implementation of DRR, response and recovery plans. In support of this function, DMAs have been established from the national to the municipal levels. The NMDF adopted in 2007 is a cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder platform to guide implementations.

Both NMDA and NMDF recognised the importance of mapping potential hazards and vulnerabilities at all levels. In fact, flooding was viewed as one of the top priority hazards in Pakistan. Hence, disaster management has largely revolved around flood rescue, relief and rehabilitation. Had the NMDF been fully implemented, the impact of the recent floods could have been averted or at least minimised. Some challenges that have been identified are the lack of financial and human resources; an effective information system and clear mandates and authorities of the implementing agencies; the lack of community awareness on disaster risks to the issue of deforestation; and illegal logging and corruption, which have all hindered implementation of NMDF.

Moving towards long term disaster preparedness

There is an urgent need for better implementation of the NMDF to ensure human security in Pakistan while bracing for future disasters. Attention should be paid to areas such as agricultural management, quality of infrastructure, good governance, forest and environmental management, raising community awareness, and building capacity to mitigate and respond to natural hazards. Also, as it is now increasingly possible for scientists to project the intensity and frequency of weather-related events; such information should be factored into disaster management planning. This in turn will assist in the creation of an early warning system, which has been stated as one of the priorities of the NMDF.

The NMDF outlines nine priority areas to be implemented within five years from its adoption. Furthering this effort, the government needs to prioritise its disaster management implementation strategy in the short, medium and long term at all levels. This in turn will ensure sustainable implementation beyond the five-year period. Yet, in the near term, the government must ensure that DRR is incorporated into its recovery efforts.

In addition to state agencies, non-state actors are central to a multi-stakeholder approach to disaster management. Unfortunately, some non-state actors have stepped in and used aid for political ends. They have publicised their actions as more responsive and timely compared to the government. These notably include Pakistan's hardline Islamist groups, whose efficient networks of volunteers have been distributing aid and attracting political support. Pakistan's Taliban has also called on those affected to accept its aid and decline the one offered by the United States.

Given the scale of the disaster and the need for aid, a more coordinated and timely response from all stakeholders can help ensure those affected receive the assistance they need, regardless of the politics. Pakistan's multi-stakeholder approach outlined in its NMDF called for better partnerships between the government and the military, international organisations, local communities as well as civil society groups -- and that includes engaging the hardline Islamist groups.

A pro-active approach will certainly ensure that the disaster management strategies alleviate the impact and risk of current and future disasters. There is already international disappointment with the slow response of the Pakistani political leadership -- as demonstrated in President Zardari's much delayed visit to the affected region on 12 August 2010. Any further tardiness will only play into the hands of the Pakistani Taliban.

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