

DISASTER

[Mis]management

A Collective Failure

Sarwar Bari



Since 1950 Pakistan has been devastated by 29 major flood disasters. The country spent billions of rupees on thousands of flood protection measures, yet losses continued to rise. The ongoing colossal calamity is a good reminder to rethink about the flood protection strategy from scratch, as it has miserably failed the nation. It is a collective failure of everyone who participated in its formulation, provided funds for and implemented it. First and foremost, our policymakers and implementers need to understand the basic concept of disaster and the relationship between vulnerability and hazard. They must know that there are some hazards like floods which can't be contained. Therefore, the construction of embankments alone is not a solution. Building resilience by reducing vulnerabilities is essentially vital as it will prevent hazards from becoming disasters. Our flood disaster management strategy sadly lacks balance.

Consider. A review of past disasters reveals five factors that have been causing vulnerabilities - poverty, ignorance, poor governance, poor planning/implementation and foreign aided/designed solutions. For instance, analyses of Pakistan's disasters and its context appear to be comprehensive, but solutions are extremely simple - brick-and-mortar. In this case, it is earth-and-stone, e.g., embankments, spurs, mega-dams, etc. They are designed by large consulting firms, imposed upon people, built by large contractors and influenced by greedy kleptocrats - having no local ownership and zero preparedness.

Donors who provide huge loans for infrastructural solutions, though, talk a lot about community participation in planning and implementation, have often compromised on their

principles. The communities that bear the brunt of structural failures have never been asked for their participation and consent. The ongoing flood disaster is another best example of a collective failure - a systemic failure that happens every three years.

Analysis of datasets of flood disasters and investment on flood management clearly show little relationship between interventions and losses. In other words, flood disaster management strategies appear to have failed to achieve the stated objectives. That may be a simplified conclusion of complex plans and reports available on the websites of NDMA, FFC and foreign donors, i.e., Asian Development Bank, World Bank and UN agencies, etc. But it seems to reflect reality.

Between 1950 and 2020, Pakistan has experienced 28 megaflood disasters. Overall, during this period, 198,000 villages and 616,558 Km2 area were badly affected. And the total economic losses were almost \$50 billion. According to FFC, the flood of 2010 was the worst flood in the history of Pakistan, in which about 1985 people lost their lives, 1.6 million houses were damaged/destroyed, 17,553 villages over 160,000 Km2. As for the current disaster, the federal government estimates its economic impact as high as \$10 billion or 3 percent of GDP. If rains continue for another week or so and a new wave of riverine deluge takes place, damages will rise further.

According to a World Bank report, in Pakistan, 'every year about 3 million people are affected by disasters and disasters affects 77 percent of the population economically and overall yearly losses are roughly \$1.8 billion or 0.8 percent of the GDP.'

History repeats itself because humans have little capacity to learn from it. Thirty years ago, on 9th September 1992, another gigantic flood disaster had devastated almost half of the country and Kashmir, killed 2,000 people, washed away about 13,500 villages, affected about 9 million people and made 0.4

Houses Destroyed & Damaged in Monsoon Floods

670,328

Total houses destroyed and damaged

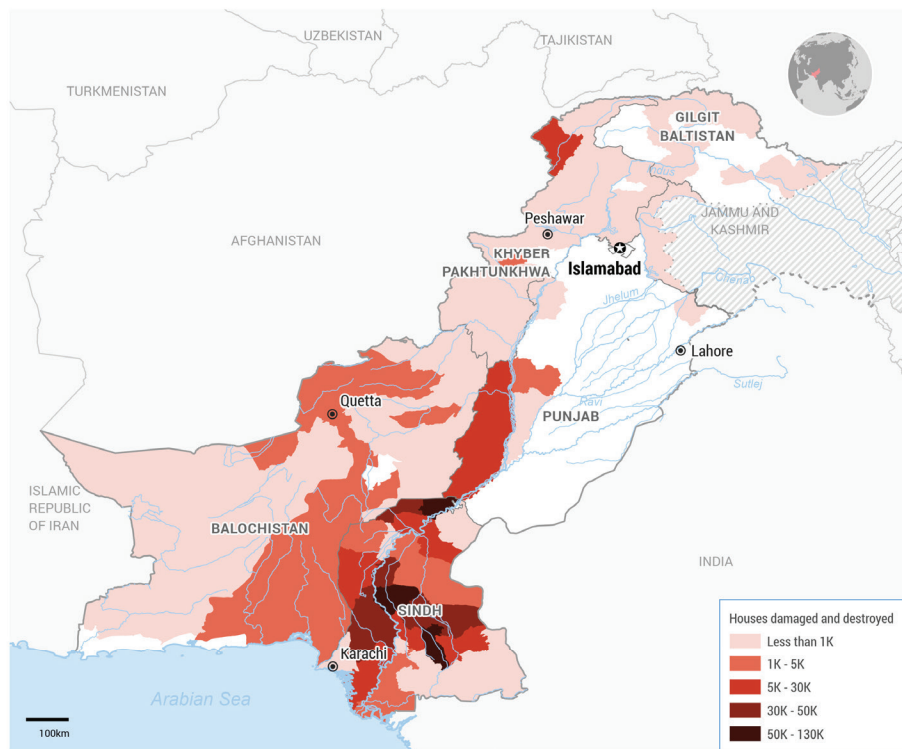
452,098

Total houses damaged

218,230

Total houses destroyed

Province /Region	Houses Partially Damaged	Houses Fully Damaged	Total Houses Damaged
AJ&K	154	255	409
Balochistan	20,220	7,527	27,747
GB	257	383	640
ICT	-	-	-
KP	7,457	8,312	15,769
Punjab	28,951	15,605	44,556
Sindh	395,059	186,148	581,207
TOTAL	452,098	218,230	670,328



Source: OCHA



Situation at a Glance

33 Million Estimated Flood Affected People in Pakistan

6.4 Million Estimated People Requiring Humanitarian Assistance

1.7 Million Estimated Houses Damaged or Destroyed Due to the Floods

1,355 Estimated Flood Related Deaths in Pakistan

Source: OCHA



Displaced people take refuge along a highway after fleeing from their flood-hit homes in Pakistan's Charsadda district

million families homeless.

No wonder experts consider Pakistan as one of the most disaster-prone countries in South Asia.

The above-mentioned colossal losses have been taking place despite massive investment on flood protection measures. For instance, according to FFC, by 2020, the country had built 799 and 245 small and large dams, respectively, while 94 were under construction. By 2015, Pakistan had also erected 2,742 flood protection structures. Between 1978 and 2008, the country spent more than PKR 25.348 billion. Overall, we spent more than PKR 45 billion on flood management measures between 1978 and 2020, yet total losses reached to \$50 billion. Forget the cost of repayment of loans and other costs such as social and psychological etc., as they are impossible to count and don't forget to count the loss of SDGs if there were any. Also, ignore the cost of relief and recovery efforts in the aftermath of each flood disaster.

To Albert Einstein, 'insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.' We have been repeating our insanity continuously for the last 75 years. Generally, we reasonably behave rationally. For example, if a medicine doesn't work, we go back to the doctor and often, the doctor changes the prescription. We stop buying products that don't fulfill the stated purpose. We also have so many wise folk proverbs to learn from. Consider. 'Once bitten, twice shy' and 'a stitch in time saves nine' (preparedness and risk reduction). But the basic issue is this – a complete disconnect between the architects of flood disaster management and the beneficiaries. Sadly, so-called beneficiaries become the worst losers in the aftermath of flood disasters and the service providers turn into the best beneficiaries.

Simply, the existing flood management framework appears to be a collective insanity committed by the world-class consultants, economists, sociologists, hydrologists and experts of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations

and Pakistani officials. Enough is enough. The time has come to develop an innovative and people-centered, people-driven flood disaster risk reduction strategy.

Therefore, donors are as much responsible as we are for our failure and because the projects they had developed could not achieve their purposes, the loans we had received from them should be written off.

A federal minister observed this recently, 'the current calamity was a disaster of 'epic proportions.' One can't disagree with the statement, but it is just a half-truth and half-truths are always misleading. One could find similar statements of governments in the aftermath of previous mega-disasters. In fact, by blaming 'nature' and declaring the events unprecedented, the governments try to hide their own failures. Sadly, a large section of media appears to be spreading this false narrative too. If I generalize my long experience of working with disaster-prone communities, I will have no hesitation in stating this – to politicians, every disaster and everyone who is affected by it is a soft target for political gains. Strangely, no political party has a comprehensive chapter on DRR in manifestoes because DRR is not tangible; relief is. No wonder every politician appears to be desperate to have access to relief. Should our political society have invested 20 percent of their current efforts and relief on DRR, we would have far fewer damages.

It is extremely important to remind everyone that as many as 99 percent of the disaster-affected people have always been poor, marginalized and rural. They lose whatever little they have, and they begin their lives from scratch after each disaster. They become more vulnerable and more dependent on their tyrants – powerful landlords. Let's reverse the marginalization by investing on poverty and inequality reduction and let's pressure architects of disasters to extend a profound apology to the poor people. It won't cost a rupee. Though it won't compensate them economically, it will heal the wounds, the harm and the emotional damage that has been done to them for the last many

decades repeatedly.

Along with a profound apology, there is a serious need to build pressure on donors to write off loans that were imposed on the country in the name of flood protection. We have a very strong case worth fighting. Already we are hearing some British MPs and civil society groups demanding the cancellation of Pakistan's debt. Sadly, no Pakistani MP or political leader has shown the courage to raise such a demand.

In the aftermath of the 2010 flood disasters, the Supreme Court of Pakistan formed a judicial commission and its reports had found officers by name, institutions and processes too for causing and aggravating the 2010 flood into a disaster. At the time, the People's Party was ruling in the center and Sindh and the Muslim League Nawaz was in power in Punjab. They never took any action against any culprit nor considered the recom-



mendations seriously. Rather, many alleged culprits were promoted. Isn't it shameful? The iron is hot. Let's hit it hard.

They are again in power. The nation deserves an explanation from them. Had they taken the reports seriously, we might have better flood management today and, as a result, far less losses and misery. This is the best time to demand the opening of the commissions' reports.

Those who intend to help or are helping the flood-affected people and set up relief camps appear to 'have little trust in federal and provincial governments.' People prefer to donate money or goods through non-governmental setups. These are some of the findings of PATTAN's survey.

Last but not the least, let's inform the major weaknesses in our flood disaster management: Poor conceptualization: state institutions such as the ministry of climate change, NDMA, PDMA and Federal Flood Commission appear to ignore the vulnerability (poverty and ignorance) side of the concept of disaster risk reduction as a major cause of the disaster, while over emphasize on containment of hazard - floodwaters; There is a complete disconnect between legislation/policy, and plans/projects; NDMA has miserably failed to transform disaster management from relief to DRR. Virtually NDMA and PDMA have become relief distribution organizations; Politicians politicize disasters: To them, disasters provide a huge opportunity to gain political capital through relief distribution, while DRR is an intangible venture; Exclusion of frontline defenders from decision-making has been a major factor in creating vulnerabilities and voicelessness because empowerment of communities is being perceived as a threat by local influential landlords; Too many cooks spoil the broth. Roughly there are 12-15 organizations that are, in some ways, responsible for coordinating with each other. Like ECP, NDMA also has to rely heavily on the human resources of other departments, but due to institutional rivalries and jealousies, efficiency disappears, which is the backbone of effective response; Blurred responsibilities (federal, provincial, and local); Extremely poor and inadequate early warning system; Absence of autonomous local councils; Lack of preparedness. If you are not prepared in normal times, you can't act effectively in case of emergency; Poor designing and quality of infrastructures and above all poor governance as we have poor quality polity and elections. If you are not prepared in normal times, you can't respond effectively in an emergency.

Though the country needs to fully focus on fulfilling the needs of 33 million affected people, we must also name and shame the factors and actors who have been failing us time and again. If we want not to experience another disaster of this scale, we must shift from disaster management to risk reduction in letter and spirit.



The author is associated with PATTAN Development Organisation - a pioneering NGO in DRR that has been working with disaster-prone communities since the 1992 mega-flood disaster.



Online Version