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Author(s)	Sania Nishtar
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Pakistan's Flood Disaster: An Unprecedented Humanitarian Crisis

By Sania Nishtar

Synopsis

The recent monsoon-related floods have wreaked havoc in Pakistan. Decades of development outcomes have been wiped out and critical human security challenges have been precipitated. It is critical to build Pakistan's capacity to cope with the unprecedented crisis.

Commentary

Scale of the impact

The recent monsoon-related floods in Pakistan, described as the worst humanitarian disaster in the world today have unprecedented consequences. In the short term 17.2 million people have been affected, 1.2 million houses have been damaged, many razed to the ground and 3.2 million hectares of standing crops have been inundated. No fewer than 7820 schools and over 200 health facilities have been partially or totally destroyed. Twenty percent of the land mass of the country — more than the entire landmass of Italy -- has been affected.

In some of these areas access has become a major issue with roads and bridges washed away. There has been colossal damage to communication and irrigation infrastructure in many badly hit areas. As the tragedy unfolds the true scale of the disaster will become evident. Millions of poor people in the riverside communities of the Indus have been pushed further into poverty; their economic assets have been damaged and their adverse dependency ratios have been compounded. This, coupled with the environmental consequences of millions of decaying cattle corpses and damage to sanitation infrastructure, poses significant threats to the health status of displaced and vulnerable populations.

Pakistan's civil society, armed forces, international development and relief agencies and government have been spurred into action, but the sheer scale of the disaster seems to have overwhelmed all, in particular the government. The involvement of grassroots religious organisations in the relief operations, some of them labeled as fundamentalist, indicates their level of entrenchment in communities. These grassroots dynamics create an imperative for the government to act as a stronger steward at this stage.

The calamity has hit at a time when the country is grappling with many competing priorities. The internal security situation is unpredictable, a war is ongoing and fiscal constraints are grinding. There is lack of clarity in governance norms at the overarching level as many things are being reshaped. The federation's relationship with its provinces is being redefined under a constitutional amendment and a new formula for fiscal federalism.

Drastic changes have been made in the local government system. Many processes are, therefore, in a flux. This coupled with Pakistan's systemically weak governance capacity is posing an impediment to rescue and relief, and will constrain efforts aimed at rehabilitation.

Magnitude of the response

There are many questions relevant to the effectiveness of governance upon which successful relief, rehabilitation and further strategic planning now hinge. Five points are crucial:

Firstly, coordination is critical at every stage. Pakistan's indigenous population and diaspora have stepped in to help as has the international community. Unfortunately, the country does not have a regulatory framework in place to allow full expression of the potential contribution of volunteers, nor does it have frameworks that can enable civil society engagement in a structured manner. It is critical to develop institutional mechanisms, so that Pakistan can leverage on the strength of many strong civil society organisations and the socially committed private sector, which have been mobilised in response to the crisis.

Secondly, resources are and will continue to be an issue. The initial response to the crisis was below expectations and it is hoped that additional support will be mobilised soon, to meet the United Nations' estimates in the short term. In the medium and long term, support must also be commensurate with comprehensive damage assessments, which are currently underway. However the Pakistani government will have to institutionalise oversight mechanisms in order to overcome the current trust deficit. This deficit plagues its relationship with some aspects of donor interaction, as a result of which disbursement channels outside of government entities are now being explored.

Priorities and Climate Change

Thirdly, there are a number of short term priorities. Consolidation of information streams in every sector — health education, infrastructure, livelihood, etc., is one of them so as to obviate current duplication and multiple channels of information flow. In the short term the government of Pakistan must also facilitate speedy import of essential food items so that cartelisation, which has been a dominant determinant in the recent commodity shortages in Pakistan, does not factor into play to exploit the situation.

In the fourth place and in the medium term, once relief is over, the task of rehabilitating the victims of a vast humanitarian tragedy and economic revival must get underway. Plans for reviving industrial and agricultural output, rebuilding infrastructure, and supporting poor communities in a post-disaster situation will have to be developed and implemented. This cannot be enabled unless there are additional resources which are effectively utilised. Diversion of low priority expenditures, a focus on aid effectiveness, cutting back establishment costs has become an imperative. The critical question of increasing Pakistan tax-to-GDP ratio and policy discussions on reform of GST becomes relevant, now more than ever.

Lastly, the current disaster also prompts an analysis of Pakistan's capacity to cope with climate change. To a certain extent the true scale of the disaster could not have been predicted; however, an advisory had been issued on June 26, indicating that there would be an increase risk of flash floods. Several reports have previously drawn attention to the risk that has been looming — with rapidly receding glaciers Pakistan is vulnerable to flooding followed by periods of extreme drought. In fact, experts have indicated that this may be one of the first footprints of the greenhouse effects in the subcontinent. Unfortunately, Pakistan has limited institutional capacity to strategically plan and cope with these challenges. The report of a Task Force on Climate Change has not translated into policy. The country's disaster management frameworks developed subsequent to the October 2005 earthquake have not been optimally functioning, hence ideas are now being mooted to create new commissions and institutional mechanisms, without fully realising that the top-down models of centralised bodies and installation of parallel structures do not work unless certain governance norms are ingrained.

Politicised Governance

The floods are also a reminder of the highly politicised nature of governance in the country. The unusual diversions of flood water as a result of the politics of canal breaches have had a role to play in flooding many areas. This is an illustration of how influence is wielded and power is abused. At a more overarching level, inefficiencies in governing the Indus have come into focus. In particular weaknesses in regulating the mighty waterway and the ill-planned settlements that have developed around it.

Pakistan has a mammoth task at hand, and many competing priorities. Progress depends on the quality of governance, commitment of its leadership and the level of international support. The lives of millions of impoverished people in the riverine communities would be at stake if the country and international community

fail to accord due attention.

The author is the founding president of the NGO think tank Heartfile, a health policy group in Pakistan [www.saniaishtar.info]. It is linked to the consortium of Asian think-tanks on non-traditional security studies (NTS-Asia). The consortium is coordinated by the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.