The Culture of Disaster Risk Reduction and Pakistan

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Sustainable development, poverty reduction, good governance and disaster risk reduction are mutually supportive objectives, and in order to meet the challenges ahead, accelerated efforts must be made to build the necessary capacities at the communities and national levels to manage and reduce risk. Such an approach is to be recognized as an important element for the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.

The mandates of human development are directly synchronized with capacity development. There is a yin-yang relationship between sustainable development and management of disasters through risk reduction. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) encompasses community capacity building through community education, training, and awareness programs, functioning early warning systems, legal and institutional settings, threat and vulnerability assessment, and integration of project development with DRR. Or else to sum it up, the main pillars of disaster management edifice are political will of the government and resilience of the first respondents to natural calamities - the communities. A synergy in these top-down and bottom-up approaches of DRR will ensure a proactive and cost-effective set up for managing natural disasters.

A significant part of DRR is mainstreaming it with development plans, which ensure that massive and ill-planned industrial expansion in urban areas, and weak and vulnerable communities especially in rural areas do not worsen fallout of natural disasters. Disaster risk analysis framework can be based on assessment of environmental and social effects and industrial advancement. The World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Kobe, Japan presented the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015, whose prioritized actions suggest that the governments should exhibit strong political will required to promote

Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015:
Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters.
mainstreaming DRR into development.

Drawing conclusions and making recommendations in their case study of DRR in Algiers - “Disaster Risk Reduction: Cases from Urban Africa” - Mark Pelling and Benjamin Wisner highlight the significance of integrating DRR management into the government’s mainstream policies. The following recommendation can be generalized:

In a [disaster-prone country], it is of crucial importance to have a well-established and well-regulated [DRR] management strategy and action [program] at the national level. This enables the government to avoid undue crisis management when future emergencies occur. It is also of crucial importance, again at the macro-level, to integrate [DRR] management in all its facets into government’s mainstream policies and plans for urban development.

Mainstreaming DRR into development addresses risks from natural hazards and suggests actions in medium term strategic framework to the institutions, to the states for policy formulation, and even to individual projects run in countries that are geographically prone to natural hazards. The UNDP 2004 report “Reducing Disaster Risk: A Challenge for Development” explains the devastating Hurricane Mitch which struck Honduras in 1998. It was a catastrophic disaster but could be avoided only in La Masica district on the Caribbean coast due to a well-planned local level risk management and early warning system that was proactively emplaced before the hurricane. Unlike the rest of Honduras, no lives were lost due to the excellent planning as compared to the watersheds in the neighbourhood, which claimed hundreds of casualties. Another example of mainstreaming practice is British Virgin Islands, which are instigating a Comprehensive Disaster Management Strategy (CDMS) with UNDP and other agencies’ support.

Likewise, working on the capacity building of the community paves the way for building up of “social capital” through strong relationship bonds among members. This approach plays a major role in enabling the civil societies face complex emergencies. Mainstreaming DRR into development, hence, can be achieved by promoting social assimilation and political involvement.

With respect to community development, George Ritchie observes that the disasters are more associated to society rather than just the natural changes underlying them. The philosophy of human rights forms the basis of community development because it serves the basic right of protection from disasters, community’s understanding, traditions and ethos, and addresses vulnerability. Once disasters are taken as social and not a ‘natural’ phenomenon in nature, the emphasis also changes from solutions based physical and technological way outs to those that are stronger in strategic terms. The solutions thus are based on a proactive rather than a reactive approach, which
are integral parts of the development plans and process, ensuring that the future vulnerability of people is reduced and their adaptive level to their environment is improved. This fact is highlighted well in the following formulation by Ritchie:

*Among the various social units, which are involved in [DRR] planning and action -- individual, household, group, organization, community, society, international, the local community level is where there is greatest potential for impact. Collectively, the community has greater resources to respond to the social disruption caused by disaster than do individuals, households, groups and organizations. In fact, local communities become involved in disaster response prior to the involvement of outsiders from the larger society and the international system.*

The main principles on which this process of community building stands are that it should be “participatory, responsive, integrated, proactive, comprehensive, multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary, empowering, and developmental.” “Coping mechanisms i.e. local methods of dealing with local problems” have also been derived in the developed world to solve problems faced by livelihoods and environment. New technologies along with better transport and storage systems are also important and helpful.

In the above context, the HFA posits that disaster reduction mechanisms and strategies must focus on “the spirit of volunteerism.” It is imperative to address the socio-economic challenges of communities to meet DRR plans. This can be done by promoting agriculture base leading to food security, working on the goal of ‘hospitals safe from disasters’ and health facilities within buoyant hospital environs, consolidated and secure public facilities and infrastructure such as communication systems, hospitals, schools, water-plants, culture preservation, disaster management centers, safety nets for poor, handicap, elderly, eradication of all possibilities that may add to hazard risk, introduction of financial risk sharing systems and insurances through them besides inventing substitute financial mechanisms for risk managing, and mechanism of public-private partnership initiative for DRR. A balanced coordination between all stakeholders is quintessential in such a manner that neither the public nor the private sector overshadows each other. It is a fine balancing act, but the goal should be a strong civil society and a strong state working in partnership with a socially committed private sector.

Timely evaluation and implementation of all envisaged programs will also ensure that they are being followed unfailingly. Another important step is coordination between all institutions involved in DRR. Unless grounds are made to avoid confusion between these parties and partners, all programs cannot bring desirable results. Allocation of finances, technological assistance, provision of materials, and training of human resource are other main areas where the political will can play its role in setting proactive strategies for mainstreaming DRR and development.
DRR has strong linkages with the political will, so that effective policies and strategies are shaped. It calls for a serious effort by the decision makers and the authorities and the process falls in the realm of governance. The political will is the basic prerequisite for mainstreaming DRR in all sectors. The main elements of good governance i.e. transparency, accountability, participation, efficiency and responsiveness are mutually significant for DRR and development. Moreover, giving the poor and vulnerable a voice is imperative so that – being the largest stakeholder - they have a share in policy formulation and resource allocation.

Andrew E. Collins in his book “Disaster and Development” observes that DRR is directly related to behaviours, which can be positive or negative. The quality of life may set this behaviour and poverty and has a direct linkage to it. Once worried about nutrition, rights and leisure, one cannot contribute to DRR. Here the responsibility lies with the government to take poverty reduction steps and exhibit its will and put the disasters and development issues as top priorities on the agenda. This political situation will also create an awareness and environment where the voice of the most vulnerable will be heard and will be eased to implement solutions to avoid under-development and manipulation.

In Pakistan, however, DRR is a tale of contrasting perspectives. The immensely deluged areas – most recently in 2010, 2011, and once again in 2014 - highlight the absence or non-implementation of proactive strategies while simply reinforcing that ‘disasters are for the poor’. One can simply ask with perplexity whether the so-called political leadership will ever demonstrate political wisdom and maturity to ensure that disasters are tactfully mitigated through institutional and strategic synergies. The situation appears to be murky at the moment owing to the visible plight of the poor and affected.

The 2005 earthquakes in Pakistan’s northern areas set the tone for DRR policies and institutional setup for DRR in Pakistan, and now many good standards are set through policy frameworks and strategies. The main institutions are National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) – the ‘focal point’ for disaster management that works under the National Disaster Management Commission – Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs), District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMAs), the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA), Ministry of Climate Change, Federal Flood Commission, Pakistan Directorate General Civil Defence, Provincial Irrigation and Drainage Authorities, etc. The pre-2005 period organizations focused mainly on reactive approach to manage aftermath of natural disasters and are now undergoing a slow evolutionary process of mainstreaming DRR and development. The yardstick, however, for gauging capacity is to match the designed policies and desired goals with the achievements so far.

Pakistan is signatory to the HFA which strongly underscores the connection between disaster risk reduction and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and states that: “Disasters can be substantially reduced if people are well informed and motivated towards a culture of disaster prevention and resilience, which in turn requires the collection, compilation, and dissemination of relevant knowledge and information on hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities.” When one sees it through a Pakistani lens, communities are not trained and moved for disaster mitigation. They know the area and the associated problems thus can play a vital role. It is therefore imperative to co-opt grassroots and ensure community involvement in the ongoing DRR policies and practices to mitigate and prepare for and respond to natural and even man-made disasters.

The expected outcome of HFA by 2015 is “the substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives and in the social, economic, and environmental assets of communities....” The framework expires next year; almost a decade spent and even the initial goals have not been fully achieved in Pakistan. The gaps in the systems have widened. Were the lessons from the floods of 2010 learnt and Pakistan had developed the institutional capacity to manage floods of that magnitude, the situation would have
far different in 2014.

It is fair to conclude that a couple of years are a short time span for capacity development. The monsoons don’t wait and meteorological department’s forecast is ominous. However, the disastrous effects of floods can be averted by vigilant planning and its effectual implementation, and by reducing vulnerabilities; which in turn rests on the synergies and capacities of institutions charged with this onerous task.

Disaster risk reduction process in Pakistan will have some major imperatives. One, government makes timely risk assessment of vulnerable areas and communities and instigates effective early warning systems. Two, it takes all stakeholders – like the administrators, civil society, donors, and affected communities – on board. Three, it minimizes the risks such as evacuating vulnerable population to relief camps and checking flood protection dykes. Four, it makes disaster prone communities and first responders self-reliant. Finally, nothing can succeed sans political will, financial capacity, and sustained and de-politicized efforts of several years.

Let’s briefly recap the risk that Pakistan faces as regards monsoon. The floods in 2010 claimed 2000 lives, affected 20 million people and deluged one fifth of the country’s landmass. Properties, infrastructure, and livelihood were badly hit. The UN estimates revealed that some 800,000 people were stranded and could only be reached by air, and considered the devastation more than the combined impact of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2010 Haitian earthquake, and the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir. Socio-economic fabric of the society was petted in 2010, this impact compounded in 2011, and before 2014 floods things were still reeling under its effects. The major challenges include food insecurity, damaged infrastructure, displaced population, etc. What role do we see the government playing against this backdrop?

The government has excellent policies in general but lacks the capacity and the will to implement these. The will to integrate the disaster risk reduction into development projects is an abysmal area of governance in Pakistan that needs sustained commitment. The policies cannot be evolved and executed without strong institutions and efforts to shore up their capacities. Creating parallel institutions is the first spanner that can jam the spirit of disaster management. The National Disaster Management Commission (NDMC) and NDMA were formed in 2006 and 2007 respectively to manage ‘all natural and even some manmade disasters’ and the commission’s capacity to manage the delegated task must be maximized. The concerned organisations should avoid friction and abstain from stepping on each other’s toes. TheDuplication of authority impedes the entire process of disaster management and ends up in slip-ups among stakeholders. During floods, donors face the confusion of approaching concerned administrators for dispensing funds, there are many at the helm of affairs, thus the mismanagement in fund allocation. The fact that NDMA is not a development agency and is unable to get into the bureaucratic domain of institutions hampers its performance. A year gone and the Ministry of Climate Change is still without a minister, that shows the political priorities and will.

Moreover, the government’s investment in disaster management pales due to the lack of direction and commitment in capacity development of the disaster management institutions. These anomalies can be removed, for instance, by removing redundancies in the organizational structure and focusing meticulously on capacity development. The slow and tedious nature of the process of DRR makes it less lucrative for the politicians and paltry funds are diverted for this sector. A handsome amount should be allocated in fiscal budget instead of giving money for political promotion during floods.

The capacity building of communities especially those which are prone to disasters can focus on strategies such as: making community based organizations comprising local villagers, mock drills and early warning training sessions, village flood plans, communication between locals and district administration, formulation of records
including village list, village vulnerability profile, economic ranking, problems, and solution mechanism. These plans will perk up human and social capital and enhance self-reliance. NDMA’s initiatives such as the National Composite Risk Assessment Project in 2009 for compilation of National Hazard Atlas, creation of National Disaster Management Fund, the National Working Group, Urban Search and Rescue Teams, the Program for Enhancing Emergency Response, and the National Contingency Plan are praiseworthy. However, it has to be analyzed whether the desired objectives match with the goals achieved in set timeframe. Plans such as integrating DRR into the curricula of educational institutions (which had to be done by 2009) and finalize a vulnerability atlas are still in doldrums.

Among myriad of factors affecting the institutional capacity, corruption supersedes all. Like other state structures, corruption abounds the disaster management process. There were numerous reports of mismanagement of funds after 2005 earthquake. Besides donors’ fatigue, corruption was one reason that very few gave very little in 2010. Likewise, the funds finally diverted to maintenance of dykes are reportedly pocketed by the district level administration and the neglect comes to fore during floods.

The early warning and controlled breach mechanism failed to function in 2010 or even if it was intact, the disaster could not be mitigated well. Next four years were not enough to prepare thus the situation in 2014. The political and institutional machinery was caught by utter surprise to witness floods in the month of September. It remains to be seen if decision makers and people are not caught unaware during the years to follow, and the dams and breaches are made to divert flood without political pressures that aim at saving the lands of haves and flooding the lands of have-nots.

Similarly, this is the time once the fully equipped relief camps should be functional. The author conducted a case study of a remote village in Muzaffargarh, and was told that the people prefer to live on roadsides rather than shifting to these camps. Hygiene standards and privacy for women are so poor that only the most destitute end up in the camps. Those who can afford rent houses at safer places or shift to their well-heeled relatives. Small farmers were highly disgruntled as they were ordered not to sow crops as the floods were projected, while they were not provided with any compensation or alternative. This certainly reflects an irresponsible and insensitive behavior of those at the helm, as such short term measures become a big challenge for the livelihoods of those who provide utilities and services in barter for share in crops at the end of the year.

If the present reactive disaster management scenario sustains, Pakistan is likely to find it increasingly challenging to cope with larger floods in future. Recurring floods will erode the
consequence management capacities and place the country at the mercy of nature and donors instead of self-sustainment and proactive disaster management. In order to change the status quo, the culture of disaster risk reduction and mainstreaming this into Pakistan’s developmental strategies has to be imbibed into country’s social and national fabric.

Proven global good practices and cutting edge systems in disaster management call for active involvement of every stakeholder up to individual level. “Mainstreaming of participation” by affected communities is the order of the day because the position of communities as ‘passive objects’ has transformed into ‘active subjects. This change is a by-product of disaster attentiveness culture, well-implemented educational programs, and vulnerability assessments. This paradigm shift occurs with political will and conscious national efforts. The “political will” is the magic ingredient for disaster risk reduction and it has to be free of duplicity, nepotism, corruption, and personality-oriented systems.

As the apex agency for disaster management in Pakistan, NDMA must move beyond the status of merely coordinating national effort. NDMA would become effective if it is vested with the authority and capacity to implement the policies and frameworks. This will ensure “one window” operation for managing disasters in Pakistan. Being financially strapped, Pakistan must implement short-term yet sustainable arrangements. If Pakistan ignores the culture of disaster risk reduction for few more years, the marginalized may become miserable due to wrongs that they never sinned.