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Rescue, Relief and Rehabilitation

BLURRING MARGINS

It is said that with conscious irony that the three 'R's – rescue, relief and rehabilitation – do not begin with disasters but often end in them. Can we defeat this depressing truism?

Rescue	: Save or set free from danger or harm
Relief	: Alleviation or deliverance from pain, distress and anxiety
Rehabilitation	: Restore to effectiveness or normal life by training, etc

The Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English

Impact of cyclones

The damage that cyclones cause does not fade as time goes by from the short-term to the long-term – all that happens is that the problems metamorphose, the colour of danger changes. The response remains urgent on a massive scale weeks, even months, after the event is over.

The major impact of cyclones is broadly categorised below:

- Loss of lives, injuries and other health consequences such as epidemics and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Loss of habitat
- Loss of cattle, damage to crops and agriculture fields
- Damage to public utilities
- Disturbance and damage to the ecosystem

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Loss of lives...

Most lives are lost during a cyclone on account of floods and the devastating storm surges that often accompany cyclones. In severe cyclonic storms with storm surges, more than 90 per cent of the fatalities occur from drowning, either during the incoming water phase or during the (usually more devastating) out-surges. In severe cyclonic storms without storm surges, the deaths are more or less evenly divided between drowning and the collapse of buildings.

Storm surges, or mini-tsunamis, are essentially huge amounts of water sucked up by the low pressure at the eye and then propelled forwards and outwards by the driving winds on the outwalls. Storm surge height (up to seven metres) and length (up to 50 km) depends on the tides, the rate of water runoff from the land, onshore winds, and the coastal configuration. They cause the most havoc when they are receding. On an average, storm surges kill seven times more people and damage three times more crops than severe but storm surge-free cyclones (Winchester, Peter, 1992).

For instance in the November 1977 cyclone that hit the Krishna-Guntur-Prakasam-West and East Godavari districts in Andhra Pradesh, storm surges rose to as much as 9-20 ft, were 80 km long and 24 km deep, and shot up the death toll to over 8,000, one of the highest figures ever recorded.

Injury, health impact

One important aspect that requires attention in the aftermath of cyclones is the injuries and other health impacts on the affected populace. The most common debilitations are waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, typhoid, viral hepatitis; respiratory diseases such as pneumonia and whooping cough, and other diseases such as chicken pox, measles, gastroenteritis, cholera, conjunctivitis and fever. Of late, experts have pointed out that the affected people may suffer from long-term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), characterised by a high incidence of divorce, alcoholism and suicide.¹

¹ Sharma, VK and Singh, R, *Psychosocial Consequences of Disasters: Case Study of the 1996 AP Cyclone*, paper presented at the National Workshop on Psychosocial Consequences of Disasters, NIMHANS, Bangalore, 1997

Loss of habitat

Despite being the one state in the country that has suffered, continues to suffer, and presumably will suffer the maximum number of cyclones, in the matter of safe shelter during cyclones, AP is well behind the national average. More people in the state live in *kutcha* houses vulnerable to collapse during floods and cyclones than in any other.

Despite having historically suffered the maximum number of cyclones in the country, Andhra Pradesh has more people living in kutcha houses than any other Indian state

This dismaying fact was more pronounced in the 1970s. A National Sample Survey (NSS) done between October 1971 and September 1972 found that out of the 34,319 houses taken up for construction in the state, as many as 16,249 were *kutcha* buildings, each costing on an average of a pathetic Rs 329. In the Eighth Plan, the Andhra Pradesh Housing Board was actually allotted only Rs 229.1 million out of the actual provision of Rs 318.5 million – and of that amount, it went ahead and spent no more than Rs 194.6 million.

There is a case for the argument that better-designed *pucca* houses are an essential component of cyclone disaster mitigation. But the path to disaster obviation is strewn with social ironies. After the devastating 1977 cyclone, major cyclone-proof housing activities were undertaken with some sincerity. But instead of turning into a great leveller, *pucca* houses became a status symbol, even in pockets of poverty. In any case, it was also realised that as a disaster mitigation effort, housing can play only a limited role. Other factors such as storm and flood patterns, location of the house, and the occupant's options to relocate at times of emergency also define the "disaster vulnerability" of a household.

In the November 1996 cyclone, struck by a storm surge 9-20 feet high that penetrated 15 miles inland, many victims were trapped inside their "safe" homes. Some who moved to the terraces of their houses were safe only for a short while. The sheer force of the water lifted the thatched huts and floated, spun and upended with the tide. Roofs broke apart and families were scattered – some consigned to treetops, a great many drowned and "missing". Some of the "cement-and-concrete" *pucca* houses also crumbled, the walls shattering, and collapsing. Those who had taken shelter in *pucca* buildings like schools drowned when the water entered the buildings and trapped them inside.

Socioeconomic factors obviously play a major role in defining the vulnerability of the people to a cyclone. The most vulnerable households share a few characteristics:

- The most vulnerable households are often located in low-lying, flood-prone land, usually village peripheries
- Most of the poor and vulnerable households have/had the least remunerative employment and the least assets

They are economically marginalised; they have the least employment opportunities; and they have the least resources to sell, including their own labour. Their health status is poor.

Only an understanding of the entire impact range – climatic and otherwise – that people are likely to be exposed to can help evolve holistic risk-reduction strategies (Winchester, 1992).

Other losses

Other major disaster tolls include loss of cattle, crops, and damage to agriculture fields and public utilities such as railway lines, roads, transport, power lines, communication systems and public buildings. In further aggravation, bad design of roads and railway lines, that does not take into account the natural drainage pattern of the land, exacerbates the flood situation by blocking receding floodwaters. The capturing and conversion of wetlands for construction and agriculture also amplifies the vulnerability and delicate balance of the land, as mangrove forests in the wetland act as barriers against cyclonic storms.

The response to a cyclone is through a confused ad-hoc mechanism that creates a communications chaos between satellite imagery and remote sensing at one end and the dissemination machinery at the other

Response: ad hoc mechanisms

The various phases of a disaster response mechanism comprise of early warning, evacuation, rescue, relief, rehabilitation and development. In the absence of a comprehensive policy to deal with disasters and development, the response to cyclones has been that of the grinding of an ad hoc mechanism.

Early warning: With the advent of satellite imageries and remote sensing, cyclone forecasting has become more sophisticated and

accurate.² However, the dissemination of any warning whatsoever percolates down to the essential block level rather late.

The problem lies in the inadequacy of communication networks at the local offices. Even if the communication were to reach the block offices in time, the absence of vehicles makes it difficult for officials to propagate this information and organise evacuation in the case of an emergency. Especially when the vulnerable villages are located in far-flung, inaccessible villages or on islets or deltas, the dissemination of timely information becomes crucial – and is clearly inadequate.

Evacuation: Forecasting plays a crucial role in facilitating evacuation. Just before the 1983 cyclone hit the AP coast, 50,000 people were successfully evacuated because of early warning and, yes, political will. Regarded as a costly and difficult method of saving lives, evacuation often becomes inevitable.

Documentation proves that socioeconomic and psychological factors prevailing at the point of impact tend to hamper evacuation. People refuse to leave their homes and fields even when a cyclone is about to hit. Officials are often reluctant to take the initiative to evacuate fearing the consequences that go with that costly chimera, the false alarm. Sometimes, the prodigious haste that accompanies evacuation also raises human rights issues, as people may have to be induced or even forced to evacuate in the face of a clear danger (Winchester, Peter, 1992).

Rescue and relief: This is the “sandwich” phase which usually lasts for two to four weeks. It is marked by a strong presence of the armed forces, various government agencies, NGOs, and other voluntary groups. The situation is decidedly volatile, with many actors with varied interests “paradropping” into the disaster site. “Band-Aid” relief, which does not take into account the long-term and actual needs of the affected population, is a common phenomenon, and an increasingly common complaint. Often, the commendable philanthropic outpouring that follows in the wake of disasters is out of tune with the ground reality.

² Singh, Arun Kumar, *Remote Sensing and Disaster Forecasting: The Indian Experience*, paper in *India Disasters Report : Towards a Policy Initiative*, Oxford University Press (2000).

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Politician-bureaucrat skirmishes intrude into the realm and process of relief. "The heightened role of politicians made it difficult for officials to arrive at any kind of conclusions and enumerations."³

Rehabilitation and development: Rehabilitation, the process through which the affected communities are returned to normalcy, is a long-term slog. Rehabilitation should ideally include restoring life sustenance systems as well as rebuilding the social fabric of the affected communities. A community-based rehabilitation should ideally comprise an integrated programme that takes into account the health, education and the special needs of women and children. It should address the needs of farmers, agriculture labourers, and artisans with special focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups.

In the case of AP, the state government as well as donor agencies have pumped in huge amounts of money to rehabilitate the cyclone-affected people. In the ongoing scheme of things the specified amount of money that would enable the affected people to purchase the tools of their trade or to undertake their own restoring activity is provided along with money for rebuilding their houses. Numerous factors, including political considerations, define the *ex-gratia* payments extended to the affected people. In the 1996 cyclone, the maximum *ex-gratia* payment given was Rs 100,000, which, by any accounts, is less and adequate.

The norms related to the amount of compensation to various categories of the affected were formalised by the Government of India in 1986. The same norms are being followed today with suitable modifications. To rehabilitate those affected by the 1996 AP cyclone, for instance, the government formulated a scheme to give 50 per cent matching grant to voluntary organisations that came forward to construct houses.

Changing modes of response

Relief is defined as an attempt undertaken by humanitarian or political activists to alleviate the pain and distress of the people

³ Reddy AVS and Sastry KR, *The Politics of Disaster: Public Pressure and State Response to Cyclone Relief in Andhra Pradesh in Disaster Management*, Vol 4 Number 3, 1992

affected, especially in a crisis situation. Oxfam views emergency relief as part of a range of humanitarian responses to poverty and suffering which support the people's capacity to take greater control over the forces that affect their lives.⁴ A crisis may be defined at a point at which radical change becomes necessary – when the status quo has become clearly unsustainable. Not all crises give rise to emergencies; and change is by no means always negative.

For people or societies that are already vulnerable, even a small shift in their situation may give rise to a crisis that outstrips their capacity to cope – in other words, a disaster or emergency. Crisis does not refer, therefore, only to an unexpected catastrophe, but also to the culmination of a slow build-up of political, economic or environmental factors. The combination of these factors with a sudden event, such as an earthquake or a major accident, can prove overwhelming.

Traditionally, sociologists and development and charity workers viewed emergencies as temporary interruptions in the process of development. Especially since poor people are virtually under constant crises and any emergency amplifies their vulnerability, the response to emergency should ideally be to lessen the underlying vulnerability, ensuring that humanitarian relief efforts systematically address the root causes of the crises.

Drawing up categorisations such as “natural” or “humanmade disaster” is of little help in predicting the impact of a crisis, or the longer-term implications of a disaster, or of relief efforts. The conventional division of programmes into categories of “relief”, “rehabilitation” and “development” is proving to be more and more unrealistic and unhelpful – particularly so because such divisions do not reflect ground-level realities.

It is those governments which integrate relief, rehabilitation and development, rather than dividing them into components of an imagined evolutionary process, that have been most successful in alleviating hunger, observe noted economist Jean Dreze and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen.

The traditional view, now dispensed with in most nations, of emergencies like disasters is that they are temporary interruptions in the far larger and inexorable process of development

⁴ *The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief*, an Oxfam publication, Oxford, 1995

Any dividing line between the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction phases is necessarily imprecise, especially when an emergency has been protracted over months, years – or even decades. Rehabilitation and reconstruction are areas where relief and development become inseparable from each other. Specific rehabilitation methods should also reduce the vulnerability of the community to similar emergencies in future.

Relief work should be held to development standards. Rehabilitation process should also focus on social and economic interventions as well as on improvements in material conditions. Both relief and development should be more concerned with increasing local capacities and reducing vulnerabilities than with providing goods, services or technical assistance.

In fact, goods, services, etc, should be provided only insofar as they support sustainable development by increasing local capacities and reducing vulnerabilities. Development work should be concerned with long-term sustainability. Thus, every development programme and project should anticipate and be designed to prevent or mitigate disasters. They should identify and address the vulnerabilities of the people with whom they work, and ensure that these are reduced over time.

Though the urgency of human need compels swift action and thorough assessment and planning, it may be impeded by constraints of many kinds. However, it is precisely because social structures and cultural traditions and economic and political systems are weakened by emergencies that individuals are made more vulnerable to damage by ill-conceived interventions.

In the case of disasters in India, the state and civil society have responded swiftly and comprehensively with rescue and relief operation. But the government continues to view rescue and relief work as the responsibility of its revenue department. And public support is not factored into it. This is consistent with the overall perspective of the administration in viewing people as passive recipients of government largesse. As with welfare and development programmes, people have no participatory role in defining and implementing rescue and relief operations.

Providing legitimate space for people to play a meaningful role would significantly improve post-disaster recovery initiatives. Relief is no substitute to people-oriented action.

Rehabilitation is often hampered by two reasons. First, there is the inability to programme relief as a development opportunity, which is why such initiatives lack actions that would regain sustainable livelihoods. Second, the Indian public views the provision of relief as a collective responsibility but considers rehabilitation and development as the responsibilities of the government alone. Often enough, however, the government action falls far short of expectations and actual needs.

Worldwide, as governments shift focus away from social sector interventions, civil society faces a challenging task in addressing the issue of long-term rehabilitation and development. Civil society's role is no more limited to feeding, clothing, and housing the people affected by disaster, but has expanded to include the empowerment of the most vulnerable.

