

Keeping recovery on course: challenges facing the Pakistan earthquake response one year on

October 2006

Survivors have begun rebuilding their homes, communities, and livelihoods – but as another hazardous Himalayan winter looms, urgent efforts are needed to ensure that people stay safe and the reconstruction process is not derailed.

1 Summary and recommendations

More than five million people were affected – including 73,000 confirmed dead, at least that many left injured, and 3.3 million people made homeless – when a powerful earthquake registering 7.6 on the Richter Scale rocked Pakistani-administered Kashmir (PAK) and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) on 8 October 2005.

The devastated region, covering 30,000 sq km, is characterised by difficult mountainous terrain, poor infrastructure and, in many places, severe poverty. It is also a land of extreme weather conditions: heavy winter snowfalls, torrential monsoon rains, and baking summer heat. These conditions, combined with aftershocks, seasonal floods, and frequent landslides, have made the relief and reconstruction task a formidable one.

In spite of these challenges, much has been achieved. Thanks to a relatively mild winter, the resilience of the survivors, plus the combined efforts of the Pakistani authorities, aid agencies, and donors, a secondary humanitarian disaster was averted. Survivors have begun rebuilding their lives.

During the emergency phase, Oxfam International helped almost one million men, women, and children by providing water and sanitation facilities, winterised tents and transitional shelter kits, and livelihood support.

However, the task of reconstruction is far from over and hundreds of thousands of people remain vulnerable, particularly as winter approaches once again. The government's reconstruction plans have for the most part been finalised and

implementation has begun. Assessments of land safety and damage to houses and water supplies have been conducted.

However, the progress of recovery has been patchy, and the pace of construction of housing and infrastructure has been slow. At least 1.8 million people have not begun rebuilding their homes; most of them are in makeshift shelters that offer limited protection against the coming cold. Last winter was relatively kind; this one is predicted less likely to be. Urgent action is needed to ensure that communities are safe, warm and healthy this winter.

Some of the most pressing needs are:

- temporary winterised shelter for people living in rural and mountain areas who are unable to rebuild, as well as upgraded winterised shelter for people in camps (especially in NWFP)
- solutions for people who have lost land permanently and for those who can't return home for other reasons
- effective mass communication strategies to promote seismically-safe reconstruction and to inform both men and women of their entitlements
- collection and analysis of data, split by gender, to support well-targeted policies
- sustained political, technical, and financial support for the reconstruction effort

2 Reconstruction: a massive task

Devastation on a huge scale

Much of the city of Muzaffarabad collapsed, hundreds of other towns and villages were damaged or razed, and thousands of hospitals and schools were largely destroyed:

- Homes in affected areas destroyed: 203,579; damaged: 196,574
- Educational institutes destroyed or damaged: 5,857
- Medical facilities destroyed: 388; damaged: 197
- Roads damaged: 6,403 km

Not only did the destruction leave more than three million people homeless, thousands were also left landless – unable to return to villages that had been buried under rubble or swept down mountainsides. The town of Balakot in NWFP was among those declared seismically unsafe. Its 30,000 people are among thousands more left landless, still waiting to be allocated land so they can begin building their homes. Livelihoods were wiped out too – in PAK alone, 80 per cent of crops were reportedly destroyed and more than 100,000 cattle were killed.

People's lives have changed dramatically. Many men have been unable to return to paid work because they have been waiting for financial grants and rebuilding their homes. Women's burden has grown heavier because of distress and the increased need for care in families.

Managing reconstruction: getting the balance right

All governments are responsible for meeting the needs of their citizens. In response to this crisis, the Government of Pakistan created the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) to oversee early recovery and reconstruction. Staffed by a mix of civilian, military, and ex-military personnel, ERRA has a range of specialist departments supervising key areas such as rural shelter, transitional relief, water and sanitation, health, and livelihoods. ERRA has also established state, provincial, and district branches.¹

One of the challenges facing ERRA is how to get the balance right between leadership, co-ordination, service delivery, long-term institution-building, and programme sustainability. A combination of strong centralised policy-making, a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, and new, under-resourced structures sometimes causes tensions between ERRA, provincial and state governments, and public services departments. Meanwhile, local authorities are concerned about how much input they have into strategy, their access to resources and technical support, and to what degree their mandates are being challenged. This is partly due to the fact that ERRA is a new institution with no guiding experience. Its drive for rapid progress, for instance, has sometimes come at the expense of ensuring that local authorities are properly consulted and involved in decision making. This could have implications for the sustainability of its efforts.

In terms of community and civil society input into ERRA strategy development, the record is mixed. These plans were developed in Islamabad with little or no consultations in the earthquake zone. However, some strategies involved flexible and concerted consultation with civil society organisations in the capital; others did not. Recently ERRA has also established a system of advisory and co-ordination groups, opening up opportunities for dialogue between stakeholders. Again the challenge will be to give affected communities a voice in Islamabad.

Rural housing: a mountain still to climb

Reconstruction of earthquake-resistant housing has been identified as a priority in a region prone to seismic shocks. ERRA's rural housing strategy aims to help 450,000 families to rebuild their homes by providing financial support and technical guidance. By mid-September, the first instalment of money to begin building permanent homes had been disbursed to more than 370,000 families. However, a host of factors, such as administrative issues, poor dissemination of public information and problems associated with officially sanctioned building materials, have slowed and hindered the rebuilding of earthquake-resistant homes.

ERRA's 'owner-driven' construction strategy makes home-owners responsible for overseeing the process, either through rebuilding themselves or through hiring local builders, but in both cases requiring compliance with ERRA standards. Some positive policy changes have been made in recent months, such as allowing NGOs to build houses for vulnerable households who could not manage it themselves.

Significantly, ERRA has set – and then changed – the rules specifying which materials people can use in order to qualify for financial support and receive appropriate technical advice on earthquake-resistant construction. Although the original strategy favoured local designs and materials, ERRA subsequently insisted that homes must be based on a cement-and-steel model.

The obligatory use of cement and steel substantially raised costs without guaranteeing housing that was safer than timber-based homes. ERRA staff have acknowledged that even after receiving official financial assistance, people will have to find additional money to pay for rebuilding their houses. This is not possible for those who have lost everything, however. The problem has been compounded by fees charged and by corruption.²

The problems of cost, accessibility, and transport of approved materials led many people to begin building homes using alternative materials such as timber frames with mud mortar. Under the cement-and-steel-only rule, however, they did not qualify for financial support; nor were they given guidelines on how to make their homes safer in the event of another earthquake.

ERRA recently acknowledged the negative implications of the building materials rule and in September 2006 changed its position: homes based on timber frames or reinforced concrete columns (RCC) were approved. The challenge now is to ensure that technical advice on building homes to earthquake-resistant standards reaches everyone who needs it as quickly as possible.

ERRA has just handed responsibility for this to UN Habitat, which will now have to act fast. Getting information to isolated rural areas isn't easy: many families have no access to radio and TV and others cannot read. An even bigger challenge is ensuring that women, most of whom do not travel far from their houses, have access to good quality information. In many rural locations, existing ERRA guidelines on home construction are still not easily available or understood. This has given rise to two worrying phenomena:

- 1 People not building at all while waiting for information and funds, thereby increasing their vulnerability as winter approaches.
- 2 People building either cement/steel homes or timber-based homes without basic information about improving the seismic resistance of their houses, making them vulnerable to future earthquakes.

This means that the centrepiece of ERRA's housing reconstruction strategy – the building of earthquake-resistant homes – remains under serious threat. By mid-September 2006, ERRA calculated that only about 17 per cent of affected people had begun rebuilding their homes, and almost a third of these were not complying with official guidelines. Where the Pakistani authorities are unable to deliver guidelines and training on earthquake-resistant house construction, the international community needs to share the burden.

Recommendations

ERRA and UN Habitat need to finalise guidelines for timber-framed and RCC houses quickly and develop mass communications materials as a matter of urgency. These then need to become part of a broader fast-moving public information campaign.

Rural landless: the forgotten people

Aid should be provided impartially and proportionately to those who need it. However, rural dwellers who lost everything they owned as a result of the earthquake remain extremely vulnerable. The Pakistani government has yet to present official plans to address the issue of the rural landless.

Even the total numbers of such people are not known. We know only that most of those unable to leave the limbo of camp life are landless people of rural origin. Over 35,000 people remain in official camps in PAK, more than 5,000 in NWFP. Elsewhere, tens of thousands remain in unofficial camps, in tents or makeshift shelter near villages and other locations – many of whom are believed to be landless.

In rural areas, those who have lost land are living with relatives or in tents near their villages, both of which are unsustainable solutions. PAK and NWFP are treating these problems in different ways. In PAK, the process of registration and verification of people claiming to be landless has started. The state government is also working on the identification of land for the landless. In NWFP, where the provincial authorities lack the political commitment to treat the matter as a priority, no such process has begun.

Recommendations

- ERRA should help the state and provincial authorities to identify and acquire suitable land.
- The government of NWFP should urgently implement an equitable process of registration, verification of eligibility, and land allocation.

Preparing well for winter

In a region where many earthquake survivors have been physically weakened by the travails of the past year, where traditional social support mechanisms have been disrupted, and the geological landscape has been damaged, the approaching winter brings heightened risks of an impending humanitarian crisis. The slow implementation of rural housing strategies, the massive challenges involved in rebuilding urban areas, and the absence of plans to provide for landless people have exacerbated many people's vulnerability. Tens of thousands of people are still sheltering in tents and makeshift shelters whose condition is deteriorating.

ERRA's position has been that no-one should be living in tents by the end of 2006. It has drawn up plans to provide transitional shelter (consisting of 10,000–15,000 two-room dwellings) to people who lost homes in the urban areas of Muzaffarabad and Balakot. ERRA has very recently announced plans to provide corrugated iron sheeting to vulnerable rural people so that they have some support in building transitional shelter. This is a welcome move towards addressing one of the most pressing needs of rural communities preparing for the coming winter. With snow now falling in the mountains earlier than expected, however, time is short to provide that help to all who need it.

'Winter will be a freezing hell if we do not get good shelter. Up in the mountains, you can't believe how cold it gets.'

— Muhammad Ghulam, in Bhudwar village, near Balakot

Recommendations

- ERRA and the state and provincial governments need to ensure that people living in tents and makeshift shelters (in camps, villages, and the mountains) have access to durable winterised shelter and essential items to stay healthy and warm. The PAK model of lightweight, reinforced shelter kits should be seriously considered.

Winter in the camps

In NWFP, there are four official camps with more than 5,000 inhabitants. In PAK, there are over 40 camps with more than 35,000 people in total. These camps are necessary for people still unable to return home. All the camps need refurbishment before winter.

UNHCR stepped back from its role of overseeing official camps on 31 August this year. Together with the Norwegian Refugee Council, it is now helping local government to co-ordinate service delivery with other organisations, as well as advising on camp management issues. The plan is to provide lightweight, inexpensive materials and temporary shelter designs.

The main concern is that the Provincial Relief Commissioner has been interpreting the 'no tents by December' policy as an instruction from ERRA to close the NWFP camps. ERRA had until recently been discouraging people from entering camps this winter. Its concern was that, rather than rebuilding their homes, people would be drawn back to camps if these were upgraded. ERRA has now accepted that the camps need to be upgraded for winter – but the NWFP authorities appear unconvinced that this is necessary and desirable.

Recommendations

- NWFP authorities should prepare camps for winter and develop durable solutions for people who have no other place to go.
- ERRA and leaders of the international community should continue lobbying to achieve this.

Supporting social and political stability

Pakistanis generally appreciate the recovery efforts of their own government and of humanitarian agencies. The aftermath of the disaster, however, has provided opportunities for politically extreme elements to exploit the situation for their own ideological interests.

Organisations with suspected links to illegal armed groups have gained influence through the management of camps, schools, and health facilities. Certain groups and influential local figures have occasionally organised protests and issued warnings to humanitarian agencies to leave or face violent ejection. Attempts to prevent the employment of women in reconstruction activities – including sporadic threats against NGOs who hire them – are also sources of concern.

Recommendations

The international community should remain responsive to socio-political developments in this region by supporting mainstream humanitarian actors working towards an inclusive, sustainable, and equitable recovery. It will have to work closely with the Pakistani government to achieve this.

3 The humanitarian response reviewed

Relief and recovery: lessons learned

The emergency response to the earthquake was largely a success: aid was delivered despite enormous challenges, major outbreaks of disease were averted, and a secondary disaster during last winter was prevented. More than 300,000 people were cared for in official camps and many times that number received assistance elsewhere.

Working in over 200 different camps and villages, Oxfam International provided a variety of vital services to nearly a million people, supported financially by members of the public, institutional donors and Oxfam affiliates.³ These funds helped provide water and sanitation facilities for around 580,000 men, women, and children; winterised tents and transitional shelter kits for around 370,000 people; and a range of livelihood programmes for nearly 60,000 people.

Working to alleviate poverty in Pakistan since 1973, Oxfam's existing relationships with local partner organisations meant it benefited from their knowledge and experience of the affected region.

However, a number of problems dogged the early response in general and subsequent stages of recovery. Funds were slow to arrive, for example, which hampered the early relief effort. A month after the earthquake, donors had promised less than a quarter of the \$550m appealed for by the UN (\$131m), and even then nearly half of this figure (\$60m) had not materialised. However, after these initial problems, most of the larger donors have come closer to fulfilling their pledges than in most emergencies. Part of the reason for this is Pakistan's current global strategic importance.

The lack of adequately winterised shelter and safe heating options was a serious concern during the first half of last winter. Tents commonly used in humanitarian emergencies proved inadequate against the harsh mountain conditions. Rapid measures were adopted to rectify this: plastic sheeting and corrugated iron sheets were the most commonly used remedial materials. Oxfam piloted a package of materials and tools that allowed families living at higher, colder altitudes to build huts using local materials.

Same fate suffered, different support received

Humanitarian assistance should be impartial and provided according to need. Moreover, such assistance should be brought to people in need, rather than transferring the burden of transport to them. After the earthquake, however, distinctions were made between the types of camps, which led to differing standards of services and support to people who had suffered the same catastrophe.

Camps containing 50 tents/families or more were managed either by UNHCR or by the government. The fate of people in camps with fewer than 50 tents/families was not as clear. In many cases, such smaller, unofficial camps were informal settlements, located near home villages. These spontaneous camps were sometimes managed by NGOs but in many cases they were all but invisible, scattered across the mountains and not easily identified until months after the earthquake. Conditions in such camps were often much worse than in official ones. However, for various reasons — such as roads blocked by landslides, a desire to stay close to their remaining assets, or an intention to protect women and children from perceived risks and stresses — people

were either unable or unwilling to leave. Many of those involved in the emergency response now believe that this distinction between camps was regrettable.

Co-ordination: often good, but not good enough

Gaps in the capacity and predictability of global humanitarian response efforts are widely recognised. To address this and to ensure a more comprehensive response in this disaster, the UN piloted the 'cluster' system. To improve information sharing, co-ordination, and accountability, specialised groups or clusters were established for key sectors such as camp management, shelter, water and sanitation, health, and logistics in the capital Islamabad, in addition to regional co-ordination points, or 'hubs'. There were some teething troubles, but clusters such as water and sanitation, health, and shelter (after a shaky start) worked reasonably well, and major outbreaks of disease were averted.

The UN's evaluation process later identified the need for several improvements. These related to NGO participation, communication between hubs and the capital, limited accountability across clusters, and scant policy advocacy on key issues. At times, the system struggled to deliver important UN responsibilities. Social protection monitoring, for example, was too weak to ensure that the return of displaced people from camps in NWFP to their home areas was guided by international standards and principles.

Complexity hindered planning

Predictable crises require planning and preparedness, so as to ensure predictable and reliable responses. Although the earthquake came as a devastating surprise, certain subsequent events such as the migration of people from camps were perfectly predictable. Nevertheless, those providing assistance sometimes struggled to act in a timely and appropriate manner to prevent or mitigate the negative impact of these 'secondary' shocks.

This occurred for a number of reasons, and in complex circumstances. The understandable focus on the 'winter race' – the push to provide adequate shelter before the worst of winter set in – affected other plans, for example. Planning by the international community for the return of people from camps, which should have been part of a dialogue with local government, in NWFP began less than six weeks before the process was scheduled to finish. Consequently, important opportunities for joint planning between the UN and the government were lost.

In PAK, the situation was different: there was a strong desire for the international community to play a part. International agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF, and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) actively helped people to return to their homes. In NWFP, the authorities scheduled a faster return. The international community played a limited role here, and this led to concerns that the process was in many cases not safe, dignified, informed, or voluntary.

Challenges for women

It is widely recognised that disasters have a different impact on women and children than they do on men. Therefore, to ensure appropriate and effective assistance that addresses actual needs, those needs must be assessed and analysed in a way that addresses gender-related differences.

The loss of family members and the new demands of rebuilding have created stresses for both men and women. Workloads have increased for both and their traditional roles have shifted. Many people have to travel significant distances and stay away from home in order to access grants and compensation. This is particularly stressful for the women.

'Women's mobility, legal recognition, and access to education have traditionally been restricted in many affected regions. So, their ability to benefit from the reconstruction and relief operations will be limited unless steps are taken to tackle this.'

— Yamina Mokrani, Oxfam GB advocacy officer, Islamabad

Women from rural areas have traditionally had limited experience of public institutions. They now face substantial challenges in dealing with the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) offices, banks, and other offices. Women report feeling humiliated and undermined in such places. This is attributable to the absence of special facilities and to the attitudes of staff working in these offices towards them. Women also face heightened risks because of insecure housing, male-dominated institutions, and low levels of literacy.

During the emergency response, many relief organisations struggled to address the different needs of men and women in a consistent manner. Government and non-government strategies were developed, but in many cases without sufficient information about how men's and women's needs differed. Moreover, access to women in many areas proved difficult. As a result, many of these plans didn't accurately reflect their needs.

Recommendations

- Planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems being established by involved agencies must ensure that gender-disaggregated information about how men and women respectively are benefiting from reconstruction activities is gathered, analysed, and shared.
- Government survey and monitoring teams should be sensitised both to gender issues and to emerging vulnerabilities.

4 Conclusion

Last winter, it was feared that the sub-zero temperatures of the Himalayan winter could cause as many deaths as the earthquake itself. The largely effective and successful response of the international community and the Pakistani authorities, aided by a relatively mild winter, meant that such a catastrophe was averted.

However, because of the scale of the disaster — in a poor part of the world marked by extreme environmental conditions — thousands of people remain vulnerable.

An urgent effort is required to help them stay alive, warm and well this winter. Meanwhile, to make a reality of the Government of Pakistan's policy of 'Build Back Better', more work is needed to ensure that the survivors can rebuild homes and communities that are safer and stronger than they were before.

Notes

¹ ERRA set up the State Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority in PAK, and the Provincial Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority in NWFP, as well as district reconstruction units (DRUs) across the affected areas.

² Revenue officers have been found charging inflated fees for issuing essential documents. Likewise, landlords are reportedly demanding up to a 50 per cent share of the official shelter compensation before signing the agreement that a tenant needs to have to receive the cash.

³ Institutional donors were Britain's Department of International Development Fund and the Disasters Emergency Committee (which distributed British public donations to 13 UK-based agencies); the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO); AusAID; the Canadian International Development Agency; the Government of Belgium, UNICEF; FAO; UNHCR. Support also came from the following Oxfam affiliates: Oxfam Solidarité, Oxfam Ireland, Oxfam America, Oxfam Japan, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam Hong Kong, Oxfam Germany, Oxfam Canada, and Oxfam New Zealand.

Appendix: list of acronyms

ERRA – Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority

FAO – Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

NWFP – North West Frontier Province

PAK – Pakistani-administered Kashmir

PRC – Provincial Relief Commissioner

RCC – Reinforced Concrete Columns

UNHCR – United Nations High Commission for Refugees

UNICEF – United Nations Children Fund

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