

Chapter 6

Gaps and Shortcomings

Pakistan lacks coherent multi-hazard disaster preparedness plans at all levels of the government and public arenas. Only a few non-government organisations have formulated limited plans, but these are narrow in their scope and implementation, restricted to a few districts in the country at the most.

The existing strategy for disaster preparedness in the country revolves around mitigation for river-flood hazards through structural measures such as spurs, embankments, and related protection works. Lately, there has been additional emphasis on upgrading capabilities for early flood warning through the use of advanced technologies, e.g., radar, satellites, HF radios, and so on. In the case of river floods, over the years a plan has emerged for coordination between various early-warning, controlling, and disaster management institutions for mutual consultation for preparedness for an effective response and subsequent relief and rehabilitation. None of this has, however, been documented in the form of a preparedness plan.

Whereas, flood disasters associated with major river systems have been greatly controlled, flash floods caused by torrential rains are continuing to play havoc with lives and assets. Their unpredictability in terms of both time and locale make flash floods more difficult to mitigate and respond to than river floods. Further, the region threatened by flash flood hazards is much greater than that threatened by river floods. Whereas the issue is enormous, Pakistan's preparedness for meeting this challenge is virtually negligible. Only a few non-government agencies (e.g., FOCUS Pakistan) have started to tackle the issue by developing vulnerability maps in Pakistan's northern mountainous region – including Gilgit and Chitral. This effort is required on a much greater scale so that the entire country can be covered in terms of vulnerability maps; and then lead to the introduction of mitigation practices where required. At the moment, neither the federal nor the provincial authorities or agencies concerned with flood management are focusing on this issue. Likewise, almost all the major cities and towns in the country are least prepared for even an insignificant amount of rain. These cities either lack or have badly clogged drains, resulting in flood-like situations damaging houses and commercial areas, short circuiting the electricity, and even sweeping children away into open drains.

Whereas it is a great achievement to have developed effective government institutions dedicated to the mitigation of floods, one glaring flaw remains in the context of the minimum involvement of communities. There is hardly any evidence that vulnerable communities are trained to respond effectively to floods, let alone evidence of attempts to involve them in decision-making on the location or type of controlling structures. Further, is there effective communication between flood-forecasting agencies and the vulnerable communities? Despite the fact that there are manuals to bridge this gap, in practice much of the forecasting information is mere jargon for common people.

These flaws in flood-related disaster management, in particular, and management of all disasters, in general, will remain unless active community participation is ensured. The Local Government System (2001) that has been implemented in the country for the past five years has the potential to give greater empowerment of elected representatives at all levels than heretofore.

For other hazards, e.g., earthquakes and landslides, the status of preparedness is even bleaker than for floods. Disasters from these hazards can be avoided or at least minimised through vulnerability mapping. In the case of earthquakes, formulation and implementation of building codes ensuring earthquake resistant dwellings, especially in seismically vulnerable areas, forms the basis of preparedness. The British Government implemented strict building codes following the disastrous Quetta earthquake in 1935. Yet, instead of continuously revising, upgrading, and ensuring implementation of building codes, Pakistan made the building codes virtually redundant. Collapse of government buildings was ten times greater than the rates of collapse for private buildings in the Kashmir earthquake of 2005. This clearly demonstrates the status of earthquake preparedness in Pakistan.

In the case of landslides and the related disasters of debris flows and mass movements, Pakistan's preparedness is again restricted to the supply of relief as and when the need arises. Every year hundreds of lives and large amounts of property are lost to landslides. Like earthquakes, landslides can be completely unpredictable. However, in most instances fissures and cracks start developing hours and sometimes days in advance, with the commencement of rock falls and rise of dust. Not a single occasion has come to light in which an area or road segment has been declared vulnerable and evacuated or barred for use in response to such warnings. Firstly, such phenomena are highly localised and it is only the local population that can judge these warning signs, and they do not have the necessary authority or equipment to make decisions. Despite the existence of local governments at village, sub-district, and district level, somehow there seems to be no effective mechanism in place to use the local knowledge about prediction of landslides and related hazards and to decide in advance to ban activities in vulnerable areas and road segments to avoid frequent mishaps.