

Learning from previous flood responses

The fury of floods has been on a distinctly disturbing trend across India and Bangladesh in recent years. In the short term, the casualty figures due to natural disasters may have shown a slowing trend. This is due to improved warning and preparedness, as well as the fact that there hasn't been a disaster with a magnitude of the South Asian Tsunami or Kashmir Earthquake. However, the economic losses and human hardship are mounting significantly. In fact, floods cause the maximum economic loss across all natural disasters. Much of this suffering remains under the radar as the communities are poor and their economies informal. The personal losses, though amounting to huge magnitudes in their own rights, often do not dent the formal GDP and so do not shake the souls of the media, the government and people at large.

Humanitarian flood responses therefore usually take place in particularly challenging settings with very limited resources and in the face of detrimental policies. A study by Christian Aid and Saferworld Communications attempted to capture the lessons from flood responses between 2007-2012 in a manner that can help organisations plan for the future and build appropriate capacities at all levels. It is a forward-looking attempt for an ever-improving aid system. One that not only helps affected families survive, but also helps trigger rapid recovery and long-term resilience. Seven main areas emerged that aid agencies, donors and local organisations should consider during a flood response.

INCLUSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: There is a critical need to develop a nuanced understanding of socially excluded groups and power structures; engaging these groups as active stakeholders; and to influence specific inclusion policies.

There is a dire need to document complexities of the inclusion issue, relevant strategies and best practices; strengthening context specific strategies for the most socially, religiously and economically marginalised groups. Power analysis could be undertaken to help identify the most marginalised during an emergency. Tools such as PVCA and social audits should be deployed to encourage participation. Finally, collaboration and networking of NGOs working in the same area can allow for optimal coverage of affected communities and help converge resources for increased effectiveness.

LONG-TERM RESILIENCE: Long-term resilience requires effective techniques and technologies that are simple enough to be locally, culturally and environmentally sustainable; as well as a focus on livelihoods at the household level.

The integration of long-term resilience into programme design and main funding lines – including emergency budgets – can help bring these issues to the fore. Partnerships could also be established with local technical resource groups (such as universities) to pre-identify appropriate technical solutions for the general intervention areas. Livelihoods and risks should be diversified as much as possible, ensuring that they are financially viable within an enterprise model. For all structural interventions (including schools, houses, cyclone shelters and WASH), designs, materials, technology and labour should be local and sustainable.

CAPACITY BUILDING: Skills need to be strengthened across levels, with a focus on new mechanisms such as cash transfer; and virtual platforms built upon for better resource mobilisation and technical capacity.

There is a vital need to invest in capacity building and encourage cross-learning between organisations. Challenges in the deployment of emergency mechanisms such as HAP and cash transfer need to be researched; and their implementation system refined to ease operations at the ground level. Specific skill sets and long-term capacity issues of all local players need to be made an integral part of the programme, activities and budgets. It is also important that sector-wise expertise is available on project teams (especially in technical areas like shelter and WASH).

KNOWLEDGE AS HUMANITARIAN CAPACITY: Indigenous knowledge and local coping mechanisms must be collated and shared; and best practices, challenges and evidence of change documented for continued learning.

Research and documentation of local practices and appropriate new technologies need to be invested in as part of the main budget lines; using it for advocacy and skill building. Field initiatives and projects should be documented thoroughly to ensure project learning is transferrable. Part of this process is looking internally at capacities within the communities themselves while designing solutions.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Accountability principles adopted explicitly as a way of working can help promote timeliness; and downward accountability both within the organisation and for elected representatives.

There is a need to simplify and communicate HAP principles more effectively down to ground level. The local challenges and risks in the implementation of accountability mechanisms need to be understood, building in flexibility where needed. As far as possible, responsibilities of beneficiary selection, procurement and monitoring should be transferred to the community themselves through a system of truly representative committees. Yet, while doing this, it needs to be ensured that local power plays do not derail inclusion efforts.

ADVOCACY AND NETWORKING: Engagement with the government, donors, the private sector and academic institutions is necessary to influence social inclusion policies, mainstream risk reduction and reduce dependence on recurrent relief.

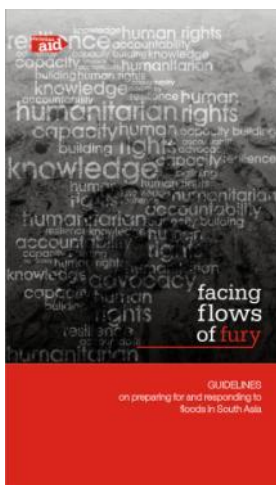
Local organisations need to come together for national and regional advocacy targeting governments, regional groupings such as SAARC and international organisations. Proactive engagement in inter-agency groups and other multi-stakeholder platforms is needed for collaborative advocacy. Governments should be engaged with at the state and national level to influence the policy environment. Local academic institutions can help study and articulate the complex macro-issues. Finally, exploring partnerships with the private sector can help mainstream small-scale innovations and initiatives to influence the market

PLANNING FOR THE NEXT BIG ONE: Programmes need to acknowledge and integrate the challenges of climate change and growing numbers of climate refugees; as well as growing urban risk and poverty.

A focus also needs to be kept on internal and external planning for the 'next big one'. Increasingly dense habitation in hazard prone areas, marginalisation of the poorest and impending threats of climate change impacts leave no doubt that the future holds increasingly devastating disasters. Floods, in particular, are a regular phenomenon. Though life loss may be contained through ongoing DRR efforts, economic losses and hardships are on an alarming trend. Humanitarian organisations have no choice but to anticipate this and prepare for it right now.

SPREADING THE KNOWLEDGE

The study has culminated in an analytical report complete with case studies, as well as two core learning aids. A simulation-based learning module on responding to floods in South Asia can help participants analyse, debate and chart the course of various stages of a complex flood response. A pocket guideline for field practitioners offers recommendations and action points for donor and national agencies, as well as local partners. It also summarises key documents, theories and methods that will help assist humanitarian staff in carrying out work in these areas. These supporting measures will help future steps of improving institutional memory and putting in place capacity building measures.



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