

Disaster governance

Dr. Sania Nishtar

Disasters are a true litmus test of governance. Many attributes of governance interplay in disasters, before, during and after a situation. This comment flags five governance lessons, evidenced by the response to the recent catastrophic floods.

The first attribute relates to strategic planning, which raises an important question: was it possible to predict the behaviour of the monsoons this time round? Whilst it is true that the scale of the disaster could not have been predicted, the calamity clearly hasn't dawned as a surprise.

Findings of a vulnerability mapping of Pakistan as part of a regional study on global environmental issues sponsored by the Asian Development Bank had described the potential effects of climate change on natural resources as far back as 1994 and had suggested strategies to avoid worst impacts. This was also emphasized in the South Asia Human Development Report in 2007 and was reiterated by the report of a Task Force on Climate Change, established under the aegis of the Planning Commission, in February 2010. The latter stated "it is projected that climate change will increase the variability of monsoon rains and enhance the frequency and severity of extreme events such as floods and droughts". International reports have placed Pakistan amongst the top twenty global warming hotspots in the world with low adaptive capacity. It is not clear if these forecasts led to institutional changes to enhance capacity. Pakistan also doesn't have a national security apparatus in place which takes cognizance of human security threats that can be precipitated as a result of forecasted disasters, with implications for economic, food, energy, community, individual and health security.

Relevant to the case in point, the metrological office had issued an advisory on June 26 that there would be an increased risk of flash floods. It isn't clear why the country's disaster management apparatus wasn't shaken into action in response to this forecast.

Secondly, this should be an opportunity to explore if the country's disaster management frameworks developed subsequent to the October 2005 earthquake are optimally functioning and the weaknesses in the operations of the Flood Relief Commission. Ideas are being mooted to create new commissions and institutions without fully realising that the top down model of centralized bodies and installation of parallel structures doesn't work unless certain governance norms are ingrained. The government must take stock of the existing governance constraints these institutions suffer from and be clear about the manner in which it envisages obviating these in new arrangements. Rather than parallel structures an oversight body may be more appropriate, an option the government is also currently exploring. However, unless the arrangement is mandated with key prerogatives related to scrutiny and accountability, not much will be achieved.

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International reports have placed Pakistan amongst the top twenty global warming hotspots in the world with low adaptive capacity. It is not clear if these forecasts led to institutional changes to enhance capacity within state agencies or if there was headway in establishing the Global Change Impact Study Centre which was recommended by the Task Force. Pakistan also does not have a national security apparatus in place which takes cognizance of human security threats that can be precipitated as a result of forecasted disasters, with implications for economic, food, energy, community, individual and health security.

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Third, governance of the Indus River and the politics that plague it is a subject in its own right. 'Kalabagh politics' is a classical example of how political expediency interplays in strategic governance decisions. The entire nation is being reminded today that if some strategic dams existed, the scale of devastation would have been much less. What the nation forgets though is that it is the lack of enforcement of accountability—a governance norm—which manifest itself as inattention to strategic decisions such as the creation of dams.

Inefficiencies and collusion in regulating the Indus River and the ill-planned settlements around it have also come to the fore. The 'politics of canal and flood embankment breaches' and diversion plans are an illustration of how power is abused, systemic protocols are disregarded and political influence is wielded. Spontaneous unexpected collapse of the embankments raises many questions about the quality of infrastructure and the interplay of collusion and rent-seeking in the process of awarding contractual agreements. It is ironic that our perennial dilemma centres on water insecurity with crippling energy shortfall a consequence, despite the existence of waterways whose potential we haven't harnessed by increasing our storage capacity and innovative water management.

In the fourth place, there is a strong interplay of governance in many short term priorities. Coordination is critical at every stage. Pakistan's indigenous population and diaspora have stepped in to help as has the international community. Unfortunately, the country does not have a regulatory framework in place to allow full expression to the potential contribution of volunteers nor does it have frameworks that can enable civil society engagement in a structured manner. It is critical to develop institutional mechanisms, so that Pakistan can leverage the strength of many strong civil society organizations and the socially committed private sector, which have been mobilised in response to the crisis.

Resource management is another problem. It is hoped that support commensurate with the findings of damage assessments—currently underway—is mobilised. However in order to tap its potential, Pakistan will have to institutionalize oversight mechanisms in order to overcome the current trust deficit, which plagues its relationship with some aspects of donor interaction and as a result of which, disbursement channels besides government entities are now being explored.

Other short term priorities include consolidation of information streams in every sector—health education, infrastructure, livelihood, etc., so as to obviate current duplication and multiple channels of information flow. In the short term the government of Pakistan must also facilitate speedy import of essential food items so that malnutrition, which has been a dominant determinant in the recent commodity shortages in the Pakistan does not factor into play to exploit the situation.

In the fifth place and in the medium term once relief is over, the task of rehabilitating the victims of a vast humanitarian tragedy and economic revival must get underway. Plans for reviving industrial and agricultural output, rebuilding infrastructure, and supporting poor communities in a post-disaster situation will have to be developed and implemented. This cannot be enabled unless there are additional resources, which are effectively utilised. Diversion of low-priority expenditures, a focus on aid effectiveness, cutting back establishment costs have become an imperative. The critical question of increasing Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio and policy discussions on reform of GST become relevant now, more than ever.

Pakistan has been hit by this calamity when there are other mammoth tasks at hand. The calamity has hit at a time when the country is grappling with many competing priorities. The internal security situation is unpredictable, a war is ongoing and fiscal constraints are grinding. There is lack of clarity in governance norms at an overarching level as many things that are being reshaped.

The federation's relationship with its provinces is being redefined under a constitutional amendment and new formations for fiscal federalism. Drastic changes have been made in the local government system. Many processes are therefore, in a flux. The country therefore has to not only grapple the immediate disaster at hand but also the systemic processes, upon which successful relief and rehabilitation is dependent. Success is heavily dependent on the quality and effectiveness of governance. This time a lot more than just the lives and well-being of millions in poor riverside communities is at stake.

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Resource management is another problem. It is hoped that support commensurate with the findings of damage assessments—currently underway—is mobilized and that attention is accorded to debt relief. However in order to tap its potential Pakistan will have to institutionalize oversight mechanisms in order to overcome the current trust deficit, which plagues its relationship with some aspects of donor interaction and as a result of which disbursement channels outside of government entities are now being explored.

Other short term priorities include consolidation of information streams in every sector—health education, infrastructure, livelihood, etc., so as to obviate current duplication and multiple channels of information flow. In the short term the government of Pakistan must also facilitate speedy import of essential food items so that cartelization, which has been a dominant determinant in the recent commodity shortages in the Pakistan doesn’t factor into play to exploit the situation.

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