Flood and Disaster Observatory

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In the last eight weeks, 'coordination' has come to be viewed as the epitome of flood relief, and the lack thereof, a major failure of stewardship agencies. The emphasis on coordination in the given context is not without reason. The massive need for response that the flood has generated, coupled with grinding fiscal constraints, create an imperative to minimize duplications and maximize synergies. Whilst the need cannot be overemphasized, it is the approach to coordination that needs to be placed under the analytical lens. What do we mean by better coordination? What should it achieve? What are the difficulties, which stand in the way of enabling that? Do we have structures to build upon? And where are the existing competencies and institutional arrangements?

In relation to the first question, one thing to note whilst making a case for optimizing coordination is to take stock of existing arrangements. There are a plethora of coordination arrangements already in place. The armed forces have their own system, the donors led by UNOCA have likewise, as do the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and several provincial agencies. Civil society has its own mode of collaborating.

There are coordination arrangements within individual sectors, in addition. The health sector, for example, has a health cluster, themed task forces, and mobile teams in the field, a mechanism for operational control of field and mobile hospitals, and some level of oversight over fixed facilities; they publish a bulletin, maintain a website, provide for linking volunteers and have a mechanism for inter-cluster coordination. Other sectors have analogous arrangements. In addition to interagency coordination intra-sectorally, there are some mechanisms in place for inter-sectoral coordination. What exactly do we mean by enhancing coordinating then?

Most references to coordination in the present context refer to a supra-organizational structure or mechanism. In terms of what it should achieve, a number of objectives are noteworthy. Synchronization and integration of activities, minimizing duplication and wastage, ensuring efficient use of resources, and harmonizing civil society and volunteer contributions with the states' response, are to mention the important ones. The latter is important since volunteers are generally first on the scene in disaster situations, as also outlined in Resolution 56/38 of the UN General Assembly. The massive mobilization of individual volunteers and organized civil society in wake of the recent floods is evidence of the need to develop a mechanism to harness their potential.

There are many difficulties, which stand in the way of creating a supra-organizational coordination structure, which can achieve these objectives given the extremely broad landscape of actors involved in disasters. Agencies have varying mandates, missions, and objectives and diverse administrative and reporting relationships. When they are asked to synchronise, share information and come under the control of another structure they fiercely guard their turf and independence. Coordination cannot be aligned on vertical principles, when agencies don't have reporting hierarchical relationships.

The command and control model of coordination often perceived as the ideal mode of engagement doesn't appear feasible as agencies have a disincentive to participate in such an arrangement. Any supra-organizational coordination structure, therefore, has to offer two things to be successful. One, it has to offer incentives for agencies to participate, and secondly, it should add value to what the existing arrangements have to offer.

It is in view of these two prerequisites, that the idea of a Flood and Disaster Observatory is being mooted in this comment. The word 'observatory' is conventionally used to describe a location for observing terrestrial and/or celestial events. There are many examples of disciplines for which observatories have been constructed; these can be ground, radio, web, space or air-based.

The proposed Flood and Disaster Observatory is envisaged to be a dynamic user-friendly web-based portal/interface. Such an interface can enable information to be updated in real time about the needs of various geographic regions and the agency commitments and actions in response. It would also enable assessment of gaps in the field and outline requirements.

In discussing this idea with a technical colleague, certain technical aspects became clearer. If the system is to be brought in immediate use then a simple database application, where the data is entered in forms and rendered in tabular reports with the help of built-in queries, can be implemented in a matter of a few weeks. However, the ideal solution would be to provide a user-friendly interface, where the user could click on a map and drill down to the level of the *Tehsil* and then enter the requisite information. An even higher level of sophistication would be to make use of a GIS-based system such that the information is not only entered with the help of a graphical interface but it can also be rendered visually on a map. A GIS-based system works off the same database hence no additional information is provided but the visual display superimposed on a map helps in quickly identifying the target location where the specific type of aid is to be provided. A visual map also provides better context and makes it convenient to see the status of the neighbouring areas rather than having to rely on successive queries.

Any system, whether GIS-based or a simple database application, would have to provide a mechanism for authenticating users. It is this system of information and authentication, which can enable coordination implicitly. Real time updating, interaction, and visibility would be an incentive for agencies to participate; and since the mechanism would not be coercive it would be acceptable to most stakeholders. It would also make perfect sense given Pakistan's excellent telecommunications infrastructure.

The strength of this approach also lies in the fact that state agencies are already working with something that can be a stepping stone to developing this. For example, the flood relief pages of NDMA, and PDMA's websites have many useful features; they post regular weather forecasts and flood warnings and information about relief camps and urgent needs. Punjab DMA has information for registering NGOs and volunteers and has many active features related to flood relief. The inclusion of interactive features for updating the information dynamically from a variety of sources can significantly enhance use of the web-interface for enabling agencies to use it as a common platform for coordination, hence maximizing synergies and minimizing duplication.

Pakistan must enhance its capacity to cope with disasters. Unfortunately, the country is amongst the top twenty global warming hotspots in the world with low adaptive capacity. Findings of a vulnerability mapping of Pakistan clearly indicate that "climate change will increase the variability of monsoon rains and enhance the frequency and severity of extreme events such as floods and droughts". In attempting to prepare ourselves for next year, cost effective strategies as the one being proposed offer value. The government could convene technical experts to explore its feasibility further.

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