

THE NEWS

Disaster and devolution

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The recent devastating floods which have displaced or affected 30 million people, destroyed or damaged a million houses, buildings, structures, bridges, roads, rail connections, highways, commercial properties, disrupted movement of goods have brought unbearable grief to the whole nation.

The losses to the economy are still being assessed but a rough and approximate estimate indicates that it may be around \$10 billion. On top of the already fragile fiscal situation, this quantum of loss is unbearable unless once again the international community rises to the occasion on humanitarian grounds.

It is also now well established that extreme weather events such as heatwaves, floods, droughts are no longer occasional phenomena occurring every ten years or so. Climate change risks such as torrential rains, glacier melting, floods have become part of the norm and have serious consequences for the water-food-energy nexus. Economic and social planning calculus would have come up with the ways that can prevent, adapt and mitigate these risks.

In that spirit, this article lays out the contours of strengthening the institutional framework for meeting the challenges of the disasters, calamities and climate change risks in the future. After the 18th Amendment to the constitution that quite rightly devolved administrative, legislative and functional powers from the federal government to the provincial governments and the seventh NFC Award that transferred almost 60 per cent of the tax revenues collected by the FBR to the provinces, the next step should have been a robust and well-functioning system of local governments attuned to the peculiar circumstances of each province.

Punjab with a population of 110 million – just equal to several countries' population – and with 35 districts cannot be managed from Lahore. The problems of the southern Punjab districts are quite different from those in northern and central Punjab. The recent floods have damaged seven districts in southern Punjab and have had limited impact in the other two parts of the province.

Sindh has an urban-rural divide as half of the population lives in the urban and half in the rural areas. Then there is the difference in the rural districts that are irrigated and have perennial canals compared to those that depend on non-perennial sources. Tharparkar has a large desert area while Thatta, Badin and Sujawal are close to the tail end of the Indus River.

Balochistan which has the largest area in the country with low population density has the coastal areas of Makran, fertile irrigated lands in districts adjoining Sindh, the Lasbela district tied to Karachi's industrial economy while northern Balochistan linked to Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in deriving livelihoods.

KP has recently merged with districts that have suffered a lot from two decades of the 'war against terror' and have poor social and economic indicators. The Malakand Division and part of Hazara are more prone to flooding because of the mountainous terrain with ferocious rivers. Peshawar Valley is better endowed with human and financial resources while the southern districts are not so well off. Gilgit-Baltistan displays the highest risk as the three large mountain ranges and the River Indus fall in that area. AJK was the major victim of the 2005 earthquake.

Pakistan has ten agro-ecological zones based on physiography, climate, land use and water availability ranging from Indus Delta, irrigated plains, sandy desert, mountains etc. The impact of climate change on these zones would vary a great deal and can only be assessed for each individual zone. Food and cash cropping patterns and livestock intensity are determined by their location in a particular zone.

The purpose of outlining the above catalogue of socio-economic and agro-ecological heterogeneity is to assert that a centralized system of governance and decision-making from Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta controlling all resources is antithetical to the challenges of variations in factor endowment and highly complex problems faced by each of the 160 districts of Pakistan – particularly in relation to disaster management and climate change risks. These detached and remote centers of power cannot effectively identify or deliver the solutions to the peculiar circumstances and the diverse problems faced by each of these communities at the grassroots level. Chitral is not Lasbela and Tharparkar is not Gujranwala, and a one-shoe-fits-all approach won't work,

Taking the Punjab Local Government Act 2022 as the benchmark for devolution of powers to the district level, it is noticed that there is a clear division between the urban and rural areas and there is no single elected Nazim for the whole district. In each district there would be a district council representing the rural areas and a metropolitan/ municipal corporation for the urban population. The District Municipal Forum which is the coordinating body within the district as well as with the provincial, federal governments would be headed by either the chairman of the District Council or the mayor of the corporation depending on which one of the entities has the largest representation of population.

In other words, there is no unity of command in the new system although 10 departments of the provincial governments have been devolved to the local governments. Under the 2001 system there used to be a single district nazim responsible for all devolved functions. The 2001 system, otherwise quite successful in delivery of public services to citizens, development of the areas and accessibility to the nazims, had a weakness that it abolished the offices of the assistant commissioner/ deputy commissioner and took away the powers of the executive magistrate from them. The District Coordination Officer which replaced the DC was reporting directly to the District Nazim. The flaw in this arrangement was that there was no politically neutral officer of the state to whom a citizen could turn for security of person and property, prevention of disorderly and revengeful actions by those in power, for land administration

and integrity of land records and getting unbiased access to relief goods and rehabilitation once disasters hit them.

The present system has retained the office of the deputy commissioner but there is ambiguity as to who in fact is responsible for disaster management. The 2022 Act says that the councils/ corporations would assist in disaster management, but it is not clear on who in fact is in charge of rescue, evacuation, relief goods distribution and finally compensation and rehabilitation. There are national, provincial and district DMAs in a vertical chain but they don't have any anchor.

From the past experience it can be vouched that it is the Deputy Commissioner and his staff who is most suited for handling this responsibility. The DDMA should be placed under the direct supervision of the DC. He/she is best suited to make preparatory arrangements such as designated camps or setting up makeshift camps where the affected population can be located in anticipation of the actual occurrence of the event. As the DC staff knows the lay of the land very well they can navigate the evacuation through the safest routes when the tragedy occurs. They can mobilize local well to do people to provide immediate relief goods, food, tents, drinking water, blankets, medicines, water purification tablets and then coordinate with the provincial and Federal authorities, international donors and Civil society organizations dividing the areas among them and avoid duplication and overlapping efforts. They can requisition the boats, vehicles and other transport from within the district or reach out for supplementing their efforts.

The district officials are also in a better position to take preventive and mitigating measures such as uninterrupted flow of water and adequate drainage . What is described here has been successfully done in the past in many districts including the writer's personal experience in managing the floods in Chittagong. All the Provincial Governments have to do is to remove present ambiguity and provide legislative powers along with financial resources at the disposal of the District Administration. The Nazims and Chairmen of the Councils would work together to assist the Deputy Commissioner in both prevention and actual operations.

The writer is the author of 'Governing the ungovernable'.