

Floods in Pakistan: Socio-political and 'techno-nature' challenges – a first glance

Urs Geiser¹ and Abid Qayum Suleri², August 23, 2010

On July 29, 2010, incredibly intense rainfalls poured over the Karakorums in Northwest Pakistan. The intensity of the rains is beyond what people used to receive during earlier monsoon seasons, and is attributed by meteorologist to an "[Omega constellation](#)". Unusual rainfall led to landslides and initiated a flash flood in the upper reaches of river Swat and its tributaries. Over the coming days, rains continued not only in Northwest Pakistan, but in Baluchistan as well, adding to the flash flood that moved southwards to the plains of Peshawar and Swabi, then continuing along river Indus through the Punjab, to reach Sindh. By today, around 1'600 people have died. According to official figures, 15.4 million people have been "directly affected", 1 million houses damaged, and one quarter of Pakistan's land area is inundated. The spatial spread of the disaster is well known and is continuously documented by satellite data and maps, for example by the [Pakistan Meteorological Department](#), [UNSAT](#) or [ICIMOD](#).

The floods are among the worst disasters that hit Pakistan and its people. And they pose a whole series of incredible challenges to the country's citizens, administration, political parties, civil society, and academia. In the following sections, we mention just a few of them, being aware that there are many more to be tackled. We start with issues of emergency aid delivery and coordination, moving to challenges of raising funds amidst Pakistan's "bad image", then gradually moving towards questions regarding the causes for the disaster, and capabilities to cope with them.

Delivering emergency aid

The sheer size of the affected area, the enormous number of victims and the short time within which aid is required – all these create almost insurmountable challenges. The needs for emergency aid are immense: food, clean drinking water (or water purifying tablets), medicines (the risk of outbreak of skin diseases, cholera and diarrhoea); feed and veterinary care for remaining livestock, shelter, etc. Delivering aid needs infrastructure to reach the affected. But many roads are inundated or damaged, bridges washed away, power lines damaged and there are many areas where the only access is through helicopters.

In principle, the state of Pakistan does have an agency in place at central level to cope with disasters, i.e. the National Disaster Management Authority [NDMA](#) (housed in the Prime Minister Secretariat) with provincial branches (e.g. [PDMA](#) in Peshawar). However the legal status of this agency is in doldrums due to delays in procedural matters. The National Disaster Management Ordinance 2006 under which the NDMA was constituted is a Presidential Order that needs to be vetted by the parliament within 120 days. However, this had already lapsed several months back. Re-promulgation of the lapsed Ordinance is also no more possible as the Constitution of Pakistan after the recent 18th Amendment prevents the government from re-promulgating an ordinance more than once.

A crucial challenge, though, is the often weak decentralised local administration (the 'local state') that turned even weaker since the tenure of local governments came to an end last year. To recall, a (new) system of local government was introduced in 2001, giving Union Councils and districts more power, including financial, in development affairs.³ Currently administrators from the state bureaucracy are running the local administration and there is no room for local people's say in emergency aid delivery.

The best organised and well resourced player in Pakistan is the army, and it is no surprise that they do play a crucial role in delivering emergency aid, e.g. through helicopters, army boats etc. Important too

¹ Development Study Group, Department of Geography, Zurich University, Zurich, Switzerland, urs.geiser@geo.uzh.ch

² Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Islamabad, Pakistan, suleri@sdpi.org

³ See related studies by NCCR North-South researchers [Akbar S. Zaidi](#) or [B. Steimann](#)

is civil society. Though still being weak in Pakistan as compared to other countries, there are organisations at local, regional and national level that do have links to the grass-root. Civil society organisations include the well-known "NGOs", but groups as well that are for example linked to political parties, professional associations⁴ or which have religious affiliation. Especially the latter are very quickly associated with fundamentalism or even the Taliban movement. Very little, though, is known that would allow a sensitive differentiation between charitable movements that take their orientation and justification from religious arguments, and those that primarily focus on the spread of fundamentalism. Indeed this is a highly under-researched subject, not only in Pakistan but around the world (see for example research by [Jonathan Benthall](#)).

The most crucial devise at this initial time of the catastrophe, though, is "local self-help" – affected people's own efforts at helping and saving their kin, their belongings, but also starting the repair of access roads or local bridges (esp. in the up-stream regions). Indeed, these local safety nets and their stratifying consequences in the social field are almost unknown beyond the local level.

Last but not least, bilateral as well as multilateral international organisations (among them especially the World Food Program) became very active, and many of the donors with established programmes in Pakistan immediately addressed emergency aid. In many cases, they work through the networks established in the course of their regular project work (see e.g. the Swiss [SDC](#)).

Emergency aid coordination

The size of the disaster is gigantic, and there are a huge array of actors involved in, and willing to, provide support. This raises the challenges of aid coordination to ensure an efficient and effective distribution of aid. On government side, NDMA is in charge, with its branches in the provinces. In order to improve coordination among relief activities, the Prime Minister of Pakistan has tried to set up three different commissions in six days; a committee constituted for the complete assessment of damage and especially distribution of relief goods in Punjab was notified but is non functional (13th August); a "clean commission" comprising honest and credible Pakistanis was publically announced but not officially notified (14th August); and a supervisory committee on the NDMA, the National Oversight Disaster Management Council (19th August) is a non legal entity right now. Thus, none of those commissions are functional so far. However NDMA, despite its institutional and structural limitations, is coordinating the relief efforts with Pakistan Army and Rangers and UN agencies. NDMA is also providing basic information about floods, list of relief items needed, and reports damage on daily basis.

On the side of international donors, links established during the 2005 earthquake provide the essential network this time as well. Focal point of coordination is the Pakistan branch of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)). Updates on support is also given through the [Reliefweb](#).

Civil society organizations, that got organized as Joint Action Committee (JAC) during earthquake disaster of 2005, do not seem to be well coordinated this time. One of the reasons is the enormous geographical spread of the floods that has affected all the provinces. Most of the non-governmental organizations are either thinly spread or focusing on relief activities in their base districts. Many of these organizations are collecting donations as well as relief items in kind. Some of them have adapted various relief camps established by district administrations (e.g. various public buildings such as schools are being used to provide shelter and are declared as camps by district administration, plus a few tent cities as well) and are taking care of supply of food and medicines in these camps. Others are simply distributing truck loads of relief items in flood affected areas among flood survivors. Some (especially in non flood affected districts) are handing over their collection to other agencies such as [Edhi Foundation](#) or to the [WFP](#) (being a UN organisation with high credibility within Pakistan). International non-governmental humanitarian organizations are also actively working in various districts where they have established relief camps.

⁴ See for example [Geiser 2006](#)

Within Pakistan, individual philanthropists, professional bodies, chambers of commerce and industries, as well as the corporate sector are donating money and providing relief goods to the flood affected areas. As a matter of fact, this solidarity within Pakistan goes almost unnoticed in the international reporting. Usually, they take a truck load of relief items and distribute it among flood survivors. Collection sites for donations in kind as well as cash have been established by various governmental as well as non-governmental organizations. The Pakistan media is also playing a positive role in fund collection. There are about 50 independent TV channels in Pakistan. Many of them are running special flood transmission where various celebrities make appeals for donations and collect funds; as an example see [Dawn Media Group](#). They are handing over the collected funds to various humanitarian foundations.

Unfortunately, many of the above mentioned efforts are not very coordinated. NDMA has circulated a list of relief items, yet many of the relief providers (especially civil society groups) are either not aware of this list or simply forward whatever they receive in terms of donations. It is also noticed that camps established along accessible roads are getting more relief goods and camps in remote areas are often getting ignored. It is a challenge to further understand and analyse such processes of transmitting aid from international and national donors through networks of agencies, the processes of defining relief needs and priorities, and the geographical as well as 'urgency' reach of these endeavours.

Mobilising funds, transparency, and Pakistan's "bad image"

Emergency aid needs funds. The [Pakistan Initial Floods Emergency Response Plan](#) of early August estimates immediate requirements at 460 mio US\$. After UN Secretary General Ban Ke Mon's visit to Pakistan and the special session of UN General Assembly on Pakistan's flood, the pledges of the international community has reached 845 mio US\$ by 22nd August 2010. Here it is pertinent to mention that these are the pledges and not the actual amount received – which raises issues of actual availability and accessibility of pledged funds.

The Pakistan government stated that it is not in a position to bare the costs of this disaster. Some quarters within Pakistan, though, start raising more general questions regarding budget priorities, for example: "(...) first, the government should not be asking the world for more loans and aid but in fact should be making a case for the writing off of debt (or at the very least substantial restructuring of debt repayments). Second, parliament should revisit the federal budget and re-allocate all non-productive expenditure – particularly defence – towards the flood relief/rehabilitation efforts" (Dawn August 20, 2010). For sure, this debate will gain momentum.

Raising funds internationally is a challenge too. Pakistan has a bad name internationally. Talibanisation, corruption, the absence of the President during the initial phase of the catastrophe – all these things are widely published globally. Incidentally, just at the beginning of the floods, a report was released by the UK newspaper [Telegraph](#) on the misuse of funds during the 2005 earthquake, and again reported globally (for an example from the Swiss press see [NZZ](#)).

Food insecurity

One aspect that seems to be ignored is how this flood has affected the food and livelihood security situation. We are talking of flood in a context where 48.6 percent population was already not able "to secure nutritious food, for all times for everyone". 61 percent districts of were already devoid of prerequisites for food security, i.e., physical availability of food, socio-economic access to food and food absorption. In Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa,⁵ barring Haripur and Abbotabad, the rest of the 22 districts were categorised as food insecure by SDPI/WFP/SDC recent report "Food Insecurity in Pakistan 2009". Northern districts of Pakhtoonkhwa are most affected by floods. Upper Dir, Kohistan, Lower Dir, Malakand, and Shangla were the five worse food insecure districts in 2009. This was pre-flood situation. After the devastating floods all three components of food security have turned even worst in

⁵ Recently, the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) has been renamed as Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa

Pakhtoonkhwa. The loss of livelihood opportunities directly affects the socio-economic access to food. Loss of physical infrastructure, stored food commodities, and livestock affect the physical availability of food. Prevalence of diseases during floods negatively affects food absorption in human body. It should not be an exaggeration to say that after the floods more than 90 percent of population in the above mentioned districts would have gone food insecure. We are talking of a region where most parts got disconnected from land routes and helicopter is the only reliable means to provide relief to them. For an update on the other districts of Pakistan see Abid Suleri's article on "basic instinct" in [THE NEWS](#).

In a nutshell, one hundred percent crop losses have been recorded in many areas and tens of thousands of animals have been killed. According to FAO, nearly 700'000 hectares of standing crops are under water or destroyed and in many cases surviving animals are without feed. The upcoming fall season's wheat crop is now at risk in a region that is the bread basket of the country. The direct flood survivors are facing an acute food insecurity problem, while the areas that were not hit hard by floods would also have to face food shortage problem next year due to production as well as price hike.

Questioning the environmental degradation - flood vulnerability link

We now turn to debates on the causes of the disaster. There is agreement that the downpour was exceptional by any means. Still, questions are being raised regarding factors that made Pakistan more vulnerable to such natural events. One such issue is environmental degradation. Forest cover in the catchments areas of river Swat and its tributaries has reduced enormously in the recent past (see respective research by the [NCCR Pakistan Research Group](#)). An intensive debate has started on this – impaired, though, by the very contested debate (national as well as international) on the causal links between rainfall and run-off under vegetation cover. A much more obvious issue is land use zoning. Especially in the catchment region of river Swat, being a narrow valleys, a huge amount of houses has been damaged or washed away (e.g. in [Madyan](#)) – many of these buildings were hotels and other infrastructures that serviced the growing domestic tourism within Pakistan. Especially during hot summer months, many people from the plains used to travel to upper Swat. This raises the question of land use zoning – a technical matter at first sight, but deeply embedded in, and linked to, governance. There are already, in principle, state laws existing that address zoning, but the core challenge is implementation; we will come back to this further below.

The role of the irrigation infrastructure

After leaving its catchment area in the Karakorum, river Swat and river Indus enter into plain areas roughly 1'500 kilometres away from Karachi where Indus reaches the Arabian sea. These areas 1'500 kilometre north of Karachi are only around 200 meters asl. Thus, river Indus indeed flows through a very flat plain area for hundreds of miles. The whole stretch along river Indus is irrigated through a highly complex and sophisticated irrigation system, consisting of barrages that tap water from the river, main canals that bring the water to distributary ones, and a whole network of field canals.

The spring flood that emerged in North-west Pakistan swept along river Indus, breaching barrages, overflowing into canals, and thus bringing the flood water to areas quite distant from the river as well (see the [Tori Bund](#)). The irrigation infrastructure is controlled and managed by state authorities who tried many ways to cope with the situation. This ranged from opening sluices to blowing up dams etc. In addition, reports emerge on landlords that took their own measures to avoid their land being flooded.

There is an intense discussion emerging regarding on the one hand the capabilities of the responsible state agencies to cope with such events, and on the other hand on the feasibility of the physical infrastructure. Much of the infrastructure goes back to colonial periods, and is being refurbished in recent years through World Bank credits, among others. Already before the floods, the feasibility of barrages and the technical procedures of their rehabilitation was questioned. One of the issues raised is that they lead to siltation and the elevation of river beds; see for example the recent article by [Musthaq Gaadi](#) who is involved with the case of the Taunga barrage since long. We argue that there is an enormous

challenge for a critical debate in this field. At the institutional level, one also needs to critically look into the role (or failure?) of the [Federal Flood Commission](#) – a body established already in 1976.

The challenge of governance

Coordinating the delivery of emergency aid; having plans ready beforehand; bringing all the involved stakeholders on board; ensuring the proper operation and maintenance of irrigation structures, creating but also operate and maintain organisations for disaster preparedness – all these are facets of governance. While "government" refers to planning and decision-making by the state and its institutions, the notion of "governance" takes a societal look. How are decisions made within a certain society or nation; who is involved in these decision-making processes and who has which powers to decide; on which evidence is planning based and which planning are taken as basis for decision-making; how are conflicting views dealt with?

The present floods in Pakistan challenge the government of Pakistan in an unprecedented manner. Various instances are being reported where people affected by floods were staging protests; national as well as international media continuously report on the absence of "the state" in many flood-affected areas; and at the federal level, conflicts between various sections of the administration seem to affect the government's ability to act. But above all, the catastrophe challenges the whole governance process (as defined above) as it exists in the country. One of the many dimensions of this governance crisis is the highly contested nature of local government and related decentralisation processes. Much of the critique on the inefficiency of governance is known, though the scale of its consequences is unprecedented. The real challenge ahead is to take these insights as starting points, and to develop, propose and discuss feasible alternatives that help to ensure an effective governance system (incl. decentralisation) suitable for the conditions of Pakistan.

Can democracy deliver?

At the very heart of the matter lies the system along which a society or a nation for that matter structures its interactions among the citizens, the related decision-making process, etc. – "governance" in short. Pakistan is, in principle, a democracy. Or better: it is a democracy-in-the-making (a term we prefer to the popular "failed state"). The country has been created as a completely new entity a few decades ago only, and military rule over extended periods of time prevented the emergence of the key ingredients that constitute a "democratic system": political parties that are accountable to their voters, fair elections that reflect the will of people, an executive and a related bureaucracy that "delivers", people to be "citizens", etc. Enormous progress has been made in the recent past, partly also due to agitation by civil society, vibrant media and proactive judiciary. But the material and non-material benefits expected from democracy do not reach most people.

This leaves room open for those that challenge this political system. The floods and the way how the present state handles the emergency provide these critiques with arguments. They find easy arguments of linking the present governance crisis with the established political system – a system ("democracy") that has been (in the eyes of many critiques) been imposed on Pakistan by "western interests"; see for example the statements on the incompatibility of democracy and *shariah* by [Sufi Muhammad](#), (former) leader of the *Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi* (TNSM) in Swat. To quote S. Akbar Zaidi (who also wrote for NCCR North-South):

"Whichever way one looks at it, the response by the government, by its loyal opposition, by Pakistan's so-called friends, or by aid agencies, all highlight the Pakistani state's abject failure to govern at a time when it is needed most. It is not surprising then that people seek other alternatives" (see [Dawn August 20, 2010](#)).

It is the understanding of people's livelihood concerns, the state's, civil society's and international donors' response, the consequences of these responses, and the competition for the hearts of the people that we consider the utmost challenge.