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Emergency Response Challenges in Mountainous Terrain

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After the disaster, one single official "President's Relief Fund for Earthquake Victims 2005" was created, which was criticised for being unaccountable to the parliament or international donors. Entirely new structures responsible for relief administered it, such as the "Federal Relief Commission" and the "Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Authority" (ERRA), of which both had Army Generals as heads. The army took over also classical civilian tasks like official damage assessments and subsequent government compensation payments to villagers, on the grounds that civilian authority had virtually collapsed in Kashmir.

But even with their limited capacity, Union Councils, the lowest tier of local government, could have been a valuable source. Civilian administrators were sidelined by the military, and, as a result, failed to use their expertise in assessing and meeting the local needs. For example in NWFP *nazims* (elected mayors) headed district emergency coordination committees, but army representatives marginalized their role.⁵ A former senior bureaucrat stressed that the timely mobilisation of the civil administrations of unaffected provinces in coordinating the systematic dispatch and orderly transportation of relief goods to the base camps would have averted unnecessary chaos.⁶

Other moderate national NGOs like the *Edhi* Foundation were deliberately marginalized according to ICG. This way, national and regional policies did not arrive on the community level, as most of the villages were not connected to proper information systems and the army did not follow a pro-active information policy.

In conclusion, the Pakistani case has shown that the national as well as the international army does neither have the capacity nor a credible mandate for working with a community-based, demand-driven approach. The core competency of the army remains security and logistics. The structures of local civil defence communities were - although weakened - formally in place and could have contributed much more, if they had been given a stronger role in decision-making on relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation. Donors must make sure that local civil defence professionals and volunteers get more support, capacity and resources in the future, especially as they work closer to the victims and the affected.

⁵ Policy Briefing of the International Crisis Group, 15 March 2006, p. 4

⁶ Shamshad Ahmad Khan, „Lapses in crisis management“, *The Dawn*, 27 October 2005

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Resource



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Collecting data on disasters: Easier said than done

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Disaster Data: Essential for Preparedness

The need for systematic data for disaster mitigation and prevention has been an increasing concern of both development and response agencies. Until recently the needs were addressed on an ad-hoc basis, collecting the information at the time of the emergency. As a result, data were incomplete, outdated or unusable for a variety of reasons, even if better quality information existed. The time pressure to respond quickly for fund raising or relief planning was usually paramount and the quality and availability of information suffered. Disaster management remained reactive in nature, focusing on relief and then rehabilitation and reconstruction. Prevention planning or community preparedness was rarely funded and not a policy priority with national governments or with UN and other international development institutions. With the increase in the scope of disaster impacts, mostly in the poorer developing countries, concern has been mounting regarding the poor state of preparedness, mitigation and prevention. Natural disasters engender serious setbacks to the development process - highlighted in the last years by earthquakes in India (2001), Iran (2003), Pakistan (2005) and the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004). The result of these events has been that the demand for disasters data from policy makers and development planners has increased.

Experiences from EM-DAT: The International Disaster Database

Within this context, the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), developed in 1988, the EM-DAT database with the initial support of UNDRO, WHO and the Belgian Government. The database was designed to provide rapid and accurate information to serve purposes of humanitarian action at national and international levels.

RESOURCE

Further collaboration with the U.S. Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) and the Climate Information Project of NOAA, allowed the enhancement of the database, the creation of a dedicated website as well as a dynamic display of its products. Currently, users access through different search options to updated figures on the occurrence and effects of over 15,800 natural and technological disasters since 1900.¹ EM-DAT has become the unique global reference database mainly due to its methodological rigour consistency and comparability in time and space. It provides essential evidence for priority setting and resource allocation at multiple levels.

Disaster Data: Methodological Issues

Today, data on disaster occurrence, its effect upon people and cost to countries remains patchy. No single institution has taken on the role of prime providers of verified data. Key problems with disaster data include a lack of standardized collection methodologies and definitions. Furthermore, ambiguities exist regarding the intent behind the reporting of the data, the loose definition of people affected, dates reported and changing national boundaries. Information is not specifically gathered for statistical purposes and so, inevitably, even where the compiling organization applies strict definitions for disaster events and parameters, the original suppliers of the information may not.

Information systems have improved vastly in the last 25 years and statistical data is now more easily available. However, the lack of systematic and standardized data collection from disasters in the past is now revealing itself as a major weakness for any long-term planning. Despite efforts to verify and review data, the quality of disaster databases can only be as good as the reporting system that feeds them. Fortunately, due to increased pressures for accountability, many donor and development agencies have started placing priority on data collection and its methodologies, but this has yet to result in any recognized and acceptable international system for disaster-data gathering, verification and storage.

Collecting disaster data is a complex and tedious task. Basic maintenance work can be time consuming and confusing when calculating trends. Inconsistencies, data gaps and ambiguity of terminology make comparisons and use of different data sets difficult. This leads to a fair amount of confusion in the evaluation of a disaster situation and poses severe obstacles for prevention planning and preparedness.

In the last years, EM-DAT has developed a methodology for selecting and validating data coming from various sources and frequently with contradictory reports. While weaknesses abound in the EM-DAT statistics like any other global database, its main strength is its internal consistencies and coherence.

Overview of Existing Databases

Other publicly available databases also exist. Recently, CRED has undertaken an analytical review of selected data sets on natural disasters and impacts² The paper aims to summarize the content, presentation and accessibility of a select group of disaster losses databases. The objective was to provide a comprehensive overview of the current disaster database landscape to better identify gaps in information and strengths in our individual interpretations.

The paper highlights the strengths and weaknesses of all those efforts that have taken place to better document the effects and impacts of disasters and draw the attention to the problems and the areas in which management of disaster information could improve:

Disaster definition: Differences and lack of standardization of the terminology complicates comparisons of data.

Disaster typology: Databases struggle with disaster (sub) types classification as well as their primary and secondary effects. Without standardized terminology, databases continue to face a decreased precision in reporting disaster related impact.

Georeferencing: It allows for more accurate recording of the location of the event but questions remain on how to locate larger-scale disasters that cross borders (i.e. floods). While data resolution (by smallest administrative boundary) offers a detailed perspective not usually available, disaggregating the effects of a disaster becomes difficult and may lead to overestimation of impact.

Temporal aspects: Issues of the level of resolution of a database are compounded by the difficulty of reporting the date of occurrence of an event.

Methodology: Lack of a publicly available methodology, raises issues of the transparency of databases but also makes comparability difficult because of the ambiguity of variables (definitions, sources, criteria)

Sourcing: Availability of sources varies across the board. Whereas particularly developing country databases must rely on one source of information due to the lack of resources, many developed countries struggle with trying to integrate and validate an overabundance of data sources.

The issues raised above are not new but represent the areas in which we should be focusing our attention and remind us of the challenges that this area of research continues to face. It also opens up two channels of discussion: the accessibility of these databases and the inter-operability from one database to the other one. Standardization of methods and definitions is clearly the key issue to be addressed for improvement of data quality. And this can only be achieved if international efforts are made to develop these tools and make them available for national level use.

¹ See "EM-DAT" Guideline section on: <http://www.em-dat.net/guidelin.htm>

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