

Sindh Peoples Commission on Disaster Prevention and Management

Civil society describes Sindh's floods as 'man made';

Islamabad: Sept 21, 2011: The recent spell of heavy rains has reinforced the losses caused by intense showers early in August in parts of Sindh. While initially the floods affected over one million population in seven districts of Sindh, poor arrangements by the state to establish a relief mechanism ensured that the suffering takes many more in its fold. Today, over 5 million people are facing extreme difficulties, including displacement and inadequate access to food, drinking water, and health and sanitation facilities. Twenty three districts in Sindh and five districts in Balochistan have been severely affected. The UNFPA estimates that of the five million affected by the floods, one million are women of reproductive age. More than 100,000 of these women are pregnant with a large proportion in need of medical assistance. 1.1 million homes have been damaged or destroyed compared to 1.8 million houses destroyed across Pakistan during last year's floods.

Seeing these floods from the point of view of numbers trivialises the very harsh realities associated with it. After last year's extensive devastating floods, it is a matter of concern that the state machinery yet again failed millions of people by sleeping over both preparedness and management of the disaster that struck the province for second consecutive year. There are glaring deficits in infrastructure planning and management both riddled with irregularities and corruption. This when added to a deeply marginalising and polarising social and political order of the province leaves a trail of misery that is hard to recover from. It wouldn't be inappropriate to say that not only were the floods avoidable because of their very man-made nature, the destruction brought about by the waterflows would have been much more controllable had the state paid any attention to its constitutional obligation of delivering on people's right to live, right to equality and access to social services.

We, at the Sindh People's Commission on Disaster Prevention and Management (SPCDPM), are firmly of the view that these floods were very much avoidable and there were great number of opportunities to ensure that the floods caused minimum damage to the population. A few points drawn from extensive discussions held at various meetings organised by the SPCDPM and from experts' reports are presented here to support our arguments:

LBOD is largely responsible for the man-made catastrophe:

It is noteworthy that one element responsible for the floods in the month of August this year was multiple breaches in the Left Bank Outfall Drain which, in the past had been repeatedly criticised for its faulty design that exposes the local communities living alongside the area to great number of risks in case of heavy rainfalls. This is not the first time that the LBOD has severely affected and displaced the population of Badin. The 1999 cyclone, 2003 monsoon and 2006 rains caused overflows and breaches that displaced the population of Badin and adjacent areas and also caused loss of lives. The maintenance and management of the LBOD and the *sim nalas* (that too overflowed this year), has remained a neglected affair due to extreme corruption and capacity deficits of the Public Works and the Irrigation Departments of the province. It is pertinent to note that *sim nalas* demand extra care and maintenance since they serve the purpose of draining out effluents that weakens the

drainage structures. There have been no serious efforts to maintain the *nalas* over the years due to a lack of interest on the part of the government and the concerned departments that are full of political appointees compromising merit and capacity.

To add salt to the injury the Sindh government completely ignored Badin district and Left Bank Outfall Drain (LBOD) in the Sindh Flood Contingency Plan 2011, rendering the August-September floods as a complete man-made catastrophe. Independent reports suggests that had the contingency plan identified vulnerable embankments and carried out repair work in the LBOD prior to the monsoon season, the losses could have been considerably minimised.

Underdevelopment of Sindh intensified the miseries:

Sindh presents an extremely grim picture in terms of access to basic services as well as the rights of the citizens in the rural areas. In the context of the development, there are wide disparities between rural and urban Sindh as the social indicators of urban Sindh equal or surpass the level of development in other developing countries with comparable per capita income. The level of human development in rural Sindh is worse than in some of the Sub-Saharan African countries. Two out of every five of the citizens of rural Sindh live below the poverty line.

Early this year, data released by the Sindh Department of Health indicated a Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate of 21.2-23.1 per cent in children aged between 6-59 months in flood-affected areas of Sindh. This rate is well above the World Health Organization's (WHO) 15 per cent emergency threshold level which triggers a humanitarian response. Furthermore, records from Northern Sindh reveal a Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) rate of 6.1. The Sindh government estimates about 90,000 children aged 6-59 months are malnourished.

In terms of school-going children, 73 percent girls and 63 percent boys in the province remain out of school, according to the Sindh Education Management Information Systems. In rural Sindh, 9 out of every 10 newborns are delivered without proper medical supervision. According to the Pakistan Social & Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM) the immunization rate among children in rural Sindh children is extremely low -- 28% children of Rural Sindh between 12-23 months of age have been fully immunized - -compared to Punjab 54% and rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 48%.

Sindh has the highest incidence of absolute landlessness (62% or two million households), highest share of tenancy (11% or 300,000 households), and the lowest share of land ownership (26% or 700,000 households) in the country, as pointed out in a report 'Social Development in Pakistan; Annual Review 2004'. The land holding in the province is characterised by small holdings with 62% of small farmers owning less than 5 acres restricting modern mechanized agriculture. Yet, more than 70% of the rural population derives their livelihood from agriculture, livestock, forestry, and fishing. The organized manufacturing and services sectors have minimal presence in the rural areas. Rural Sindh is highly dependent on public services with little role of the private sector. According to the latest Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES), rural Sindh's household described as "poor" have 9.11 members on average with only 2.76 persons per household employed. In the Punjab, an average household of 7.94 members has 2.31 persons per household benefitting from employment.

Groundwater is the principal source of drinking water for the majority of people in Pakistan. While about 80% of the Punjab Province has fresh groundwater, in Sindh, less than 30% of groundwater is fresh. Much of the province is underlain by highly brackish water with some instances of elevated fluoride levels.

In terms of housing too, rural Sindh has the highest percentage of population, 35 percent, living in one room accommodation. The PSLM Survey reports over 47% of the rural houses in Sindh made of mud bricks compared to 22 percent in Punjab and 28 percent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; though faring below 79 percent in Balochistan. The mud brick structure makes these houses prone to threats of damage in the event of floods or other disasters.

The four districts Badin, Mirpurkhas, Sanghar, and Thatta hit by the floods represent 27% of the rural population of Sindh province, with widespread poverty and incidence of bonded labour prevalent in the region. The cases of bonded labour flow from the existence of an unequal sharecropping tenancy system as well as the presence of brick establishments in the region that has over the years come to become a stronghold of bondage for workers involved in the sector.

Gender disparity both in terms of access to social services as well as cultural norms is acute in the Province of Sindh. For every 100 boys being immunized in urban Sindh, only 70 girls get immunized in rural areas. For every 100 boys enrolling in primary school in urban Sindh, only 43 girls do so in rural Sindh. Sindh also represents worst gender ratio in the country; for every 100 males in Sindh, there are only 89 females. Age old tribal traditions including the culture of honour and violence against women as a source of cultural pride continue to exist in the province.

Back to floods: No lessons learnt

During last year's floods too, Sindh suffered immense misery despite the government having adequate time to prepare and prevent widespread losses. Seventeen districts of Sindh were affected by the floods last year making it the second most affected province following 24 districts devastated by the floods in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Around 182,1479 people stayed in 4,632 relief camps set up by the government during last year's floods. Sindh suffered economic losses, especially in the area of agriculture and livestock.

According to a report by the Pakistan Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission and, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, during 2010 floods, Sindh suffered the highest damage to Kharif crops with 60 percent of the cotton crops, 64 percent of the sugarcane cultivation and 100 percent of rice crops estimated to be damaged by the floods. The Livestock Department of Sindh estimates that more than 40 percent of the 40million cattle heads perished due to floods in the province, while majority of the animals developed various diseases. Fish farms too suffered as most of the farms are located in Thatta, Badin and Dadu, three districts listed amongst the worst-hit districts of the province. State representatives themselves expressed dissatisfaction with the repair work undertaken last year with Chairman of the Monitoring Committee on Rehabilitation Works on Canals and Dykes Dr Ahmad Ali Shah voicing apprehension over right bank canals' capacity to sustain floodwater when it would be released into the system because of "unsatisfactory repairs carried out since last year floods."

It is indeed a point of grave concern that despite the heavy losses of the 2010 floods, the government took a very long time to come into action after the district Badin was hit by floods in August 2011. In a press report on August 18, the Sindh CM categorically stated that there is no need for international assistance while the miseries of the affectees kept piling up. It was only on Sept 7, that the government announced that it is contemplating launching an international appeal for help.¹ This is even more astonishing since according to government's own figures, till Aug 27, over 2 million people were already distressed by the floods and while 9,367 villages remained under water.² Sadly, local NGOs and humanitarian bodies too did little to offer assistance running extensive assessment exercise while seeking funds from local and international donors. The situation of food shortage, inadequate shelter and access to clean drinking water kept multiplying all this while.

According to the 2000 Agricultural Census, nearly one million households in Sindh earn their entire livelihood from rearing livestock. There are another million households that farm and raise livestock to supplement their incomes. The recent floods, according to official figures, have perished over 14,000 cattle heads. The government estimates 25percent of the province's standing paddy crop to have been destroyed by the floods. The initial estimate of losses released by the Sindh Agriculture Department on Sept 5 showed that the flooding of the fields had destroyed a third of the total kharif crop, while another private estimate reports the losses to Sindh's rural economy at Rs 250 billion.

The performance of the NDMA has been most dismal in this case as the relief measures undertaken by the authority fell short of the requirements on the ground. The NDMA, PDMA and the government are currently indulging in a "pass the buck" exercise, each blaming the other for not responding adequately to the crisis. Speaker National Assembly Fehmida Mirza even called for the closure of the NDMA for its ineffectiveness, while in a latest controversy, the NDMA has pointed to the government for sitting on Rs 5 billion of unused funds for flood affectees collected last year. All this, at a time when eight million people in Sindh and Balochistan are facing acute difficulties is a matter of utter shame.

We at SPCDPM demand immediate measures for the relief and rehabilitation of flood affectees. The state must establish a functional and credible coordination mechanism to inter-link the relief efforts. The compensation mechanism needs to be swift and deliverable without bureaucratic hitches. Most importantly, the state must undertake serious rehabilitation measures once the relief period is over. The rehabilitation phase must be based on the premises of establishing a new social contract with the affectees that should end the sense of marginalisation, disempowerment and deprivation that has long characterised the state-society relations in the under-developed parts of Sindh and Pakistan.

¹ Dawn, 'Rain disaster in Sindh; Govt to launch international appeal for help', Sept 8, 2011

² <http://pakresponse.info/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=3S8Y9Pne1Fo%3d&tabid=93&mid=557>