

# Alternatives

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## Planning Against the 'Unnatural Disaster'

From the *Alternatives Desk*

There comes a time when things do not go the way one would like them to go. When we first started this section on Alternatives we never thought that a deluge could derail us from our regular planning of things. While this may sound depressing and lack of thinking on our part, it is actually somewhat of a reassurance, if not a boon, for those who work with alternative ideas and practices. Indeed, only under 'crisis' or 'emergency' situations certain things become easy for us to comprehend, although some people may have been reflecting on them from time to time. In this context, admittedly quite regretfully, the worst floods in this century has come to inform us that regular activities and the long exhausted on-going pattern of thinking can hardly overcome the physical and social damages wrought by this deluge and the ones to come. And there lies the purpose of this issue.

But why call a natural disaster 'unnatural' and why must we plan against the latter? Critics have lately suggested that there is a 'strong human component' on both the extent of destruction and the number of people killed or displaced in natural calamities of modern times. It is no longer simply a case of divine's wrath and something against which little can be done but rather in the light of the human component it is more a case where the natural got transformed into something unnatural and therefore can be rectified. The task, however, is not a simple one and, in so far as both 'nature' and 'humans' have conjointly produced natural disasters in modern times, including the severity of the 1998 deluge, there is no scope for wholly naturalizing or de-humanizing the thing.

Take the case of controlling floods via embankments, for instance. I hear that Ershad is being congratulated by both friends and foes for saving Dhaka! And lest this be made into a vote-catching issue in the future, if not for any other reason (I suspect), the Awami League government very quickly declared its intention of building a 50-mile embankment around Dhaka. But then, how sound is the thinking? Is it not true that the embankment that 'saved Dhaka' also brought unprecedented floods and suffering to the people living on the other side of the embankment? And then again, if Bangladesh consists of villages and where millions live, is it possible to embank all villages? There are other problems as well. Much of the apathy and the unconcernedness that we witnessed this time in Dhaka, particularly at the beginning of the floods and until the DND scare, could indeed have been the result of Ershad's partial embankment of Dhaka! If this is the case, what I am worried then is that with Dhaka fully embanked and protected there will be even less cause for the elite and the policy makers to save the villages and the majority of the distressed from the floods. Indeed, for the sake of protecting the country from destruction of this magnitude, Dhaka-based land-centric management of things must be abandoned and replaced by (and this is no rhetoric) village-land-ecosystem-based management of things.

A more immediate unnatural disaster that is practically knocking at the door relates to food, not so much their availability as the case of not having the power to purchase them. Indeed, the government, including serious researchers on this subject, has taken the task of reassuring the public that food, particularly rice and other basic items, will be available in the market and there is no reason to panic. Less attention is given to the issue of the distressed not having jobs and the means to purchase food, and this is somewhat odd given our homely knowledge of famine and entitlement (a la Amartya Sen). To gear up this effort, particularly at the governmental level and in view of our failures to contain past famines, may be the time has come to rename and refunctionalize the Ministry of Food into Ministry of Entitlement and Food. The officials of the Ministry will then be more sensitive to the issue of purchasing power and not limit themselves merely to the task of making 'sufficient food' available in the market.

Unnatural disaster can also unfold with respect to the issue of displaced people or 'environmental refugees'. This time with unprecedented floods in both Bangladesh and India (particularly in West Bengal and Assam), the flow of refugees (I believe) will be both ways. Given the prompt availability of international relief in Bangladesh, one should not be surprised if some distressed people from Malda and Murshidabad, the two hard-hit areas of West Bengal, are found crossing over to Bangladesh. The case could also be the opposite if relief fails to reach the flood-affected border areas of Bangladesh timely and substantially. This is indeed a regional issue and ought to be resolved regionally. I just want to emphasize the point that flood itself is a regional thing and the construction of numerous dams in both West Bengal and North-East India is no less responsible in contributing to the severity of the deluge in this region. A great part of the resolution, therefore, lies in tackling the issue regionally.

Last but not the least is polarized politics and the not-so-happy consequences arising from it. In fact, both the ruling party and the main opposition party are vying for the support of the distressed, mostly by way of downplaying each other's relief work. This has seriously eroded confidence amongst the people who are yet to be fully mobilized to meet the challenge of rehabilitation and rebuilding. I guess that given our polarized politics and the need for transparency in disbursing funds, the ideal solution would be to hand over the task of coordinating relief and rehabilitation work to some neutral bodies, like the interim regime. The other alternative would be to gear up non-governmental initiatives, backed by people from all walks of life. Are we asking too much?

## The Dhakaites: Battling the Deluge

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

I personally went around some flood affected sections of the city, including Goran, Bashabo, Gulshan and Khilkhet to see how people on their own initiatives are struggling to beat the flood. Various measures, largely non-institutionalised, taken by the people in this regard may provide some ideas about coping with floods in the future.

THE devastating flood of 1998 shattered the life of millions through out the country. Living has been particularly difficult for the city-dwellers in Dhaka, as the entire infrastructure of this 'modern' city is not equipped to face such a huge surge of water. Thus, people living in the areas like Goran, Bashabo, Khilkhet and even Gulshan, Baridhara were severely affected by the flood. Living places, market centres, basic services, transportation— all were affected and disrupted. But life did not stop. People devised their own methods, tactics and measures to cope with this extreme situation. People were seen working round the clock to protect the DND embankment, using country boats as the means of transportation. All these demonstrate their battle against the flood.

I personally went around some flood affected sections of the city, including Goran, Bashabo, Gulshan and Khilkhet to see how people on their own initiatives are struggling to beat the flood. Various measures, largely non-institutionalised, taken by the people in this regard may provide some ideas about coping with floods in the future.

**Boats!**  
Hundreds of boats plying over what once were muddy roads became a common scene during the flood. In many areas, country boats became the principal means of communication. Some well-off families even bought their private boats for everyday movements. In fact, boats became the alternatives for usual services of rickshaws, tempos and even motor cars. In the Goran area, two families were found to have turned the boats into their temporary houses. One of the members of these families stated that as their houses have been submerged, they have brought their essentials on to the boat. At nights, they hang mosquito curtains to protect them from mosquitoes and other insects. The flood has also turned boat manufacturing into a profitable sector. A huge supply of boats was required for the

city and the boatmakers all around the country (especially in Comilla) made substantial profits. Moreover, boat-rowing and renting boats for transportation became alternative sources of income for a substantial number of people. Some vendors and shopkeepers were found to have learned the skills of a boatman to earn their livelihood during the flood. Also, some others have bought country boats to let them out for a rent. Daily income from boats ranges around TK. 200-300. Thus, the buyer can easily raise the cost of buying within two weeks and then earn profit. One such boat entrepreneur also mentioned that profits are quite large as requirements of spare parts for boats are very nominal.

**The Floating Markets:**  
The submersion of regular market places did not stop buying and selling in flood affected areas. Many shopkeepers have rearranged their shops on platforms high above the water level. The buyers come in boats to collect their essentials. In the Goran area, vendors were travelling by boats to sell various essential goods. In the Khilkhet area, floating boats became full-fledged market places. Moreover, most of the markets have moved to higher areas out of the reach of floodwater.

**Trousers - Flood Fashion:**  
The innovativeness of general people to cope with the flood situation has also been reflected in the garments sector. To paddle through the flood water safely a new style of trouser became popular. It has chains along the knee-side and it can be pulled up over the knee. This saves the trouser from getting wet.

**Embankment - from Rivers to Houses:**  
This year people also resorted to the construction of embankments to prevent intrusion of floodwaters into their houses. They also piled up sandbags and bricks around their houses. These embankments lack technical sophistication and, therefore require constant monitoring by mem-

bers of the family.

**Sands and Bricks:**  
Sandbags and bricks are the two most essential elements for combating the onrush of floodwaters. Suppliers of sand have made handsome profit in the situation. Sandbags are needed everywhere—from protecting the very important DND embankment to building temporary bridges from the submerged doorsteps to the nearest highlands.

**Habitats during the Flood:**  
While thousands of flood victims took refuge in various shelter camps, others made arrangements in their houses to tackle the situation. Some people stayed back in their houses mainly for guarding their assets. In many un-shaded and kacha houses where water entered the rooms, people used bricks to place their beds at a place higher than the water level, so that they could at least spend their nights. Also as pointed out earlier, many used sandbags and bricks to prevent water intrusion. Some people also set up wooden pillars and made temporary platforms on them to live. In various buildings families have taken shelter at rooftops. Some even made arrangements to live in trees. I talked to a person in Gulshan who is living in a make-shift platform on tree tops with his family at Maradia. He pointed out that this measure is not only uncomfortable but also involves a high risk of falling down into the water.

**Sewerage System and Drinking Water:**  
The flood has severely disrupted normal sewerage system and has led to an acute crisis of pure drinking water. While some families practice the bad habit of sucking human waste in plastic bags and throwing them into the water; others (usually wealthier ones) have replaced and readjusted their sewerage lines higher than the water level so as to prevent floodwater intrusion. Finding unpolluted water for drinking and other purposes was extremely difficult. Women

often were forced to travel long distances to find fresh water. Some families brought drumful of fresh water by boats and stored it for use.

**Conclusion:**  
Since 1954 this country has experienced 17 severe floods and innumerable local inundation. The city lacks proper flood protection mechanisms. Yet, the people have demonstrated tremendous resilience in facing such disasters and in their own innovative ways have kept the life in the city going. But these have never been institutionalised nor taken into consideration by the policy planners. Must this state of affairs continue for ever?

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Trapped in the Dhaka Jute Mill Workers' Colony in Keraniganj the families of the workers await relief and assistance.—Photo: Philip Gain

## Initiatives Needed for a National Mobilisation

by Rehman Sobhan

*As the waters recede and people return home to rebuild their lives, problems of much greater complexity will arise during the rehabilitation process over the next six months. Efforts by the government to keep track of such emerging problems would be greatly facilitated by drawing upon the efforts of civil society which is already in the field fully involved with the relief process.*

ALL available measures suggest that the 1998 floods appear to be of historic proportions as to its scope, economic devastation and displacement of people. It has also been observed by a number of people that these floods present both a challenge and an opportunity for the government and people of Bangladesh. It would thus be no exaggeration to view the response to the challenge of these floods as a defining moment not just in the life of the incumbent regime but in the future direction of the course of governance in Bangladesh.

Much has been learnt about disaster management from the time of the 1970 cyclone to the most recent floods. This means that the management of the present disaster does not call for a reinvention of the wheel. We thus, need to take account of past experiences with disaster management of the floods of 1974, 1984, 1987 and 1998 as well as the cyclone of 1991. This knowledge needs to guide us to improve our crisis management and to put in place an effective programme to ensure recovery from the effects of the floods.

Past experience has pointed to the need for strong national leadership, co-ordinated action and the importance of transparency in the identification of problems as well as in remedial actions for their solution. Given the national dimension of the disaster tackling the crisis should involve a national effort based on political cooperation between government and opposition as well as cooperation between the state and civil society in coping with the relief as well as the rehabilitation effort.

One assumes that the government is doing the best it can to cope with the present crisis. As an elected government one would expect no less. There is also an ongoing process of civic mobilisation to help the flood victims. This being Bangladesh, one can always be confident that there is ample scope for improving performance through more effective coordination and management of the relief and rehabilitation process both

within the government as well as in relation to efforts by civil society.

It would be advantageous for the government to expose itself to public scrutiny of all its relief measures and rehabilitation plans. We operate in a world of imperfect information at the best of times. In the aftermath of a major flood where communications are disrupted and the administrative machinery is under pressure the government should draw upon all sources of information, apart from whatever reaches it through the administrative machinery, to keep itself abreast of the varieties of problems affecting the people in the aftermath of the floods.

As the waters recede and people return home to rebuild their lives, problems of much greater complexity will arise during the rehabilitation process over the next six months. Efforts by the government to keep track of such emerging problems would be greatly facilitated by drawing upon the efforts of civil society which is already in the field fully involved with the relief process.

This variety of miscellaneous information from the field, emanating from political activists, NGOs, citizens groups engaged in relief, private citizens and the media will need to be collated, analysed and presented in a simple, usable format to be shared both by the government and the people. Such initiatives to generate and process such information at the level of civil society should be seen both as a resource available to the government as well as the grassroots organisations in targeting their recovery programmes as well as serve as part of an exercise in promoting transparency in monitoring the relief and rehabilitation effort. Such an effort to assemble and analyse field data would also be functionally valuable for the government by relieving them of the burden of keeping track of the plethora of such information originating from the field and sorting out the wheat from the chaff. Furthermore, official data from the field may not always be reliable

or updated and would be less likely to generate information about inadequacies in the rehabilitation effort at the local level.

A large number of NGOs as well as citizens groups are mobilising resources and are engaged in relief and rehabilitation. There is thus scope for overlap both at the level of civil society as well as with government efforts. Since available resources, in relation to the enormity of the post-flood problem, will always be limited, it makes sense to minimise this overlap so that the relief and rehabilitation effort does not exclude any affected area or household and can be calibrated to the severity of the need. This suggests the need for a consultative mechanism between the government and civil society to establish priorities in the recovery programme and to establish a division of effort between the state and civil society in the execution of this programme. Evidence of such a co-ordinated effort would make life much easier for international assistance for the rehabilitation effort. Today prospective donors are being inundated by requests by both government and the NGO, for resources to support their respective relief efforts. This leads to some wastage in the use of aid as well as some loss of ownership over directing the recovery process to the donors.

In support of such a co-ordinated effort it would therefore be useful for the government to establish a national focal point for overseeing the recovery and rehabilitation effort, possibly located in the Prime Minister's Secretariat and headed by a person of high authority enjoying the full confidence of the political leadership. The emergence of such a national coordinator may be without prejudice to the coordinative role, being played by the Ministry of Relief, which may continue to perform its designated role of overseeing relief. It is however argued here that rehabilitation and recovery involves a much broader area of responsibility and need for coordination than the distribution of relief, hence

the need for a national coordinator with sufficient political authority to oversee this next stage of the recovery process.

To interact with the national coordinator it makes sense to have a focal point within civil society which can bring together some of the principal NGOs and grass roots organisations such as Grameen Bank along with professional bodies such as doctors, engineers, economists, who have functional contributions to make to a national recovery programme. Such organisations will most certainly be carrying out their own programmes of relief and rehabilitation as well as analyses. These grassroots efforts would benefit from having a focal point within civil society to generate information from the field on the impact of the recovery effort as well as to coordinate their own efforts and to interact with the government.

The emergence of such a focal point within civil society should recognise that a number of organisations, professional bodies and citizens are active in the field and some may indeed set up their own coordination efforts at the local or national level. Ideally, if all such efforts can intersect at some point it would be more effective in its impact of linking the government with civil society. But in practise it may not be feasible to bring all such efforts under one umbrella so such parallel efforts should be encouraged. It is only by letting a hundred flowers bloom that a sense of national participation in the recovery process will be made more universal.

At the end of the day national disasters tend to bring out the best in our people by recreating a sense of national mobilisation where public service briefly triumphs over individual or sectional ambition as we rediscover our sense of obligation to our fellow citizens. Since such a sense of community has become a conspicuous casualty of our contemporary policy agendas, political culture and social environment, these moments of national regenera-

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## Women Coping with Floods

by Shaheen Anam

*This tragedy is testing the resilience and spirit of our men and women to its limits. Yet they are surviving, that is perhaps the only beauty in this tragedy... In some shelters women have formed groups to protect each other... They have even set up vigilance group to keep guard and prevent violence against young girls.*

ture because of lack of privacy have to wait till nighttime. Added to that are other biological conditions such as menstruation, pregnancy etc which women are having to cope with in such adverse conditions.

Those working among flood victims come back with astounding stories of women's courage and strength. Even in these adverse circumstances, they are responsible for feeding and taking care of their children. Poor women who are already resource poor find themselves in a situation where even the means of procuring food are not available. Yet they do not give up or abandon their young ones. They beg, borrow and stand in line for hours to get something for their children. Women are constantly trying to improvise and feed their fam-

lies with whatever little relief they get, as usual eating last and the least.

An NGO worker reported that, women in their area who previously were engaged in small enterprise are now going out and taking work as domestic help. They are even sending their children as young as 7 or 8 to work. Their houses still inundated, many women have no other means of taking care of them. A little boy of hardly 9 or 10 was seen pushing boats across muddy, dirty water to earn enough to buy 1 kg of rice for the family. The mother said her husband was too sick to work himself and she had another 4 children to take care of.

These circumstances are also forcing women to change their stereo typed roles and jobs. Women are now seen rowing passenger laden boats, a job

previously thought to be too physically strenuous for them. Their reply when questioned is, "I don't have a husband, how else can I feed my children". Women headed households are yet further marginalized. They have to feed and take care of the children at the same time go in search of food and water. Not having anyone else to take care of them often they carry their very young children with them.

The flood has brought not only diseases, want and homelessness, it has also unleashed social problems such as looting, assault, rape and other forms of violence. The vulnerable are once again victims. Young girls in shelter camps are in constant danger of rape or assault. With a breakdown of all norms of privacy, young women are easy prey for criminals who are always seeking a chance to op-

press and victimize. In some shelters women have formed groups to protect each other. In a certain shelter where 3 families share a room, women have decided that at nighttime all women should sleep in one room while men should sleep in another. They have even set up vigilance group to keep guard and prevent violence against young girls. Due to the floods domestic violence has also increased as unemployed, jobless men vent their frustration on their wives.

This tragedy is testing the resilience and spirit of our men and women to its limits. Yet they are surviving, that is perhaps the only beauty in this tragedy. The front page photograph in the Daily Star on September 16 of a man holding a laughing child on his palm and a long row of smiling women waiting in line for relief depicts the spirit of our women. If the innocent laughter of a child can still make them smile, perhaps then they can face any adversary.

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