


Alternatives

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The Worst is Not Yet Over

From the *Alternatives* Desk

MY intention here is not to sound the death knell of our post-flood living, but information thus far received from the affected areas indicate that things are moving quite rapidly from bad to worse. Sitting at a distance, one possibly would take this as something resulting from mismanagement and lack of resources and the demand, therefore, would be for more centralized coordination and making more goods available, but the fact of the matter is that these are, if at all, only partially true. More serious concern has been the lack of work for many of the affected able-bodied people. There is a touch of irony here. While there is so much of work to do in the affected areas, there are still plenty of the affected without any work! And with no purchasing power, that is, no means of livelihood, things are bound to deteriorate; indeed, to a point where famines, at least at some local level, may become a reality.

In such a situation, relief, while important, cannot help much. Three things need to be pointed out in this context. Firstly, there is no reason to expect that there will be no mismanagement or misappropriation of relief goods. I am sure most will agree that human greed hardly got washed out with the receding floodwaters. Moreover, since the time of the last great floods nothing spectacular happened in the organization of the government that would lead us to believe that an extra-vigilant cum efficient machinery is in charge of supervising this massive relief work. On the contrary, the age-old structure continues to disburse relief goods and as such must continue to remain inefficient and ineffective like many other age-old structures.

Secondly (and this I came to know from a village relief-activist), 'relief demoralizes the community.' There are very few people in this world preferring to live a life by means of relief. And when relief takes place at a community level, the pain is even greater. The cry of the time is necessarily for work and more work and that again, any kind of work that would somehow sustain their life, if not the living they just had. This brings us to the third point.

Already a sample survey conducted by a non-governmental organization found that 9 percent of the village households in the flood-affected areas are totally looked after by women, implying that their husbands had left for the cities in search of work. And what kind of work awaits them in cities, particularly in Dhaka? Mostly, rickshaw-pulling! Interestingly, there has been some qualitative shift in the running of rickshaws in Dhaka. Previously, rickshaw industry enjoyed a steady 'horizontal' growth, with the city mismanaged by some 3.8 lakh rickshaw-pullers, with only 80,000 of the rickshaws having valid license. Thanks to the post-flood ('no work in the village') syndrome, the horizontal growth is now being added by a 'vertical' growth of the rickshaw industry in the Dhaka city. This refers to the sub-letting of rickshaws by fellow rickshaw-pullers, which at times could be for a duration as short as two hours! If things in the affected areas deteriorate further, the deepening of the vertical growth is bound to take place. The ill effect of this growth can hardly be exaggerated. Not only does it help in reproducing a culturally sloth 'bhadra class' (using a rickshaw where they can easily walk), it also tends to overburden the city and waste the creative energy of many a puller. I guess in a situation like this, only the availability of alternative work opportunities could rescue us from the impending danger. Do we really have a handful of them?

Post-flood Work Opportunities: A Report

Rebuilding kutcha road was identified as major source of employment for the rural poor (daily laborers etc). However, participants cautioned that in many rural areas the earth is still 'soft' and rebuilding programs may not be started immediately. Repairing the embankments, removing sand crust, cleaning ponds may also be alternative sources of employment in the rural areas.

A roundtable on "Post-Flood Work Opportunities" was organized by the Information and Analysis Committee of Nagorik Durjog Mokabala Uddog (NDMU), on October 4, 1998, at the CPD Conference Room. The main objective of the roundtable was to delve on issues of work opportunities and sustaining income in post-flood phase. Based on reports published in newspapers, the Information and Analysis Committee of NDMU placed its preliminary findings on possible work opportunities before the participants.

According to the Committee's estimates the losses stand out to about Taka 10,000 crore, which includes losses in the agriculture, infrastructure and industrial sectors. The Committee estimated that approximately 40 lakh persons may be provided with work in different affected sectors. This, however, was deemed not enough to overcome the predicament brought about by the deluge. The Committee, therefore, requested the participants to concentrate and deliberate on alternative work opportunities.

During the discussion the participants from various organizations shared their field experiences. The discussion made it evident that creating work opportunities and maintaining purchasing power of the people were connected to rehabilitation plans and their implementation. Following is a

summation of the discussion that took place:

(i) **Government Programs:** Participants drew attention to the fact that in discussing 'post-flood' employment opportunities, Food for Work (FFW), infrastructural rebuilding programs are always highlighted. However, for implementing these programs there are several issues that need to be addressed. Bureaucratic red-tape in starting the FFW is a major drawback in the system. Tender is called for all major rebuilding programs which goes through a long official process etc. Atiur Rahman from BIDS stressed that because of this time lag in implementing reconstruction programs migration to urban areas will take place. Institutional innovation and inter-ministerial co-ordination is required to overcome this drawback.

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(ii) **Self-Employment Opportunities:** The participants pointed out that sustaining self-employment opportunities would be vital for survival of the people in the coming months. Immediate steps needed to be taken in this sector. Furthermore, policy planners should keep in mind that for sustaining self-employment opportunities in rural and urban areas the strategies would be different. The crucial factor in this regard is ensuring the supply of initial capital needed to restart self-employment efforts.

Atiur Rahman pointed out that small traders and businessmen (vegetable sellers, vendors, shop-keepers, carpenters, mechanics) will need capital to restart their business since they have used up their savings the flood-affected months. He suggested that GOB and civic organizations should request the wholesalers to supply their goods to the small businessmen on the basis of 'payment upon sale'. Participants also felt that small time loans could be provided to these groups. Mafuza Huq from Save the Children, (UK), pointed out that the conditions, repayment schedule, interest rate needed to be determined for these small-time 'soft' loans.

Atiur Rahman also mentioned that the urban-poor would require monetary assistance for rebuilding their houses and for buying basic furniture. The slum dwellers will also have to pay their house-rent to the owners for the past three months. In many areas, urban-poor are borrowing money at high interest rate from the 'mahajans' to pay their house rent. This would further aggravate their position. He stressed that this issue needs to be addressed.

(iii) **Other Private/Public Areas:** Rob Khan from BISS mentioned that rickshaw pulling would be a source of income for the new migrants to the urban areas. Binayek Sen of BIDS presented findings of a survey carried out in Dhaka city by BIDS, which confirmed the above. Rob Khan suggested that urban-poor could be gainfully employed in 'clean-up' action in urban areas. Massive clean up drive (esp. cleaning clogged drains, repairing sewerage lines) will have to be initiated by the city municipalities in the coming weeks.

Naeem from Oxfam mentioned that brick fields could generate employment for urban/semi-urban poor. Brick field owners will need to pump out water and clear their fields. Andres Sug Moeller from BILS,

mentioned that special focus should be given on the labor sector issues particularly, rehabilitation of the workers (clear-up workers colony, reconstruction of homes).

(iv) **Agricultural Sector:** Agricultural rehabilitation was identified as a major area of concern. Moazzem Hossain from Save the Children Fund (UK) pointed out that proper planning was needed for dispersing seeds as the crop-cycle varies in different areas. Save the Children Fund had carried out a survey of 2,500 households in areas near Dhaka.

The findings of focus group discussions reveal that in char areas people urgently wanted groundnut seeds, whereas in other areas people wanted 'mashkolai' seeds. Hossain also stated that in many of the survey areas people did not want seeds of wheat (which would be supplied by the government programs). He stressed that disbursement should be done after consultation with the local people method.

Attention was drawn to the fact that vegetables will be grown in large quantity in the coming months and their prices will fall. Therefore, the farmers will require extra capital for the cultivation of BORO/IRRI after the Rabi season is over. Furthermore, many of the participants felt that disbursements of agricultural loans need to be monitored.

Naeem also stressed the need for regulating the supply and price of fodder. In processing areas, acute scarcity of fodder (esp. in char areas) is compelling the people to sell their cattle, but agricultural activities cannot be restarted without cattle. So the peasants are facing a dire situation.

The participants also pointed out that if the seeds of foreign variety are disbursed the peasants will not be able to retain seeds for next years crop cycle. This issue needs to be settled before seeds are disbursed.

(v) **Targeting Vulnerable Areas and Preventing Famine:** Binayek Sen stated some grim facts. He pointed out that in char areas and other remote areas, famine is a strong possibility. Sen is still processing the results of a survey carried out in the remote areas in Kurigram, Gaibandha, Jamalpur. Big NGOs are not operating in these pockets. There was no wage work in this area. Local administration has not received any circulars on disbursement of agricultural loans. In char areas, people stressed that for cultivation of Rabi crop they needed loans and seeds by October 15. Sen pointed out that the food price has not risen in these areas. He argued that this is because the people do not have purchasing power. Mafuza Huq also confirmed this fact. She stated that price of rice is Tk14 per kg in these areas which is the cheapest in Bangladesh. River erosion, destruction of houses by flood, lack of medical assistance has further aggravated the situation.

The disaster prone areas are deemed as 'punishment' areas by the administration.

So lack of efficient government machinery at the local level for intervention in these remote areas has made the possibility of famine even stronger.

Sen pointed out that the famine of 1974 began in the remote char areas. So immediate intervention steps need to be taken. These areas should be identified, declared as distressed areas, and intervention model should be developed (esp. focusing on work opportunities, survival strategies) within the next month.

(vi) **Managing the 'Disaster Management System':** The participants drew attention to irregularities and inefficient functioning of bureaucratic machinery, local administration involved in the planning

and management of post-flood rehabilitation. However, they also acknowledged that in many areas the bureaucratic machinery was functioning smoothly.

Moazzem Hossain stressed that the people he surveyed suggested that in local UP chairmen, members should not be used as entry points for relief distribution in their areas. Misappropriations of relief goods, partial distribution of relief were the main complaints against the UP chairmen. In many cases people were given less amount than the Kcal allocated for them (i.e. if 10-kg rice was allocated then 3 kg was given). The people suggested aid giving NGOs and agencies should sit down with the villagers and prepare the VGF, assistance list.

Naeem suggested that a list of who received what type of assistance should be put up in each village (so if the UP members had misappropriated agricultural loans it would be out in the open).

Khorshed from ACD, Rajshahi, pointed out that in many cases District Commissioners office did not provide correct information or data on flood. The other point that was raised is that relief activities were concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas. Moazzem Hossain informed that his urban and semi-urban respondents had received 15% of the donations, whereas, the rural respondents had received only 3% of the donations. NGO activities were also concentrated in their own project areas. This situation needs to be rectified and NGOs should provide short term "soft" loans to out-group members.

(vii) **Needs of Weavers and Potters:** Meghna Guhathakurta from the University of Dhaka pointed out that, if immediate measures were not taken, the future of Jamdani sari is once again threatened. The Jamdani cottage industry is labour intensive and involves all members of the family. The handlooms are constructed in such a way that the lower half of it is placed in a pit. Floodwater has completely destroyed the whole set up of the handlooms. Therefore, small amount of credit would not solve the problems of the Jamdani weavers. The participants stressed that if only the government intervenes directly with arrangements of providing loans in simple terms and conditions, the weavers might still have a chance to recover from the present crisis. The same holds true for the potters.

(viii) **Community-Based Approach:** The participants drew attention towards the specific needs of different flood affected communities living in separate areas. Therefore, the participants felt the need to formulate community-based planning to tackle the conditions faced in different areas. One of the participants, for example, mentioned that the requirements of upstream and downstream areas definitely vary, as the intensity of flood was different. So reformulation of rehabilitation plan must take these variations into account.

(ix) **Gender Focus:** Participants stressed that a gender focus needs to be developed for post-flood rehabilitation phase. Atiur Rahman drew attention to the fact that able-bodied men were employed in the FFW programs. Female workers will have to be employed in these programs through conscious efforts. Naim stated that these programs should include female-headed households as a category. Moazzem Hossain pointed out that in his survey of 2,500 household he found that 7-12% of female-headed household (that are not NGO beneficiaries or 'in good books' of the local elite) did not receive any assistance. Naeem suggested that

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Chandar Bazar, Munshiganj; Flood water has receded taking with it the crust of the road away.

— Star photo by AKM Mohsin

Making Tubewells Work

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

The floods of 1998 have almost completely devastated the tubewell water supply system in a number of districts. On the one hand a large number of tubewells have been damaged; on the other hand the intrusion of polluted water has rendered many of them useless.

TUBEWELLS are one of the worst casualties of this year's flood both in the rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. During the last two decades or so tubewells have almost revolutionized the water supply system in Bangladesh. The installation of tubewells was taken as a priority agenda by the local governments and the NGOs in their rural development schemes. Water supply through the tubewells reduced the problem of pure drinking water to a large extent.

The floods of 1998 have almost completely devastated the tubewell water supply system in a number of districts. On the one hand a large number of tubewells have been damaged; on the other hand the intrusion of polluted water has rendered many of them useless. As the floodwater is receding the affected areas are in the grip of deadly water-borne diseases.

According to an estimate as of 4 Oct. 540 people have died of diarrhoea. A scanning of some major dailies during 17-28 Oct. shows that only in the district of Kishoreganj 11191 tubewells have been damaged; in the northern districts of Rangpur,

Nilphamari, Kurigram and Lalmonirhat the number of damaged tubewells stand at 5000. In the Fenchuganj, Brahmanbaria and Narsindi districts 2529 tubewells have been damaged. In all these areas diarrhoea has spread, indeed the damage to tubewell facilities is adding to the miseries and sufferings of the flood affected.

As the floodwater starts to recede the enormous task of rehabilitation lies before the entire nation, a task, perhaps more challenging than the deluge itself. While ensuring economic survival of the nation we have to fight against more deaths, diseases and the fear of social instabilities. How well we can face the challenge may stand out to be the ultimate test of our resilience.

Reconstruction of the safe water drinking system will be an important component of the rehabilitation scheme. Both in the rural and urban areas this task will require concerted efforts. Engineers, development workers, social planners and the like are devoting substantial attention to this issue and are coming up with creative

suggestions. The following is an account of the above.

Research by Engineers

Recently the environmental engineering division of the Department of Civil Engineering has published a circular on methods of purifying drinking water. For tubewells it suggested that an amount of 250-gram bleaching powder (having 1% chlorine) mixed in 5 liter of water should be poured inside the tubewell pipe. Then after six hours the tubewell should be pumped until the water is free from the smell of chlorine. The water then can be used for drinking and other purposes. The circular also contained other important technical suggestions, which may be usefully applied in areas where tubewell damage has caused acute crisis of fresh drinking water and the danger of disease is looming large.

The measures include [a] using bleaching powder mixture in the water of underground tank. Every 5000 litre water storage requires 250 gram bleaching powder, [b] water collected from ponds and adding a mixture of Alum and bleaching

powder/water purification tablets etc can purify rivers. The BUET has indeed earned much appreciation for publishing the above circular. Other technical institutions may also come forward in this respect.

The Role of the NGOs and the Government

The activists working for rehabilitation must immediately put their acts together for restoring the damaged tubewells. Work has begun on this. According to a report of the Department of Public Health Engineering as of 26 Sept. about 2 lakh tubewells have either been cleaned or repaired.

Among the NGOs Proshika has already started to work on 50,000 tubewells. Also it has decided to distribute 1 million leaflets with information about various methods of cleaning the tubewells. The Nagorik Durjog Mokabala Uddog, an initiative of leading social researchers, development workers and planners to suggest ways and means to face the post flood crisis also identified the cleaning and repair of damaged tubewells as one of the primary tasks and challenges in the post flood

situation. The Issue of Arsenic Pollution

Another crucial question related to the disorder in the tubewell water supply is whether the floodwater intrusion in the tubewells has contaminated the water with arsenic. Opinions seem to vary on the question. A group believes that floodwater has contaminated the tubewell water with arsenic while another opinion holds that the huge surge of water has in fact flushed the arsenic out of water. It is yet to be seen if the flood has had any impact (positive or negative) on the level of arsenic pollution.

Conclusion: There is no denying the fact that the ruining of tubewells during this year's flood has exposed thousands of people to untold sufferings, diseases and sufferings. This however is not something new. In the past also we have had similar predicament. It is time we develop some durable and well-planned scheme to tackle the issue.

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During the deluge: In Kaliganj a woman wades through chest-deep water on a major street in the locality. — Photo: Philip Gain