

Alternatives

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Can You Help?

From the Alternatives Desk

THIS is the last of the three thematically serialized issues on "Living with Floods." One must not take this to imply that the havoc wrought by the worst deluge of this century is over and that we can now go back to our old deeds and disciplines. Indeed, much against our benign wishes and hopes, news from the worst affected areas have not changed much and still remain a cause for concern. There are good reasons for this.

As reported in the previous issue of Alternatives a fortnight back, there is lack of work in almost all of the affected areas, from Kurigram to Kishoreganj, Comilla to Chapai-Nawabganj, Gaibandha to Gopalganj. And this continues to be so, although the extent of the no-work syndrome is greater in the most-affected areas that mostly border the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra and Jamuna. The testimony of this, somewhat ironically, lies in the low price of some of the essential goods, particularly rice, in some of the worst affected areas. It has been reported that the price of rice in Kurigram, for instance, is around Taka 14 per kg, markedly lower than the price of rice in Dhaka or even in Benapole (around Taka 20 and 24 per kg respectively). While in normal circumstances this would have been a cause for celebration for the Kurigramites, it is actually the result of the no-work syndrome or the lack of purchasing power prevailing in many of the thanas there. But that is not all.

To feed the most-affected, the government, under a revised Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme, has made arrangements to allot 16 kg of wheat per family. This has been done with the understanding that another 16 kg of food will be provided through other sources like test relief, food for work, personal initiative, etc. But with 'other sources' remaining mostly barren, particularly in the worst affected areas, there is no prospect for the most-affected getting access to the additional 16 kg of food. This has a damaging consequence from the standpoint of nutrition. Indeed, the 16-kg VGF allotment could provide only 1200 Kcal/day, much below the required 2100 Kcal/day advocated by international aid agencies. Put differently, even with the proper implementation of VGF many of the recipients would remain malnourished, if not in a semi-famished condition. Our concern does not end there.

There has been quite a coverage of NGOs working effortlessly to overcome the damages wrought by the deluge and that again, almost devoid of any organizational interest. This is, however, less true in the post-flood period. In fact, currently NGO work has been marked by a precise set of activities limited mostly, if not wholly, to NGO members. This has made the non-members, many of whom belonging to the most-affected category, doubly vulnerable as NGO activities by way of making them functionally invisible fail to take up their plight. Even government or private donors lose sight of them, as there is none to rally for them. It is here that the citizens, meaning you and I, must come forward, shout on their behalf and shoulder some responsibility.

The civic response, however, cannot be limited to short-term goals of relief and rehabilitation. Given the magnitude of the deluge and its return in the not-so-distant future somewhat guaranteed, there is an urgent need to nurture and channelize the civic response to long-term resolution of flood-related problems. It is no longer merely academic to say that the old disciplines will not do. If new kind of work is to be found, malnourishment abhorred and displaced, powerless and the uncared empowered, and all for overcoming the damages wrought by the deluge, what is required is a flood-centric disciplinary innovation and creative action.

Indeed, only by way of a creative encounter can we assuredly survive this deluge and the ones that await us in the future. The task is immense and complex, requiring concrete and precise innovations in the field of agriculture, hydrology, industry, geophysics, rural economy, education, urban development, civil engineering, architecture, health, forestry, even politics and sociology.

Can you help?

Ungendered Post-flood Rehabilitation

by Lailufar Yasmin

In many places, women organised themselves and setup 'relief fund' with the help of donation from their family members. These informal relief funds or programmes were not limited to monetary donations alone. Women also cooked and distributed food items like khichuri, atta roti, bhaji along with dry foods like chira, muri etc.

Flood! Flood! Flood!!! The 'century's-worst flood', 'all-ravaging flood' whatever we name it, the flood virtually kept the life of millions stranded. People had to compromise on their food, shelter and day-to-day activities. In their time of distress, who went to help the flood victims? Were there only the government, NGOs or the elites of our society? No, they were not all. Though it was so depicted by the electronic media. If one just takes a quick look in the newspapers on the relief activities column, very little news gave coverage to the 'silent donors'. One may wonder as to who these silent donors are, but take a careful look around and you will see the women. They do not need any publicity, rather the womanly instinct of helping people in distress could not let them just watch the situation and utter only a few words of sympathy. So, the mission began!

Women, who were not directly affected by floods took different initiatives to lessen the sufferings of the flood-affected people. The initiatives range from the donation of money, clothing, medicines, saline to provide relief of daily meals with drinking water and water-purifying tablets. In many places, women organised themselves and setup 'relief fund' with the help of donation from their family members. These informal relief funds or programmes were not limited to monetary donations alone. Women also cooked and distributed food items like khichuri, atta roti, bhaji along with dry foods like chira, muri etc. I personally know a family, who along with their relatives, friends and neighbours distributed 1kg rice, quarter kg pulse, 4 potatoes, 10 green peppers, 100 gram salt, 4 packets of saline and 12 water-purifying tablets per person regularly to at least 100 people for one and half months.

The newspapers indeed printed many pictures of women's sufferings in the flood,

their search for food, safe drinking water along with their children. The newspapers also had covered some of the news on the flood coping strategies of women that kept life going for them. But, after the water has receded, the focus seemed to have shifted on macro issues of rehabilitation and rebuilding the post-flood economy. Women's participation in this process is not visible at all. It appears that there is a clear perception of women's assigned role in the society. More explicitly, women are not supposed to take part in important macro issues, rather they should stay inside with their tasks of home-management. But the experience of floods showed us the equal participation of women in crisis management. These ought to be documented and women ought to be an integral part of the rehabilitation process.

Recommendations from the Alternative's team

This flood has given us a unique chance to turn the disaster into an opportunity. The alternative team believes that it is the right time to pursue our actions in such a way that would serve the above objective. The team has some specific recommendations:

Integrate Women with the Post-flood Rehabilitation: Women participated spontaneously in various relief activities and contributed significantly. Moreover, they played a crucial role in sustaining their families through out the prolonged deluge. But, their voices seemed to have waned as the macro issues like rehabilitation and rebuilding of the economy came up. Even when plans to recover from such a national disaster are in the process of formulation, women's specific needs and priorities are barely taken into consideration. The high sounding plans for women's development would only work when the experiences of women's day-to-day life, their survival strategies during the

deluge are taken into cognizance at the policy making level.

Nutritional Condition of Women

The theme of this year's World Food Day has been 'Women Feed the World'. The multiple contribution of women in the entire food chain, starting from her engagement in the field to manage and arrange food for everyone in the household make her virtually an integral part of it. But, whenever an emergency situation appears, it is the women who suffer the most. The intra-household food distribution always goes against the women of the house as she willingly (sometimes forcefully) refuses to take her share of food in times of food crisis. Therefore, in the post-flood situation the nutritional condition of women, as is feared, is going to be quite alarming. This issue should be dealt very carefully. The government, NGOs and the electronic media can sensitize the people in this regard.

Considering Needs of the Female-headed Household

In our country a large number of families, especially in rural areas, are female-headed where the male member is either permanently or temporarily absent. In such a situation the female-head of the family has to bear all the responsibility of the family. The needs and priorities of such families differ from that of general families. Relief and rehabilitation programmes must take this factor into account.

Providing Employment for Women

Another issue frequently raised in the post-flood situation pertains to the survival and creation of employment opportunities for the previously self-employed women. Specially, it would be very difficult for the women-loanees to repay

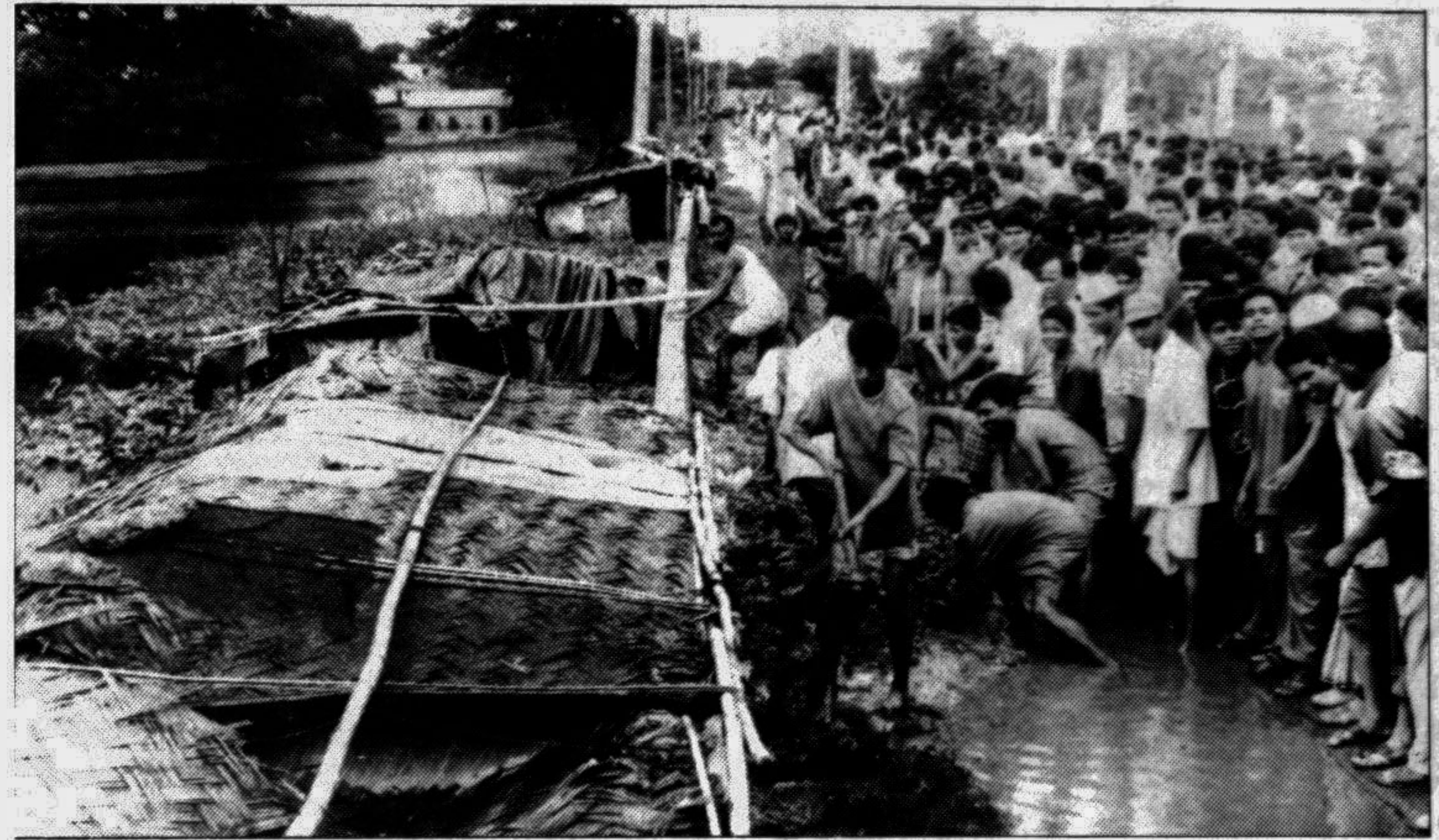
their loans if they do not get some immediate monetary help. In its post-flood emergency generation programmes the government and the NGOs must take the gender component into account.

Engaging the elected Women Union Parishad Members

The women UP members have frequently complained that they are able to work properly for lack of clearcut rules regarding their role and responsibilities. Allegations also prevail of lack of cooperation by the male members of the UP. The women members of the UP can now be assigned responsibilities of taking care of the women's and children's special needs in their unions. This is one way to ensure women's participation from the grass-root level.

The post-flood rehabilitation must again bring into fore the hollowing of the WID and GAD slogans of the government. It is time we concretize the slogans into actions. Let the floods teach us that women do constitute the BETTER HALF of this society.

The author is Fellow, Centre for Alternatives.



The whole local community thronging to protect DND from erosion.

— Star file photo

Silent Voices Speak Out

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

The letters from the affected areas bear the sorrows, deprivations, frustrations and helplessness of the unfortunate millions. In NDMU they found a ray of hope, a channel for ventilating their grievances and also perhaps a friend through whom they could speak and make themselves heard.

LETTERS came from all over Bangladesh. Letters came conveying the sorrow, misery, distress and humiliation of people. From remote, neglected regions where the flood has intensified the agony of the wretched millions, letters came as a reminder to the conscience of the urban educated people.

The Nagorik Durjog Moka-bela Uddyog (NDMU) arranged a quick survey to assess the affects of the devastating flood. A questionnaire was published in the major dailies containing a set of inquiries and respondents were asked to send in letters in addition to their answers if they felt so. The response was spontaneous and quite revealing. In fact, the members of the NDMU found that almost 60% of about 160 respondents wrote separate letters narrating their pitiable plight. The letters reflected the people's growing consciousness to react in a coherent manner in crisis situations. To a certain extent the letters were also a reflection of the actual extent of damage and casualties of the deluge of 1998. Most importantly the letters exposed the frustrations and discontent of the affected people about the present system of disaster management and rehabilitation. In this write up a brief account of the people's response through the letters received at the NDMU to the calamity of 1998 has been outlined.

Down With the Local Governments:

'We don't have any food, whatever food came as relief to the village has been appropriated by the UP chairman and his associates', wrote one person from the Sarishabari thana of the Munshiganj district. A common theme in most of the letters is complaint against the UP chairman and his associates. The major accusations concern malpractice in distribution of relief and VGF cards, selling of relief items in the black market etc. The mishandling of the relief operations by the local government authorities will indeed have a lasting

impact upon the image and role of these institutions. The indications are already there. One of the respondents urged that the process of disbursing government relief through the UP members should be withdrawn totally; and it ought to be handled by the relief operation officers. Though the respondent acknowledged that they too were corrupt, but the choice for the latter is like choosing between the lesser of the two evils. Some of the respondents also identified the political polarization of the local government members as another problem relating to the distribution of relief. The UP chairmen often provide undue privilege to their political affiliates in terms of relief distribution. The response of the flood-affected people clearly shows their reservations about the local government members' limitations of the existing system, and suggests the necessity of developing a transparent and accountable system.

NGOs and Armed Forces: Alternative Agents of Relief Distribution:

The loss of confidence upon the UP chairmen and other local government authorities has led many respondents to suggest the handing over of relief distribution to some other authority. The alternative names that frequently came up were those of the local NGOs and the army. The respondents felt that these institutions could be more active, efficient and neutral. This definitely shows needs for some readjustments in the current relief distribution system.

Addressing the Micro issues:

Responses from some of the areas highlighted the importance of various area specific requirements that might be overlooked while developing macro-level rehabilitation scheme. One of the respondents pointed out that the beetle-leaf farmers do not fulfill the criteria of receiving government agri-loans. But in his area quite a large number of the farmers earn their livelihood from bee-

tle-leaf cultivation. So he suggested that this area specific problem should come to the attention of the macro-level planners. From other areas information came about specific needs for potato, vegetables and other seeds, which were not always properly addressed in the relief/rehabilitation plan.

Uncertain Future:

The letters expressed the deep concern of the flood victims about their insecure future. Some of the respondents stated that they borrowed large sums of money from the money lenders during their acute crisis and now they are under tremendous pressure from them. The lenders are even threatening to appropriate their households if the money is not paid back in time. So they are apprehending that during the next winter they may have to live under open sky. Apart from this, the people are also suffering from job, health and food insecurity. Writing from the Doaria village, Kulliar-char thana, Kishoreganj, one person stated: 'all our cultivable lands have been inundated, we don't know what we will do in the next few months. Give us work. Give us food. Or else we are not going to survive for long.'

Come and See How We are Living:

From the village Krishnagobindapur, Chapainawabganj, one respondent strongly urged the members of the NDMU to come and visit his village and see for themselves the desperate condition of the villagers. He however is not the only one to make such a request. Many felt that it was not possible to put into writing the devastating affects of flood in their areas so there is a need to see it for oneself. Though the NGOs and local government officials are working, they felt the need of higher authorities to come and observe their sufferings. One letter from Gaurnadi, Barisal even had a drawing by a ten year old boy portraying his inundated village. These appeals only reflect the sheer

helplessness of the people and their desire for the increased involvement of higher authorities at field levels. Even though such involvement may not change the fortune of the victims, but it can at least contribute towards narrowing the gap between the rural flood-affected people and the authorities.

Not only the Flood:

A number of letters came to the NDMU with complaints that has no bearing with the floods. The complaints ranged from irregular electric supply to appeals for taking measures to reduce the overall poverty of a village. One person wrote from the CHT mentioning the failures of the government and NGOs in eradicating the poverty of his people. He wanted the intervention of the NDMU in initiating income generation projects in the area. Another person sent an appeal to the Prime Minister for solving the electricity, water supply and other basic service problems. He urged the NDMU to take appropriate measures. Some of the respondents even wrote about their personal problems. This is reflective of lack of confidence on the government and the growing faith of people on broad scale civil society initiatives.

The letters from the affected areas bear the sorrows, deprivations, frustrations and helplessness of the unfortunate millions. In NDMU they found a ray of hope, a channel for ventilating their grievances and also perhaps a friend through whom they could speak and make themselves heard. This leads one to wonder as to why we need to have a dialogue forum committees like this through which silenced voices could be heard. Why we cannot have many more committees like this at the local levels as well with a mandate NOT for durjog times only, but for all times so that voices need not remain silent. Let us all speak together and endeavour for many more of citizens initiatives.

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Apad Kalin School: Schooling During Calamity

by Ahmed Kamal

Why is this initiative unique? In more than one ways. According to the participants in the exercise, unlike other relief centres which tend to degrade the disaster affected people including children by reducing them to objects of pity, this initiative was to introduce an exercise in order to reverse the existing culture of relief.

centres which tend to degrade the disaster affected people including children by reducing them to objects of pity, this initiative was to introduce an exercise in order to reverse the existing culture of relief. And, it was a secular attempt to negate the effects of interruptions caused by natural hazards, like flooding.

Two explicit objectives were set for the whole exercise. One, while in the relief centre the children would retain their school activities uninterrupted and two, make them aware of the hazards of dislocation as experienced in inadequate hygienic conditions that prevail in relief centers.

One implicit outcome of the initiative was the generation of a new kind of meaning in elite-poor relationship. Evoking a Santa Clause image the whole exercise generated a new experience in the process of temporary relocation of the school going children of rural neighborhood of this megapolis. This 'unique initiative' was possible due to the space created by government's failure to provide shelter to the flood affected people in their own hamlets. Citizen's initiative found this space for intervention. What emerged from the relief exercise is the

inadequacy of centralised political machineries to cope with a disaster of such scale and demonstrated beyond doubt the myriad coping capacities of the victims along with the plurality of voluntary efforts by sections of the elite.

Since all kinds of different experiences and efforts to cope with flooding were beyond the reach of media we do not yet know about all of them. But we know about this one at Pogos School. The curricula adopted for the children there were basically the school curricula which had to be discontinued due to the closure of the schools due to the submersion. Added to it was the basic health awareness with emphasis on cleanliness. This emphasis on cleanliness was reflected in their engagement of a haircutter to cut the children's hair during their stay in camp. As a model for rehabilitation of displaced children during such disaster this initiative is laudable. Indeed, citizens can themselves do it without much effort. But this also is the limit of altruism.

I would like to push the issue a bit further and address this to those who want to change this society for a better and livable one. My worry is: Is it enough?

We are living in a society afflicted by governance crisis.

The elite of the society is totally callous to the needs of the common people and also insensitive to the demands of the nation building project. In this context the response of some sections of the elite to provide succor to the disaster affected people is praise worthy. More so, when a special focus was given on children's needs for education. It was designed to face disaster by creating opportunities for normal life to continue. The education that was given was slightly different than the kind of education they get in schools. There was an element of entertainment apart from the emphasis on coping with disaster. Here, I suppose is a scope for further thinking about the whole exercise.

The bureaucratic command system of our polity paralyzes during disasters of such magnitude. The functionaries remain helpless till donors arrive on the scene. The initiative and mobilization necessary to face such disasters is simply wanting in our bureaucratic culture. Agents of change of our society should take this reality into account. This is also the starting point for any critique of the social order that exists in Bangladesh. To introduce crucial content to the curricula used

in the school during calamity should then include the whole experience of dislocation and temporary relocation of the flood victims.

Curricula that will include this experience must consider the role of the government, state and civil society during disaster. The whole route from the rural hamlets to the urban relief centers is full of lessons for the victims. The sense of community that emerges among the latter across religious and spatial barriers make a transition from calamity to a fresh bonding. Allowing an opportunity these lessons may surface to confront some of the comfortable narratives of relief and rehabilitation both by government and civil society. The role of the pro-change citizenry is to highlight those elements of bonding so that the sense of community do not remain undernourished. The sustenance of this fresh bonding born in a common experience of calamity is important for two reasons. First, this may strengthen flood victims' support effort of self-rehabilitation when they go back to their villages and second, enhance their vigilance against bureaucratic distortion of their collective perception of the disaster experience. Micro intervention must not only transcend its boundary to carry the message of its usefulness during institutional failures but also create space for a critical evaluation of its own exercise.

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Traders distributing relief materials among flood victims of Jurain.

— Star file photo