

BACKDROP - THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF DISASTER AID

Natural disasters hurt people. They injure, kill, cause, trauma and emotional stress - spell social and economic ruin for many.

For the survivors, the aid that is intended to help them to recover, in most cases, impedes recovery and causes further hardships and tends to make the society less capable of coping with the next disaster.

Most large-scale disasters occur in the region between the tropic of Cancer and the tropic of Capricorn, which encompasses most of the poorer, developing, nations. In the Third World, DISASTERS tend to be treated as UNIQUE EVENTS and RELIEF has tended to ignore the implications of disasters in the context of the socio economic development of the society. Though limited, the form and content of aid often promotes the gap in the understanding between disaster response and development. Additionally, current practices of disaster aid, in most cases, do not complement development.

It was assumed until recently that the answers to natural disaster was more relief from the developed countries. Annually, the amount of relief aid has increased. How then have the losses and numbers affected due to natural disasters continued to increase? Why then are there only a handful of instances of how aid has had any meaningful results?

This dossier examines disasters on the basis of its human consequences and not merely on the phenomenon that causes it. The number of natural disasters are not more than they were in the past but what has increased is the magnitude of the effect of each disaster. The increase in disaster potential is one result of the cycle of poverty, common to developing countries like India. Increasing marginalisation of the population, lack of resources to meet the basic needs of an expanding population and the deepening poverty causes further vulnerability. In this backdrop and recognising poverty as the primary root of vulnerability and disasters in developing countries like India, there is a need to relook at the current practices of responses towards disasters. There is also a need to review the existing form and content of disaster aid because it is now being realised that the increasing magnitude of disasters is primarily because of the present state of under-development and poverty.

Historically, the techniques and approaches used in today's relief operations were developed to help refugees and other displaced persons after World War II. The relief agencies were mainly engaged in temporary and short-term measures like supply of food, blankets, tents and clothing. The reconstruction of the devastated European cities and towns and re-building of the economy were looked upon mainly by the governments and, only in exceptions, some relief agencies were involved in long-term activities. Later, in late 1940s, the relief agencies spread their work to the troubled spots of the third World - India, Korea and Palestine, to deal with the refugees. The same approach and techniques as used in Europe were adopted.

In early 1950s, the relief agencies increased their activities to give relief in times of natural disasters. New patterns of involvement were established and new relationship developed between the Government and relief agencies. The focal point became the non-government agencies (NGOs). This was so because NGO's showed greater mobility and flexibility than governmental agencies. Some of the relief agencies also began to expand their scope of activities into long-term operations.

However, the nature and content of disaster aid continued to be virtually similar to that used for refugee relief. While aid for refugees are normally non-recoverable, support during and after natural disaster can be invested in a manner which is not only largely recoverable but can also be used for long-term development. Also, while for refugee relief, the emphasis is primarily on material aid and logistics, in natural disaster, a much more sophisticated operational capacity is required and many sectors must be addressed.

During late 1950s, but more from late 1960s, a shift occurred from the relief approach to developmental concerns. New agencies were formed to meet development needs and new relationships evolved between the private and government agencies. The role of the NGOs during disasters began to change and expand.

In early 1970s, a number of study and research projects were undertaken to examine the various approaches. These reports highlighted increased dependencies, inappropriate aid and counterproductive

results and raised doubts about the fundamental principles of relief. The acceptance of the research findings was slow. Often, it was rejected as few alternatives were suggested in these reports. During end 1970s, a partial reapproachment between the critics and the relief agencies were reached. Many innovative approaches since then has brought disaster relief forward by many strides. However, some problems basic to the relief system and agencies still persist even today as few organisations have changed either their structure or their methodology of work. Most still focus primarily on the emergency needs and few try to perceive the events that occur in a disaster and how their interventions affect the overall outcome of recovery.

