

On earthquake rehabilitation

Not their moneys worth

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Efforts at reviving peoples livelihood in the earthquake-hit areas do not seem to be working. Their single-minded focus on reviving financial assets has the key to their failure.

To the extent of repeating myself, I cant help mentioning that the earthquake 2005 was a natural calamity turned into human disaster due to bad policies and planning. In fact, I should not use the word “bad”. A sheer lack of policies and planning should be most appropriate expression here.

According to various revised estimates, 90,000 precious human lives were lost. More than one million people lost their jobs, affecting 500,000 households and 3.5 million people lost their livelihoods. The earthquake and its effects/after effects killed about half of the animals and damaged about 70 per cent of the harvested and standing crops in the quake-affected areas. On top of it, there were losses to natural resources due to land sliding, soil erosion, and destruction of irrigation channels.

The government, various humanitarian assistance organisations, philanthropic bodies and individuals did respond very well and saved many precious lives that could have been lost during the severe winter that set in just after the earthquake. After the relief phase, all efforts were focused on rehabilitation and reconstruction with an emphasis on revival of livelihoods. But there seems to be a fundamental problem in defining livelihoods in terms of financial needs only.

According to Chambers and Conway, “a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living”. It is, therefore, something more than just financial assets. Experts generally agree that livelihood comprises of five capitals or assets — human (which have to do with human skills and capabilities), natural (that is, natural resources), financial, social, and physical (economic, social and communication infrastructure etc). It is believed that various combinations of the above mentioned five capitals in the context of external vulnerabilities (such as an earthquake), policies and institutional processes shape livelihood strategies and their outcomes.

It is in this backdrop that a research study was carried out in four villages of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (two each in Muzaffarabad and Bagh(and four in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) (2 each in Mansehra and Battagram) to determine the status of livelihood assets of the quake survivors. A total of 200 households (1,390 persons) were interviewed. These interviews were supplemented with focus group discussion to analyse difference in pre- and post-earthquake livelihood capitals of the community members. The relevance of current livelihood strategies for them was also mapped out.

Effects of the earthquake on human assets

Barring a number of literate persons that seemed to remain unaffected (rather slightly improved), an adverse effect of the earthquake on human assets of the studied villages was observed both in Kashmir as well as in the NWFP. The earthquake was reported to be directly responsible for the

death of approximately one per cent of the surveyed population in the NWFP and 4 per cent of the surveyed population in Kashmir. Not only a reduction in the household size was noted but also a visible imbalance in the already skewed sex ratio (number of men for every 100 women) of the households due to high mortality of women was also noted after the earthquake (see graph).

A sharp decrease (83.4 per cent) in the number of students per household in the NWFP (from 2.0 per cent of the population of the villages to 0.333 per cent of it) was observed after the earthquake. The number of students per household also dropped by 50 per cent (from 0.541 per cent to 0.216 per cent) in AJK. This drop is not only because of higher child mortality due to the earthquake but also because of the lacklustre response to makeshift schools set up after the earthquake. In the surveyed villages, the structural damage to schools resulted in the setting up of temporary schools without boundary walls or covered toilet facilities, discouraging girls' attendance due to the strict socio-religious norms in the NWFP. Moreover, with a greater number of female deaths, young girls were also expected to take charge of running households in place of their mothers. This trend has also increased the gender imbalance in literacy rates.

Effects of the earthquake on natural assets

Due to seismic shocks, villages close to faultlines have suffered due to cracks in the subsoil, landslides and soil erosion. Because of this, not only agricultural land but also supporting irrigation channels in Kashmir and the NWFP have been destroyed. This has adversely impacted natural assets of livelihoods. The study observed more loss of natural resources in our study villages in Kashmir as compared with those in the NWFP. While only 9 per cent agricultural land and 7 per cent water channels were partially or totally damaged in the NWFP, these figures were respectively 51 per cent and 23 per cent for Kashmir villages.

Effects of the earthquake on financial assets

The earthquake severely reduced financial assets of the residents of Kashmir and the NWFP. The average overall losses in income (per month), however, were double in Kashmir than in the NWFP. The study reported that monthly overall average income per household in the NWFP decreased by 18 per cent (from Rs 1,327 to Rs 1,090). In Kashmir the monthly overall average income per household decreased by 37.33 per cent (from Rs 1,204 to Rs 754). It was also observed that 87 per cent of the respondents in the NWFP and 76 per cent of the respondents in Kashmir relied on service-related income. Agriculture was a secondary or tertiary source of income for them.

It was also observed that spending pattern in the quake-affected areas is gradually normalising, though expenses on health are decreasing, verifying the efficacy of health services provided by various external sources. A major reason for normalisation of spending pattern was perceived to be role of services as major source of income. Most of the times these services were being rendered outside the quake affected areas so somehow a flow of regular income in the shape of domestic/overseas remittances continues. Compensation and support grants from various sources (though not available to everyone) are also partly contributing in household income.

Effects of the earthquake on social assets

The social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihood are defined as social assets. It was observed that these resources got adversely affected due to internal displacement, post-disaster shocks, dysfunctioning of families due to deaths, illnesses, disabilities and second marriages, missing role of women, break of traditional joint-family systems for compensation benefits, dependency syndrome and uncertainty about future. The only positive affect seen was an increased trust in humanitarian assistance organisations.

Effects of the earthquake on physical assets

In the NWFP 80 per cent of the respondents and in Kashmir 94 per cent of them reported their houses were totally damaged due to the earthquake. In the NWFP, 20-40 per cent reported that their utensils, furniture, and other household appliances were totally damaged. The percentage of these items destroyed in Kashmir stood at a staggering 70-90 per cent. Destruction of road network, schools, and other civil infrastructure invariably disturbed the livelihood assets of the affected areas.

Relevance of various livelihood strategies

An analysis of various livelihood strategies adopted by the government and non-governmental organisations in the earthquake affected areas, shows that their focus is on compensation or subsistence cash grants, revival of agriculture, imparting of skills and replacement of livestock.

There seemed to be few fundamental problems which were hampering these strategies to have a real impact.

- First, the magnitude and the nature of losses to various assets of livelihood in Kashmir and the NWFP are different. One size cannot fit all in this situation.
- Second, we need to think livelihood beyond financial assets. There is very little work done on the revival of social as well as human assets without which financial assistance on its own would not deliver. More attention should be paid towards reviving non-financial assets. It was also observed that most of the compensation and grants were non-income generating and non-sustainable, meeting one off needs by superficially increasing the spending power. Humanitarian assistance organisations should evaluate the impact of their cash grants on the restoration of livelihood. The study observed some families who had bought mobile phones from Rs 5000 cash grants provided to them by an international non-governmental organisation.
- Third, we need to break the myth that agriculture was the mainstay for livelihood in the quake-affected areas. It was not and, therefore, one needs to think of stabilising the non-farm income.
- Finally, imparting of trainings on their own would not deliver. A three-pronged strategy is to be adopted for delivering an impact — that is, need-based training, financial support for trainees and an arrangement for marketing their skills. These three components are integral elements for any skill imparting programme to succeed. In the absence of any one of them, the other two would lose their impact.

The fact does not help that all the official, non-official and private actors involved in the rehabilitation of the quake-affected people and the reconstruction of the disaster-hit areas are operating in a policy vacuum, especially on the issue of livelihood. Some of them may, of course, be operating with the best of intentions but reviving livelihoods in the quake-zone is much more than just being a matter of intent. For all the different programmes and projects to bear fruit that a comprehensive policy outline is laid down with inputs from all the people involved in the process as well as those for whom these programmes and projects are designed. But at the same time, this outline should be flexible enough to tailor itself in accordance with the changing needs of people in the light of the magnitude and nature of their losses. Only by acting this way, outside players can become a part of the solution required by the quake-affected people. Otherwise, they may remain a part of the problems being faced by the people in the disaster-hit areas of Azad Kashmir and the NWFP. Even the best of intention will not help retrieve the situation in this case.

P.S.

* From The News on 12th Nov 2006. This article contains two graphs which are not reproduced here.
See:

<http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/nov2006-weekly/nos-12-11-2006/pol1.htm#6>

* Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri is an Islamabad-based policy analyst and columnist. To obtain further details of the study quoted above, readers may contact him at Suleri sdpi.org