

Principles of relief

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Almost half of the Pakistan is submerged in floodwaters due to unprecedented floods in the unusual monsoon this month. While the country is grappling with the rescue and relief phase we need to understand that life-saving goods and services are essentially required in this phase. The provision of crucial information to affected communities is also an important relief service. However, 'an unfocussed compassion' in relief provision can add to the disaster risk. For instance, in the wake of the Earthquake 2005, it was observed that sporadic relief efforts without taking into account the diverse needs of victims brought difficulties than benefits to the needy.

It was also observed during the earthquake that relief goods and services had been concentrated in easily accessible areas as trucks loaded with such goods do not find way to reach the hard-to-reach areas. There were few events of looting, misappropriating and misusing of relief goods also.

To avoid such situations in emergencies, it is emphasised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that the ability to deliver the right supplies where and when they are needed is a prerequisite of an effective emergency operation. To achieve this, an early assessment of the logistical support is essential.

Generally, it is recommended that private and individual philanthropists should preferably donate relief in cash or kind to any organisation, agency or department instead of sending out goods directly to disaster-hit areas. It is suggested that individual philanthropists may choose any organisation of their own liking and trust which is working in the relief operations and contribute cash or kind to such outfits. This is because most of the relief organisations and outfits feel that such direct sending of relief goods creates problems. For example, sometimes senders do not have enough information about the need and relief preferences of the affected communities and unsolicited relief goods are rushed to the site. Therefore, relief mobilisation and distribution has to be guided by following considerations:

Need and supply: Relief should be need-based instead of supply-driven. It is to be noted that there exists some diversities within a disaster-hit community, and relief should adequately respond to these diverse needs of victims and survivors. It is to be realised that 'one size does not fit everybody'. Don't send inappropriate items to disaster-stricken areas. Undertake a quick assessment from various formal and informal sources as what is the most appropriate help for disaster victims. Sometimes inappropriate relief items incur more expenditures and cost of returning and dumping than the actual price of items.

Equity and quality: Principles of equity and quality should be adhered to in the provision of relief goods and services. It was observed that relief goods can be dumped in easily accessible areas by dropping out relatively far-flung and inaccessible areas. Always, there are chances that mal-distribution of relief goods and substandard relief items might create mistrust, low self esteem and panic among disaster victims. Equity in this case does not mean that 'everybody deserves first', rather 'everybody deserves equally'.

Timeliness: There is a rush for needs at ground. Rescued and survived people need essential items for subsistence. There is a chance if relief goods and services are delayed most of the survivors become too fragile to withstand the vagaries of weather. This factor becomes more critical with the recent floods. Many organisations and individuals and affected communities themselves warned everybody that we have very little time margin to reach those (with essential relief) who survived the floods.

Human dignity: As the saying goes: “The left hand must not know what the right hand gives in charity”. The dignity and self-esteem of receiver should not be exploited in relief provision. It was observed in some relief camps that rich men and women come with cash in their hands and start distributing money publicly. Children and elders run to seek the cash and it makes the mockery of their miseries. Our individual, collective and government relief operations must not take advantage of the sufferings by over publicising the giver’s benevolence and communities’ victim-hood.

Relief as a right: We should recognise that it is the responsibility of the state and society to protect life and livelihoods of its citizens and fellow human beings struck by a disaster. In the wake of calamities, safety, protection and security of affected population have to be ensured. Therefore, relief in this case is not a charity or benevolence but a legally enforceable right of disaster-hit communities. To provide relief and compensation to disaster victims is not voluntary rather it is a mandatory for the governments and social networks.

Meet the minimum standards: Quality of relief goods and services has to be in line with the minimum standards set by related agencies. SPHERE standards adopted and promoted by various international humanitarian organisations can be useful reference point to ensure the minimum quality of relief goods and services in disaster-hit areas.

Risk of exclusion: The powerful and influential amongst the affected community can approximate relief handouts. Relief goods can be used for political, religious and ethnic consolidation by local political vendors, parties and faith groups. To avoid this, a detailed mechanism for relief distribution should be devised at local level which includes all social groups i.e. women, children, elderly, disabled and other marginalised groups. Relief should be guided by the principles of inclusion, diversity and pluralistic considerations. Given the social context of flood-hit areas, there is a strong likelihood of women and children being excluded if a deliberate effort is not made to include them in the relief and recovery processes. It is considered that women, along with their dependents most often make up the largest percentage of the most vulnerable. Sometimes, a lot of destitute women, such as divorced, abandoned and widowed, and women whose husbands were away from the site do not get relief. The learning of few organisations suggests considering the women to be the more suitable representative of the family and in emergencies distribute relief goods through them.

Cultural and climatic differences: Before you decide to send out relief packages to the affected communities, bear in mind the climatic and cultural context of the affected community. Local dress code, food habits, weather variations are some essential indicators in the selection of emergency relief provisions.

Don’t send items unsorted: Disaster victims have no time to sort out relief items in the times of urgency so avoid sending unsorted items as a relief package.

Don’t donate used clothing, shoes: Used clothing, shoes, toys, home medicine, cabinet drugs or anything opened or perishable are usually of little value to disaster victims. Don’t presume disaster victims can find a use for anything.

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