

Retrieving the Wisdom of those in Need: Community Healing in Time of Disaster

Some comments

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In this paper I will try to put down what I have observed in my work with disaster situations. But before I do that, I must explain where I am coming from. I am an architect and planner who has worked extensively with communities. So, when there is a disaster, I am asked by NGOs, CBOs and government and donor agencies to help out. My work has been to find technical and governance solutions for relief and rehabilitation. In this process, I have learned a few things.

1. An involvement and control of communities with the relief and rehabilitation process empowers them. It improves their relationship with each other, makes it more equitable with state organisations, and highlights aspects of injustice and deprivation that have been invisible. Due to this visibility, they become issues and the need to address them arises.
2. A properly designed community controlled involvement can in the long run create a better physical and social environment and develop employment and entrepreneurship. This cannot happen in the short term.
3. The cheapest and most easily available material for reconstruction of homes and infrastructure is the rubble of collapsed buildings. If tools are provided for its extraction and use, the process of healing and hope begins.
4. The above can only be done through a decentralised system of disaster management, relief and rehabilitation. Centralised systems alienate individuals and communities and obstruct their involvement in post-disaster situations.

In this context, Eliane Ubalijoro's paper, apart from her beautiful and sensitive poetry, was of special interest to me when she asks "Can we open ourselves beyond our intellectual skills to feeling the pain of trauma without being lost in it?" And, would that "make us more compassionate or less able to technically support the healing process?" I have never thought of this. Again, the enormity and nature of the Rwanda tragedy is something I have never worked with. However, the repercussions of partition of India in 1947 (when I was 4 years old) were a tragedy of a similar nature. Hundreds of thousands were killed and over 14 million displaced. Yet, we were able to effectively settle the displaced and provide them with homes, jobs, and infrastructure. Today, we cannot do that for migrants from the rural areas. Perhaps we were successful then because there was hope for a better future, a feeling of euphoria at being free. I often think of this relationship between hope and the rehabilitation process.

I would like to add my observations to Paul Born's paper and blogs which deal with almost every aspect of disaster and post-disaster situations. The Pakistan earthquake of 2005 physically destroyed an entire region and killed over 100,000 people. What I observed is given below.

1. In certain areas of this vast region, old community/clan based governance systems died a long time ago but the shape of the neighbourhoods remained as before. In these areas, most people built their new homes on the farmlands and not in their village clusters. Nuclear families replaced extended ones. An unrecognised social change expressed itself, both in social and physical terms.
2. A highly centralised system was developed for relief and rehabilitation requiring individuals and families to show identity cards and have bank accounts. Few did and so they had to go through the complicated process of acquiring them and of being viewed with suspicion and hostility by government officials. Meanwhile, those families whose relations were working in Karachi or abroad had bank accounts and identity cards. Also, they were better educated and were able to establish a more equitable relationship with the relief and rehab agencies. Communities got divided along these lines. Also, because of this system, the immense desire of civil society to support the relief and rehab effort was frustrated. My proposal for a highly decentralised system, which required no identity cards or bank accounts, was not acceptable because the agencies that were providing loans for rehabilitation felt that accountability and prevention of corruption could only be achieved through the system they were proposing. I disagree strongly.
3. In the post-earthquake period, there was large scale construction activity. Because of the centralised system, a lot of benefits that could have benefited the local population, benefited outsiders and urban based suppliers of building materials.
4. Most of the shuttering contractors in the building industry in Karachi are from the earthquake affected areas and so are domestic servants of the elite. As a result, in the immediate post-earthquake period, the Karachi building industry collapsed and drivers and cooks disappeared. Six years down the road, the situation has not changed much. Many of the migrants to Karachi have opted to stay put in their native villages. As a result, the relationship of communities with local government have become more equitable; the tradition elite have lost their importance and power; and the demand for health, education, and piped water and sewage schemes has increased.

In 2010, Pakistan experienced its worst ever floods. They affected about 18 percent of the area of the country and about 20 million people. What I have observed is given below.

1. Civil society response to the floods was not on a scale that matched the response to the earthquake. This is because the flood drama unfolded itself slowly and compared to the earthquake there were very few deaths. Also, the communities affected by the floods were rural people with no links to the urban areas where civil society, individuals, and organisations are located.
2. Those affected in the rural areas migrated to the urban areas or to along main highways when their villages were flooded. Relief camps were set up in these locations. Many of these

villagers were share croppers or landless labour working on feudal estates. Few had ever visited a city and many of their children had never gone to school or visited a health facility. In many of the camps they received better food than they were used to and experienced the social and economic freedom of the urban areas. As a result, a large number (estimated at about 20 percent) of the affected do not wish to go back home. They have seen a better world and wish to be a part of it. Government agencies and civil society organisations keep asking people like me “Can we house them?” “Will it effect the ethnic mix of Karachi and cause conflicts?” “How can we make them go back?” My response is that you cannot control their decision. If they wish to stay, they will find a way through political patronage or corruption or both. Let them be!

3. The floods and associated migration has exposed to the politicians, elite, middle classes, and academia the terrible face of rural poverty and deprivation. As a result, there is concern and agitation against the feudal system that is identified as the cause of this poverty. The unfortunate thing in this concern is that the other structural factors that are responsible for this poverty are now being ignored by these lobbies.
4. The Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), with which I have been involved since 1980, runs a micro-credit programme through its local partners in the small towns and rural areas of Sindh and Punjab provinces. These partners have been trained to survey, document, and keep accounts. Their work has also linked them with the markets in their areas, with market operators and with their borrowers, many of whom were also affected by the floods. These skills and connections that the OPP partners had made it possible for them to immediately organise relief and subsequently involve themselves in the rehabilitation process, whereas other organisations had difficulties of access and skilled staff.
5. Entire towns and villages were submerged by flood waters. Highly sophisticated plans for rehabilitation have been made. These plans are expensive, do not involve people, and create islands of “good” environment in a sea of chaos and/or less “sophisticated” solutions. An insignificant number of model villages and high quality infrastructure projects cannot qualify as rehabilitation. This money could be better spent on rehabilitating agriculture more, through a process of loans and cash for work programmes.
6. Much of the water supply and sewage disposal pumping facilities have been devastated in these areas. Rehabilitation of these schemes are being carried out. The introduction of solar energy for them has been proposed. If carried out, it will help in the solution of the energy crisis in Pakistan and lower operation and maintenance costs considerably. The flood rehab process has led to projects for solar energy use for electrification in the rural areas. If it continues, it will be a great achievement. The floods have made these activities possible.

In 1987, there was a famine in the Thar Desert of Sindh. The cause given by international agencies and the government of Pakistan was prolonged drought. However, when I checked the metrological data, I found that prolonged drought was common and had not previously resulted in famine. This led to a small research project and subsequently I was asked to develop a relief and rehab plan for the desert. In the process I learned and implemented the following, which in many ways relates to Federick Burkle’s paper.

1. The famine was due to social changes that had changed the relations of production, made management of water and pasture related infrastructure difficult, and created environmental degradation. It was obvious that these changes could not be addressed through a relief programme or a short term rehabilitation attempt. New community based organisations were required and for this an understanding of change and its actors was necessary.
2. On this basis, I proposed (and the proposal was accepted) the setting up of a research and extension organisation in the desert, manned by local people. If skilled local people were not available, it was assumed that they could be trained through a process of doing. The assumption proved true.
3. As a result of this decision, the Thar Rural Development Project was established. It is now called Thardeep and it has developed new community organisations that manage the rangeland, produce and market handicrafts for the markets in the large towns, lobby government for development projects, and make government health programmes viable. They also have savings and credit programmes and more recently, are involving themselves in developing tourism related activities. Subsequent droughts have not caused famines.
4. I have suggested similar research and extension projects for the earthquake and flood affected areas but their establishment has not taken place. The reason for this is simply that state organisations have become weak and there is an increasing tendency to seek solutions through “the market.” The fact that market solutions also require effective government agencies is only now being recognised after two decades of unregulated capitalism.