[**Redefining disasters**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1703187/redefining-disasters)

[Ali Tauqeer Sheikh](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4987/ali-tauqeer-sheikh) Published August 4, 2022 Updated a day ago

The writer is an expert on climate change and development.

BALOCHISTAN foretells Pakistan’s unfolding climate story. The unending torrential rains, flash floods, landslides and mudslides, following the hot weather and heatwaves, have wreaked havoc and caused deaths which could have been mostly prevented. It has robbed many areas in the province of precious topsoil and washed away standing crops as well as individual, community and state assets — houses, livestock, orchards, solar panels, roads, bridges, railway tracks, small dams and, possibly, a number of schools and hospitals. The road links with Punjab and Sindh are disrupted, further isolating Balochistan. This has also halted local commerce, supplies from upcountry, and trade with Afghanistan through the Quetta-Qandahar Highway and with Iran on the Quetta-Taftan National Highway. The floods have undone many years of development.

While the scale of the floods has been overwhelming, the government response has been uncoordinated and inadequate; there is no coherent road map for building resilience to extreme weather events. Instead of offering long-term sustainability, the approach has been ad hoc and out of sync with ground realities and future needs. The present devastation cannot be considered a one-off event. It begs more systematic and long-term climate-smart responses.

The prime minister, during his visit to the affected areas, announced cash grants to families who had lost loved ones or whose homes had been destroyed or damaged. His approach has been driven more by the need to meet urgent requirements than building back better. He set up a committee to survey and report on the situation, but it is not clear who is on it. As per media reports, it has barely any provincial representation.

While the prime minister’s intentions can be appreciated, the issue is very complex for coming up with an instant report as the neglect is historical. The then PPP government’s ‘Aghaz-i-Huqooq-i-Balochistan’ package, followed by the PML-N government’s ‘Equalising Package’, and the PTI rulers’ Rs601 billion development package for southern Balochistan were all politically driven, top-down measures that failed to recognise the climate threats to the province. None of them had a provision for climate-resilient development; hence they all failed to mention climate threats such as prolonged droughts and flash floods, let alone proposed specific response strategies.

The natural disaster in Balochistan is a cry for climate-smart responses.

Going forward, the following two recommendations are made for the committee.

Risk transfer: The prime minister’s announced cash awards will perhaps be disbursed, sooner or later, but will not help the families stand on their own feet. The federal government has extremely limited fiscal space. The PSDP has now shrunk by almost half to Rs550 billion; there’s a throw-forward of at least 1,260 unfinished public-sector development projects, with an estimated price tag of Rs6.2 trillion, largely indicating the unavailability of financial resources.

Instead of acting like a philanthropist, the prime minister should have offered the creation of a special purpose vehicle, a trust fund, focusing on climate resilience by offering insurance or risk transfer to farmers in five areas to protect their assets: i) standing crops, ii) livestock, iii) shelter or home, iv) life of bread-earners, and v) mini and micro enterprises. The creation of a trust fund through catastrophe bonds would be a legacy institution, like the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), offering ‘trigger-based’ disbursement rather than complex insurance mechanisms. Several countries from the Philippines to Turkey and the Caribbean are successfully pursuing this track.

BISP needs to refine its mandate. The previous government used it during the Covid-19 emergency, but did not succeed in institutionalising its Ehsaas programme, primarily because BISP was not designed to run charity meals. Pakistan’s development partners worked closely for several years with the federal government and helped create a credible institution. Pakistan now has the capacity and experience to fast-track the creation of a resilience trust fund as a long-term response to climate-induced disasters such as droughts, heatwaves, urban and riverine floods in Balochistan and other regions.

Emergency response: The frequency and intensity of extreme events is constantly on the increase. The present floods have undone a significant percentage of the infrastructure developed over several decades. The damage was caused less because the rains were abnormally high, and more because no prior ‘resilience audit’ of the infrastructure had been undertaken by the provincial and national governments to check its ability to withstand climate shocks.

The construction standards followed in Balochistan, as in the other provinces, are archaic. They are not fit to meet weather abnormalities that are becoming the ‘new normal’. Almost all significant infrastructure in Pakistan is designed and delivered by Nespak (the national engineering services), the Frontier Works Organisation and the National Highway Authority. They have not introduced new climate-smart standards in construction material and specifications. They, together with the Pakistan Army Corps of Engineers, can work with the Pakistan Engineering Council to revise and upgrade construction specifications to be followed, not only by large government contractors but also municipal corporations, housing societies and private housing hamlets, as well as various income groups facing extreme weather threats. People need guidance and the poor need it desperately. Let’s not leave them alone to face the same disasters repeatedly.

Retrofitting the existing infrastructure is no less important than undertaking the construction of new infrastructure. In fact, if we wish to protect whatever we have built in the last seven decades, we should clearly have a moratorium on new construction projects until climate-smart construction guidelines are developed, notified and adopted by the provincial governments. In the 2005 earthquake, we lost 33,000 classrooms in 7,923 public schools in 32 districts. We were perhaps too occupied with the magnitude of the human tragedy to focus on construction standards and specifications. We cannot afford to brush such questions under the rug any longer.

Finally, the civil administrations are invariably the first victim of all disasters. Local governments are typically nonexistent and emergency stocks are rarely maintained, further diminishing their role and depleting their credibility and legitimacy. The void is often filled by army relief and rescue operations. The National Disaster Management Authority is a focal agency for implementing the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The NDMA and its provincial counterparts will fail again and again — unless district disaster management authorities are notified and empowered to support local governments in climate-resilient development.

*The writer is an expert on climate change and development.*

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