[**Mitigating miseries**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1729689/mitigating-miseries)

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LAST month, in a report furnished before the Sindh High Court’s Hyderabad circuit bench, the province’s chief secretary admitted the government’s failure in handling the 2022 flood disaster, saying “our response to the disaster wasn’t adequate”. He also informed the court that the government had formed a company for the disbursement and monitoring of cash aid. Meanwhile, judges of the Larkana circuit bench raised questions regarding the government’s assertion that more than Rs30 billion had been spent on ‘rehabilitation’ and dewatering in the affected areas.

‘Rehabilitation’ is often confused with ‘relief’, which is seen as the “temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce suffering from a natural or manmade crisis”. Rehabilitation starts when immediate needs are met. In the case of Sindh, the victims continue to languish in floodwaters.

Historically, Sindh has been wreaked by natural calamities caused by breaches in the Indus; rainwater from Balochistan brought by the Nai Gaj river to Dadu and other streams entering Sindh in the upper reaches of district Qamber-Shahdadkot; cyclones hitting the coastal belt; state-patronised obstructions in the natural flow of water from the monsoons; and the poor maintenance of drains.

The year 1995 proved hellish for dozens of shepherd families and their animals, in the hundreds, who had been temporarily settled in the dry beds of the Nai Gaj and its offshoots. They were washed away due to the gushing water during the night. This catastrophe could have been averted had there been a floodwater warning system at the entry point of Nai Gaj in Sindh. The volume and velocity of the floodwaters were so high that, by sunrise, they had inundated the entire Kachho area of district Dadu, flooding Manchhar lake to its maximum level. Then, the cyclone in 1999 killed scores of fishermen at sea and those residing on small islands and near the seashore.

No lessons were learnt from past flood disasters.

Sadly, neither the provincial nor federal government conducted studies to identify failures that could be addressed to prevent such tragedies from recurring. The federal government, meanwhile, has failed to respond to the Sindh government’s demand for an early cyclone warning system in district Badin or Sujawal.

The devastation caused by the rain floods in 2010 is more recent. Thousands of displaced families were settled in cemented houses. But has their journey from thatched huts to pukka houses changed their economic life?

The centre and province had seemed satisfied with giving the affected families cash aid of Rs5,000 per acre to buy quality seed. It may have been a good recipe for politicians to build their vote banks but not for the poverty-stricken inhabitants of Sindh who are vying to move out from abject poverty to respectable poverty.

The policy of cash aid has its flaws, as it is conditioned on wheat crop sowing, which requires one bag of DAP, a basal fertiliser, and three doses of urea per acre to ensure a cost-effective yield. The cumulative cost, including that of seed, crosses Rs20,000 per acre. Then there are the land development expenses. Moreover, wheat is rarely sown in the rice-growing areas of Sindh. Normally, farmers sow mustard and canola seeds after rice harvesting, when the soil is wet, hence, there is fast germination with minimum input costs.

Though the Rabi crop-sowing season in southern Sindh is over, except for the sunflower crop, the disbursement of cash is not. Reportedly, the planners have a relaxed cash aid policy and have raised the claims of affected farmers to up to 25 acres — from five acres in 2010. Will it be possible for the company or government functionaries to check these claims exceeding the permissible limits or to verify how much of the benefit actually reaches the haris, who bear a proportional cost of the inputs in a state run by feudal lords? In this scenario, the need is to search for other avenues of livelihood for the landless, to enable them to break the chain of dependency on the ruling elite, but that’s a pipe dream!

Nevertheless, a few suggestions: the planners must abandon their stereotype approach of focusing solely on wheat sowing and should also consider topographical conditions, climate, soil texture, water availability and crop patterns in the area. There is huge potential for cattle farming, including of camels, in the Khirthar range. Similarly, there are vast opportunities of the export of fresh milk, meat and vegetables from lower Sindh, which is not too far off from the Gulf states, by developing abandoned jetties at Zero Point, Shah Bunder and Keti Bunder, and by re-energising old trade routes. Last but not least, there can be fish breeding in the coastal belt. The plains of the Indus need quality seeds, fertilisers and pesticides at controlled rates. But the gigantic task is the growth of mental and manual capacity of the hapless multitudes to enable them to move from an agrarian to industrial society.

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