**[The missing link](https://www.dawn.com/news/1841143/the-missing-link)**

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COMMUNITIES and the nearest ad­­ministrative tier are considered the linchpin of any disaster management system. Pakistan’s National Disaster Manage­ment (NDM) Act, 2010, focuses on the disaster management architecture and deline­­­ates the functions and powers of disaster management authorities at the national, provincial and district level. National and provincial authorities have been assigned a macro- and meso-level role, such as policy formulation, coordination, communication, providing technical assistance, and monitoring. The district disaster management authorities (DDMAs) have a pivotal role in grassroots operations.

If disaster strikes, the community is the first victim as well as the first saviour. The next line of defence is the local administration, ie, the DDMA under the law. Under the NDM Act, the DDMA’s structure assigns a leadership role to the local council head at the district level. Authority members include the deputy commissioner, district police officer and district officers of health and other departments. In contrast to 2022, when local governments were not in place during the floods, elected local bodies now are functional. It is time that district chairpersons took the lead in developing local-level disaster response plans by involving tehsils and union councils. Crucial functions of the district authority include developing, reviewing and updating district disaster management plans, developing and updating risk maps, coordinating efforts for disaster prevention, and mitigation measures.

The 2010 and 2022 floods show that functional DDMAs are the missing link in the disaster response system. The floods wreaked havoc in all the provinces, especially in the south. Unprepared communities endured nature’s wrath. No one except a few NGOs extended some training and aid to a few communities. During the floods, the district administration was unprepared. The NDMA and PDMAs have a semblance of institutional infrastructure, but for all practical purposes, DDMAs do not exist. When disaster strikes, the deputy commissioner’s office acts as the DDMA, in addition to carrying out its routine duties. There is no dedicated secretariat or team with disaster management skills. Local-level coordination starts just ahead of the flood months or after the disaster. DDMAs scramble to mobilise rescue and relief resources that often end up in the warehouses of local landlords. No wonder, rescue and relief operations during the floods were haphazard. In short, the DDMA, though the cornerstone of local response, lacks the commensurate operational capacity and resources.

Functional DDMAs are absent from the disaster response system.

Ironically, a debilitated authority is tasked with building the capacity of other local actors. The district authority’s functions include organising specialised disaster management training programmes for officers, employees, and volunteer rescue workers in the district. It is also responsible for facilitating community training and awareness programmes, and setting up a mechanism for early warning and the dissemination of accurate information to the relevant authorities and the public. These functions require a round-the-year plan with dedicated financial, technical and human resources. Sadly, no district authority carries out these functions. Sensing this lack of capacity, NDMA’s national monsoon contingency plan this year envisages the need to “enhance the capacity of DDMAs by providing dedicated human resources and sufficient funding [and] promote training and skills development for disaster management personnel at the district level”.

District-level disaster management plans require serious attention. Punjab has developed annual plans for various districts. However, the latest one is from 2022. These important plans should be revised every year. Sindh has developed Multi-Hazard Vul­ner­­-ability Risk Assess­ment-based disaster management plans for all districts for 2023-32. But, with the rapidly changing climate, 10-yearly plans will become obsolete soon. These plans require critical review and revision. Jamshoro’s district plan, for instance, does not factor in the ground realities.

Manchhar Lake was a major source of disaster in 2022 but the plan makes no reference to the risk. The district is exposed to floods from the Indus as well as hill torrents from Kirthar. These sources of disaster, preventive measures and the vulnerability of communities, including Manchhar fishermen, and risks to their livelihoods are absent in the plan. DDMAs should review and update these plans using the 2022 flood disaster as a benchmark.

With their present capacity, DDMAs cannot manage complex disasters like 2022. There is an urgent need to enhance their capacity and thus enable them to tackle disasters before they unleash havoc.

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