

Floods in Uttarakhand

A New Deal Relief

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Nearly 16 lakh people in four districts of Uttarakhand (Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Rudraprayag and Garhwal) were affected by the rains and floods that ravaged the state on 16 June.¹ The death toll according to official estimates is over 5,000, thousands of people have lost their homes and livelihood² while the losses are estimated to be above Rs 3,000 crore.³ With potable water almost non-existent, hundreds of people from neighbouring villages have complained of fever and diarrhoea⁴ and despite the heroic efforts of the armed forces and members of the National Disaster Management Force, rescue work was inadequate to cover the huge disaster. It is not too early to start thinking about the nature and extent of relief and the political economy around it.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Rs 1,000 crore relief package to Uttarakhand is indeed timely and decisive: gone are the days when the central team from Delhi would visit the site to assess the loss and damage over weeks and the concerned state's team would repeatedly approach Delhi with revised demands for relief. Negotiations and party politics around the subject would go on for months embroiled in political and economic interests delaying the supply of relief and causing even more misery to the victims of the disaster. However, the Uttarakhand flood relief announcement seems to have broken this pattern. If that is so, it is now possible to think of a new deal in terms of relief packages though it has opened another area for political action around media visibility. Disasters attract the media, and the media attracts politicians. What can be the key features of a new deal? Let us draw from India's own experience.

Cash transfer to poor households is now on our national agenda. The rural development ministry as well as the Planning Commission are making efforts

to pilot cash transfers as an anti-poverty measure. Cash transfer has also worked in disaster situations in India. However, it is not on the relief agenda. The All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI) has made cash transfers to disaster victims since the 2001 Gujarat earthquake covering over nine disasters in the last 12 years and reaching up to 26,000 families. This decade-long experience shows that if planned well and independently monitored, relief as cash transfer is time- and cost-effective. Cash transfer as relief can still be misused but the misuse is easy to spot and those responsible are easier to track down.

Encouraging Response

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Save the Children, Plan, CARE and others have used cash transfer in Odisha after the 2011 floods with ECHO (European Union) funds. The experience of these long-standing international humanitarian players suggests that cash transfer as relief reduces time, transaction costs and increases household impact on recovery. In addition as Ray Kancharla of Save the Children noted at the review workshop of the 2011 floods, the impact of cash transfer on children and mothers is most encouraging. Indeed these organisations have found that women are more likely to spend the money thus received on their children's basic needs and use it for establishing new enterprises. Cash transfer has successfully been used in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami. In Pakistan, \$325 million were disbursed for flood damage compensation to over one million families in Punjab by issuing debit cards. Cash transfers can be a key feature of the new deal of relief in Uttarakhand. The national objective of financial inclusion will be even better served by such a change in the relief package.

The utilisation of central relief by the states is not always time-bound and often there is no transparency. This is not always due to corruption but because bureaucrats at the union and state level do not have the time and space to learn from the experience of others and make systemic improvement like using cash

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transfers for relief and recovery. The Uttarakhand flood is an opportunity to do so.

The relief can replace what is lost, or can be a starting point for new ways of development that is protected from the risk of disaster and is climate smart – green and clean – in the long run. No other region perhaps needs such “green development” as does the Himalayan. The work of Chandiprasad Bhatt in Uttarakhand has pointed to this need now for almost half a century. The use of solar and other forms of renewable energy in building community-level energy security cannot be ignored anymore. New homes and public buildings – schools and hospitals included – must use solar and renewable energy. I-Set, an international think tank along with the NGO SEEDS in Gorakhpur, has shown ways to build “green shelter” that has smaller carbon footprint in its construction as well as sustenance. Ashok Khosla and his team at Development Alternatives have made a case for use of eco-materials across almost every geo-agro-climatic zones of India. The Uttarakhand government has also been constructing a number of hydroelectricity power plants, but caution must be exercised to ensure that this does not cause environment degradation and exacerbate existing flood risks. The work done by Practical Action in Nepal and inspired by E F Schumacher has resulted in smaller, safer, and sustainable hydropower units for the Himalayas.

Imaginative Relief Work

Environmentalists have pointed out that the disaster in Uttarakhand was inevitable given the rampant construction, felling of trees and building of dams in the name of development. They warned that it will continue if the state does not change tracks.⁵ The time is now ripe to go from more growth to green growth and higher rate to wider spread of growth. Imaginative relief work in Uttarakhand must use solar and wind power in villages and towns and by doing so make it a model to the rest of hilly India. Initial steps must include additional forestry plantations with Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee

Act (MGNREGA) resources as a part of the relief, recovery planning, and reconstruction processes with the Rs 1,000 crore relief amount. Such large sums offer an opportunity to invest in long-term economic growth of those affected by the disasters as well as in sustainable development.

The Uttarakhand disaster should also be considered an opportunity to implement the recommendations of the State Action Plan on Climate Change of the Uttarakhand⁶ government. The Statement on the Uttarakhand Catastrophe by India Climate Justice,⁷ endorsed by a number of organisations, demands action on a number of grounds and offers valuable suggestions for integrating adaptation measures into relief and risk reduction agendas. It demands:

- That the governments at the central- and state-level retreat to a low carbon pathway of development that has equity, decent employment, and sustainability at its core.
- That the planning and construction of dams in the entire Indian Himalayas be reviewed and that all construction be halted until such a review is carried out.
- That the use of explosives in all such infrastructure development works is completely stopped.
- That given the likelihood of extreme rainfall events and other climate extremes in the future, extensive and sub-regional warning systems are put in place urgently across all the Himalayan states, the coastal areas and beyond.
- That a proper assessment of the carrying capacity of specific ecosystems is carried out.
- That the stretch from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi be declared an eco-sensitive zone without further delay.
- That a river regulation zone be enforced such that no permanent structures are allowed to be constructed within 100 metres of any river.
- That the residents and their organisations are thoroughly consulted in a democratic plan on climate change, in the revival of the local hill economy, and the generation of decent employment.
- That all working people be compensated for the loss of life and livelihood, and that urgent plans are put in place

for the revival of local livelihoods and agriculture.

- That the central government learn from the Uttarakhand catastrophe and put in place prior adaptation measures not just for the mountainous regions but beyond, the coastal and the drought-prone interiors as well.

The above 10 points throw light on key areas that must be discussed and debated by all citizens of Uttarakhand to plan their own recovery as well as shape ongoing development. The recent announcement by the Uttarakhand chief minister to start tabulating gross environment product (GEP), a measure of the health of the state’s natural resources is a welcome step. Provision of relief cannot be confined to the government but can also leverage on private sector investment such as in insurance or risk transfer pools and enterprise development. The companies that operate in Uttarakhand directly or indirectly can come forward to work with small and medium enterprises and develop new deal relief measures. In addition to providing shelter and compensation for loss of assets they can offer economic stabilisation funds to small business and for building up the business environment and local markets. They can also assist in cluster development, providing training, offer employment and mentor the business owner with equal attention devoted to enterprises run by women.

Review Tourism Sector

The tourism sector in Uttarakhand needs a review now more than ever before. Tourism officials have pointed out that the floods in Uttarakhand have affected business to the tune of 20% to 30%,⁸ and it will worsen in the coming months. It will take years to rebuild these small and micro enterprises. The losses to the informal sector enterprises and its workers could be far greater and more devastating. The United Nations Development Plan’s (UNDP) ongoing global study in Japan, Mexico and India indicates that small and medium enterprises are not only good local decentralised engines of economic growth and markets but are also builders of social capital after a disaster. The study results also

show that disasters affect them more disproportionately and therefore relief and compensation need to pay more attention to their capital skills, and market needs. Agencies such as the World Bank which are invited by the finance minister to help rebuild the economy can start with the small and medium enterprise livelihoods.

Similarly, there cannot be any better opportunity than this to offer affordable and suitable multi-hazard insurance coverage to the victims and vulnerable citizens in Uttarakhand. Priority insurance coverage for women and children, schools and education buildings, health centres and local roads, and jobs and income for women are invariably left out in the relief and preparedness efforts. Insurance coverage to these sections of citizens and sectors of economy is overdue. Tour operators may have to leave rescue of their clients to public authorities but at least they can own up to the responsibility of protecting the local economy and ecology it has used by offering insurance protection.

The ongoing study of the potential of micro-insurance to reduce risk by Micro-Save in five Asian countries with the support of the UK-based Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN) shows that the months after a disaster are the most suitable to introduce new and structural changes in risk transfer practices and institutions. Universal insurance coverage of the poor in Uttarakhand is now possible to achieve if we start thinking about a new relief package deal. Thanks to the intervention by the finance minister who asked the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) to do away with the usual seven years waiting period for the settlement of claims in cases of missing persons, the LIC will now make it easier for Uttarakhand calamity victims to obtain payment.⁹ But this is not enough; Uttarakhand needs to do more to cover more people and losses. In any case, as the National Disaster Management Authority is trying to come up with something concrete on risk transfers for India, it can consider piloting an initiative in Uttarakhand. The AIDMI has demanded universal disaster risk coverage of all poor among citizens

who hold MGNREGA cards. Relief in Uttarakhand can be a first step towards this and the General Insurance Corporation can accelerate the process.

Such a new deal relief will help in improving what seems to be a mixed performance in rescue and response after the floods. The heroic efforts of local citizens and the army are extolled side by side with stories of neglect and delay. The anger and frustration will ebb and attention will turn towards the constructive challenge of designing and implementing relief. Such a new deal will also address the growing feeling among the local citizens that too much government attention is given to the rescue of tourists at their cost.

According to media reports, when the floods struck, about 28 million tourists were visiting the state, while the local population is close to half that number.¹⁰ Most media reports only dwelt on the tragic state of pilgrims and tourists while the extent of the damage and loss to the local population was ignored and is still unclear.¹¹ The region will face a harsh winter in a few months and there is concern that people may not have enough warm clothing and food if relief and rehabilitation work does not proceed at a fast pace.¹² But urgency must not kill the need to plan better and ponder strategic actions in Uttarakhand.

Long-term Relief Needed

Relief is often confined to short-term measures and used to serve short-lived purposes. Such interpretation often aggravates or leaves existing vulnerabilities unaddressed. The State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA) constituted in 2007 needs immediate support to successfully manage the current surge in demand for relief and linking the relief with rehabilitation and long-term development so that it emerges as a strong and credible agency in the state. In the end, the performance of the National Disaster Management Authority is dependent on what the State Disaster Management Authority is capable of doing. In its performance audit report of 2013,¹³ the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) had highlighted that the

Uttarakhand SDMA had not formulated any rules, regulations, policies or guidelines for disaster management in the state. The report also highlighted that the Geological Survey of India had identified 101 of the 233 Uttarakhand villages affected by the disaster of 2008 as vulnerable, but the state did not make any arrangements for the relocation of these villages in the past five years.¹⁴ “While we have identified 101 villages in Uttarakhand which are at high risk for land-slides, we have neither money nor land to resettle them” Suneel Muttu, secretary, Department of Disaster Management admitted in September 2010.¹⁵ Can current relief measures effectively pave the path for addressing long-term risk reduction issues such as those faced by these 101 villages in the state?

Leaders for a new humanitarian action that builds on the past but takes a leap onto the future must be found. Let relief to Uttarakhand define the new generation relief package in India, one that helps victims recover faster and better, and which puts India in the leadership position for defining the future of humanitarian action in the Asia-Pacific.

NOTES

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