

Floods & Disability: Is Your Response Accessible To All?

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The year after severe floods had inundated and crippled life and the economy of Bangladesh in 1998, Dennis T Avery, Director of global food issues for the Hudson Institute of Indianapolis, USA once wrote, "Bangladesh had the worst floods in its history last year. In other words, the country suffered its worst flooding since Noah stepped off the Ark."

Bangladesh is one of the most flood-prone countries in the world. Essentially, it is a flood plain crisscrossed by approximately 230 recognized rivers, of which two huge rivers--the Ganges and the Brahmaputra--carry spring snowmelt from the towering Himalayan Mountains to the sea.

When the rivers flood, so does Bangladesh. In addition, the cyclones that frequently sweep in from the Indian Ocean can drive millions of tons of seawater over the country's coastal areas.

In the old days, in such cyclones, Bangladeshis drowned by the hundreds of thousands. Now, reinforced concrete "cyclone towers" provide refuge so people can get above the flood waters in the coastal areas. Similar flood protection dams (earth embankments) are also built around major cities and towns, preventing the perennial floodwaters from marooning them. In 1990 the country adopted a "Flood Action Plan" under which 9,143 kilometers (5,668 miles) of earth embankments were built as flood defenses. Critics feel these embankments narrow & accelerate water flow and are of dubious benefit as once in a while, these are not strong enough to cope with the onrush of heavily strong currents, and so either leak, crack or give way. People living in the rural areas, which constitute about 80% of the country, are not as lucky as their urban counterparts, and so face the challenge of coping with floodwaters almost every year.

Historical records have allowed meteorologists to study floods in Bangladesh back to 1781, showing that a major flood could be expected every seven years and a catastrophic one every 33-50 years. More detailed records since 1954 show the worst flooding since then occurred in 1974, 1987, 1988 and 1998, when 70 percent of the country was submerged in the most serious flood Bangladesh had ever seen.

Opinion is divided amongst experts on why the frequency and intensity of floods are on the rise in Bangladesh. Some put the blame principally on the increased deforestation in Nepal and the Himalayas thereby increasing topsoil run off that adds to deposition & increased siltation and flooding downstream. Some think the building of dams in India has increased the problem of sedimentation in Bangladesh. Global warming is also blamed for sea level rise, increased snowmelt & increased rainfall in the region. Urbanization of the flood plains, according to many, has increased magnitude & frequency of floods. Poorly maintained embankments leak & collapse in times of high discharge, which according to some, are the main reasons for overflow of the rivers. The fact is, whichever rates higher than the others are of least importance. They all are facts that this country needs to cope with every year. And so floods are here to stay!

The floods of 2004

This year, according to some experts Bangladesh has seen its worst flood ever. Some others believe it is yet not as bad as it had been in 1998. With 43 districts affected (out of a total of 64) and more than 60% of the country under water, with over half of the main crop (mainly rice at this time of year) being destroyed and other crops having been damaged too, with ten million people becoming homeless and 20 million more stranded without adequate food, water or medical help, with water-borne diseases (such as diarrhea & dysentery) and other skin diseases caused by the lack of clean water, rising significantly – it matters little, if this at all is or is not the worst flood ever! That may be the concern of statisticians or historians.

All that matters now is – over 400 people have died already, and if the situation cannot be brought under control soon, many more will die and continue to suffer. About 7 million families have lost, either totally or partially, all that they had owned!

With the very scanty resources that this country has, we often have to fight a crisis on its face value, concentrating all our efforts on coping with the present situation. We hardly can afford to plan for the consequences that we may be faced with in the future. Similarly with water starting to recede in most areas of the country, one may think that the major crisis is over. But most experts think that the crisis has just begun. Water borne diseases will be on the rise now. And as soon as people from the shelters start going back to what had been their homes, the rehabilitation measures will fall short by miles, considering the demands. City areas and suburbs, including the capital city of Dhaka, will experience water logging for days. Floodwaters that had entered the cities, compounded with the sewerage waters that had overflowed and submerged the low areas, will become ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Dengue and other insect borne diseases will create yet another health crisis.

In this entire catastrophically difficult situation, there is however one group of people, who by far suffer the most. They are the people with disabilities! And they constitute a ten percent of the population. Whether they cannot move about freely, see, hear, speak, feel or are intellectually challenged, they face additional challenges and barriers from the non-disabled community in their regular day to day lives. We know so little about them, understand them so briefly, consider their needs so rarely - that we care to ignore them, and at times even go as far as deny their existence altogether! Preceding, during & immediately following such disasters, we do not recognize, or even know that the people with disabilities will need some special care, or extra bit of assistance.

Starting from evacuation & rescue from affected areas, to shifting them to safer shelters and higher grounds, while during their stay in the shelter, to relief & post-disaster rehabilitation efforts – at almost every step they may need some additional attention. While planning the flood response programs, these concerns need to be addressed at every step possible.

Even though the water is receding in most places, we should still realize that many rivers, at many points are still flowing over their respective danger levels. Moreover, this year, due to a more-than-average rainfall, the floods have come about a month earlier than all the previous years. So with grave concern, many meteorological and flood experts are fearing that, around the end of August and early September, with all the other contributing factors coming into play, the worst flood is yet to come!

According to Dilruba Haider (United Nations Development Program's Dhaka-based disaster management unit), "...the combination of monsoon rain and major rivers draining through Bangladesh means that flood prevention is ultimately unachievable." "I doubt that a

permanent solution to flooding in Bangladesh will ever be found," she says. "So rather than try to stop the unstoppable we try to teach people to live through floods so that they (floods) have less impact on their lives." So the question now remains, are we at all prepared for the worst?

Making Your Flood Response Accessible To All

During a disaster of such massive scale, the government and many other organizations, either single-handedly, or jointly, open flood shelters to cater to the needs of the distressed people. Almost in all cases, these shelters are not accessible to the people with disabilities, and they benefit very poorly there. Following is a list of issues that the authorities managing an emergency disaster shelter could remember if they are sheltering people with disabilities. It is well understood that, considering the limited resources the managers have to do with, and the extremely large number of wards the managers have to cope with, they already have their hands full to the maximum limit of their capabilities. So, one should understand that this is not an exclusive list, and not all of these are absolutely mandatory, and not only for the benefit of people with disabilities. These could only make their lives a little more comfortable, and also could help the other non-disabled people and the management also. While these could be regarded as pointers, the best suggestion however could be to apply one's best common judgement at all times.

Evacuation & Rescue Issues:

For people with physical disabilities

- Persons using one crutch or a cane are capable of using stairs without special help, as long as they can hold to the handrail and find no obstacles in the way. If a person needs two crutches, carrying one of the crutches may help him or her. Assistance may also be given by opening way if the stairs or access-ways are crowded.
- People who use wheel chairs know how to move from one chair to another. Depending on the strength of their arms and body, they may do almost all the work. If you help a person on a wheel chair, do not put pressure on their limbs and chest. This may cause pain spasms and block breathing. Carrying a person over your shoulders is like sitting on their chest; this may be extremely dangerous for those individuals who also have neurological or orthopedic disabilities.

For people with hearing & speech disabilities

- Ask personnel to take extra time when communicating with people who are hearing impaired or speech impaired.
- To draw attention of people with hearing disabilities turn lights on and off several times to call their attention. Make eye contact with the person even if there is an interpreter. Place yourself facing a light source. Do not move your head and never chew gum.
- Make gestures with your face and hands to ensure your message is understood. Verify if the message was understood; if not, repeat it. Be patient. It might be difficult for the disabled person to understand the urgency of your message. If necessary, separate the person from the rest of the group. Give him or her a flashlight or portable lamp to signal where he or she is. Do not allow anybody to interrupt you or tell jokes while you are giving information about the evacuation plan.
- Use pencil and paper. Slowly write down the instructions allowing the person to read as you write them. This method is very useful when you have difficulties getting your message through and when it is impossible for you to understand what the disabled person is trying to say. If the person cannot read or write, use your imagination and draw simple sketches to explain what you are trying to communicate.

For people with visual disabilities

- To draw attention of people with visual disabilities, announce yourself loudly when you enter the room. Do not shout or talk through a third person; talk naturally and directly to the disabled person. Do not be afraid to use words like "see", "look" or "blind".
- Besides offering assistance, you should ask for the type of help the person needs.
- Always indicate what you are going to do before doing it.
- Do not grip the palm of the hand or touch the shoulder if the person is a woman. It might put her off. Hold the person gently by the wrist or forearm so that you may serve him or her as a guide.
- Encourage the person to hold you by your elbow and follow you closely. The disabled person may be able to evacuate the place walking by him or herself; however, with your help as a guide (by staying a step ahead of the person) he or she may note your reactions before obstacles.
- Make sure you indicate the presence of stairs, doors, narrow passages, ramps, etc.
- Assist the disabled person when sitting down by placing his or her hand in the back of the chair.
- If there are many people with visual disabilities in the same place, they should hold hands and follow the leader. Once safe outside the building, you must make sure that all persons are accounted for. Should there be anyone missing, leave the group under the care of other staff, and seek the missing person.

For people with learning and intellectual disabilities

- Keep in mind that people with learning deficiencies may have difficulties following orders issued by rescue workers. Because, their visual perception of instructions and written signs may be deficient or confusing.
- Their sense of orientation may be limited; therefore, they may need somebody to guide them. So information and orders should be brief. You must be very patient. Symbols and signals should be simple.
- You must talk to and treat people with learning disabilities as adults not as children. If a person is capable of understanding what is being said, then it means that he or she is in better condition than one who understands only his/her vocabulary.

For all people with disabilities

- Train personnel to regard a disabled person as the best expert in his or her disability (except for people with intellectual disabilities) and to ask a disabled person for advice before lifting or moving that person.
- Train personnel to never separate a disabled person from his or her assistive aids: wheelchairs, canes, hearing aids, medications, urinary supplies, etc.
- Train personnel to realize that a disabled person's equipment may not be working after a disaster occurs, or it may be insufficient for emergency circumstances.
- Train rescue workers to know that some people with emotional & developmental disabilities may be too unsettled to respond to instructions and directions, such as a public address announcement to evacuate an area. Some disabled people may need to be in a quiet place for a while to regain their composure; others may even try to hide from rescue workers.

Mobility and Transportation Issues:

- In neighborhoods where familiar landmarks are altered or missing due to floods, cyclones, tornadoes and/or earthquakes, some visually impaired people may need personal assistance to travel about.
- Avoid using outdoor areas that are muddy, sandy, or covered by thick grass.

- The approach to outdoor toilets should be free of stones, rubble, steps, tree roots, mud, and loose sand.
- Stock simple tools & patch-kits for repairing flat tires on wheelchairs.
- Permit people with mobility impairments the option of going to the head of long lines.
- Train staff to realize that some people have the physical ability to ride buses, but do not have the cognitive ability to learn new routes established because of a disaster.
- Train personnel to realize that some individuals with significant intellectual or learning disabilities might not understand the significance of "Keep Out" or "Danger" signs.
- During and in the early days after a disaster, locations of shelters need to be well publicized so that family & friends can search more effectively for disabled people and vice versa.

Inter-personal Communication Issues:

- Some people are non-vocal but still capable of thinking and making their needs known. Shelter staff needs to be aware, patient and creative.
- Train staff to know how to contact disability agencies, such as sign interpreter agencies and agencies that help families with at-risk infants with disabilities.
- Train staff to understand and communicate with the large number of hard of hearing people and their needs. Stock writing papers and pencils for hearing impaired people to use.
- Train staff to realize that, even the normal amount of background noise may prevent a person with a hearing impairment from understanding spoken directions & instructions.
- All shelters need information boards with notices about announcements that disabled people (or any other people in the shelter) may not hear or where not present when the announcements were made.

General Care Issues:

- Being cold and wet may have more health implications for those who are less mobile.
- Train staff not to see a disabled person as only a person needing medical services.
- Train staff to know that some disabilities may give a person the appearance of intoxication.
- Train staff to know that some disabilities in certain circumstances leads to disruptive behaviors; and how to respond appropriately when such behaviors occur.
- With floodwaters inundating all their playgrounds, children will naturally want to spend time playing and swimming in water. Parents should be advised to control the children if the surrounding water is contaminated with sewerage water. Even if the water looks clean, once the children have returned, they should be wiped dry and especially their ears need to be dried using the corner of a cloth. Persistent ear infections from contaminated water could give rise to hearing impairments.
- Ask for volunteers among other people living in the shelter to act as personal care attendants for people with disabilities, especially in cases where they are alone.

Issues beyond the shelters, relating to relief distribution:

As part of their flood response, only a handful of organizations operate flood shelters. The rest generally organize relief programs. These programs, depending on the budget and human resources available, vary from very large number of teams, with comprehensive packages, to very small-scale responses. Whatever the scale, in most cases again, the people with disabilities are usually left out of the effort. This is not done intentionally, but because the teams usually do not know where to find them.

The people with severe physical or intellectual disabilities, especially when they are adults and fully grown, are difficult to move. And so while all other people within a community are evacuating the area, often these families face a dilemma on whether to take the trouble to bring them along, or leave them behind. It is a hard decision they have to take, and often such families stay back trying to wait till the last possible minute to evacuate, but then they get trapped! Some families flee, leaving the disabled person behind. These families and the people with disabilities more than often are left out of all the relief support, which usually are distributed in the most accessible areas.

Even if the families can evacuate in time taking along the disabled person, when they reach a safer place (but not in any flood shelter whatsoever), the relief support that becomes available is far scantier than the needs. People need to stand in long queues for long hours at a stretch. This is almost impossible for most of the people with disabilities. So here too, they do not get their fair share. Mothers of disabled children, and wives of disabled husbands are torn between the moral duty to remain by the sides of their beloved ones, and stand in long queues to fetch the scanty relief that is available. They have to send their other children to fetch the share for the families. But in most cases, a far smaller packet is handed over to the children, which is not enough for the family.

So if you are not managing a shelter, but going out with a relief program instead, even then, however large or small your response and support may be, if your response is meant for actually supporting the really distressed people, then people with disabilities, and their additional plight, needs to be high on your agenda.

National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled (NFO WD), further termed as the National Disability Forum is the apex federating body of NGOs working with people with disabilities in the country. It is registered with the Department of Social Services and the NGO Affairs Bureau under the Office of the Prime Minister of the Government of Bangladesh. Initiating in 1991 with only 22 member organizations it now has a membership strength of 177, with many more waiting to be included. The Forum is concerned with looking into matters regarding the rights & privileges of people with disabilities in Bangladesh. It is the body that has earned the capacity and the recognition to play a leading role in national level coordination in Bangladesh, and as a result has been included as an Executive Member in the National Social Welfare Council & the National Foundation for the Development of Disabled Persons (NFDDP), and as a Member in the National Coordination Committee & the National Executive Committee constituted under the guidance of the Disability Welfare Act 2001, and the Inter-Ministerial task Force on Disability in Bangladesh.

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