

NEW AGE Op-Ed

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Flood figures are not mere statistics

As we plan our relief and recovery operations it will do us good to remember that 30 million floods affected, 1 million houses damaged and over hundreds of thousands people in flood shelters waiting for relief – food and water- is not mere statistics, writes Douglas Casson Coutts

There have been pictures in the paper of people clamouring for food in the shelter camps in Dhaka. Millions more suffer where camera lenses cannot reach, but are represented in the various aerial shots, hiding beneath the vast sheets of water that the Bangladesh has become.

And that is what worries me. Has the reality of the suffering and our capacity to feel for it been reduced to mere statistics and distant electronic images? I sincerely hope not yet.

The Disasters Emergency Response (DER) Group report tells us that those most severely impacted in these floods are small, marginal farmers, agricultural workers, day-labourers, rickshaw/van pullers, small traders and fishermen.

Take any disaster and it is always those with the least and most fragile of resources and thinnest of safety nets that suffer most. The impacts are not only direct but also indirect from damage to infrastructure like road and rail, disruption of communication and slowing of the market and economy.

For people just barely managing to keep their soul and body together, the spell of floods has disrupted whatever vestiges of living they had. More than 1 million have lost their homes and are scattered around the flood shelters or community buildings, or maybe trying to rebuild fragile homes where floodwaters are receding. Most go thirsty until they cannot help but drink the contaminated floodwater. Certainly the most vulnerable within a household - the aged, women and children, may become diseased and possibly die if food, water and health relief is not made available.

The floods have not only caused immediate, visible damage but have also scarred the days ahead for a long time to come. The savings of those who could save will be exhausted in buying food, fighting diseases like diarrhoea and rebuilding homes. Loss of earning opportunities does not only mean that you cannot buy today but also that you are indebted for the future.

Regaining livelihoods, for instance by either buying cattle or poultry washed away in the floods, requires cash too.

I hope the micro-credit and the banks are taking note of this and factoring this into debt-recovery plans. A household financial support package should be drafted along side any food, shelter and health relief programmes.

As the head of a UN relief and development programme in Bangladesh, I find it

extremely frustrating that the floods have pushed thousands of our beneficiaries that crawled out of the poverty back below the poverty line. To pull them back again from the brink of poverty and hunger will remain a gigantic task that we will grapple with in our Relief and Recovery Operations. That may also mean closer dovetailing of disaster mitigation in our normal, food/nutrition and development programmes; for the vicious circle of poverty often gets reinforced and perpetuated by disasters like these floods.

As we plan our relief and recovery operations it will do us good to remember that 30 million floods affected, 1 million houses damaged and over hundreds of thousands people in flood shelters waiting for relief –food and water- is not mere statistics. It is the human suffering that has accumulated through several past disasters and a state of chronic deprivation spanning several years. We need to be acting immediately and continually.

The writer is Representative , World Food Programme, in Bangladesh