

Rising waters, displaced lives

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Although Pakistan and Colombia have relatively advanced disaster management frameworks, they were unprepared and ill-equipped to assist and protect people displaced by recent floods.

Weather-related disasters, especially floods, are responsible for the largest natural disaster-induced displacements each year. Climate change is likely to exacerbate flooding and its impacts on displacement in coming decades.¹ In 2010, flash floods in Pakistan affected more than 18 million people, nine million of whom were left homeless. Meanwhile in Colombia, in December 2010 93% of the country's municipalities were experiencing floods and landslides, and by the end of 2011 close to five million people had been affected and thousands displaced, sometimes on several occasions. Significantly, these floods occurred in two countries that had extensive displacement from protracted and ongoing conflict which increased vulnerabilities and challenges.

Both Pakistan and Colombia had relatively advanced disaster management frameworks in place at the time the floods hit. Nonetheless, in both countries insufficient capacity and coordination – especially at the local level – undermined the possibility of a more timely and effective response to displacement.

In the case of Colombia, a new flood relief system with significant financial resources (Colombia Humanitaria) did not aim to bolster existing government capacity but rather to bypass it. In Pakistan, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) had few staff, a limited budget and no authority over the Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs). In both countries, lack of implementation of disaster management laws and procedures at the local level significantly hampered the response as local authorities were not only the first, but sometimes the only, responders.

The fact that the floods in both countries rolled out over extended periods meant that different

types of movements – including emergency flight and evacuation, return and, to some extent, resettlement – occurred simultaneously in different parts of the country. Yet overall, despite the overwhelming numbers of people displaced, the period of displacement proved to be relatively short-term, with most people returning within a year; people were not precluded from returning by the threat of on-going violence, and many returned even before the flood waters dissipated. However, the quick rate of return was not taken into account in the response which was overly focused on providing assistance to flood-displaced in centralised IDP camps. As one UN official noted, “By the time we finished setting up the camps, they were empty.”

Meanwhile, returning populations faced many of the same needs and vulnerabilities as when they were displaced. Most returned to houses and belongings that were severely damaged or destroyed, and were forced to live in unsafe, makeshift shelters next to their former houses without access to clean water or sanitation. The same UN official added, “We needed a returned strategy, not a return strategy.”

Given the rapid rate of return, ‘early recovery’ programmes should



Road damaged by floods in Balochistan, Pakistan, 2010.

UNHCR/N. James

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have provided an important opportunity for helping displaced populations get back on their feet more quickly and increase resilience to future shocks. Yet in both countries the early recovery phase of the response was separated from the emergency response phase, and funding for, and implementation of, early recovery programmes proved challenging. In Colombia, the slow pace of construction of shelters was of particular concern. Many families who lost homes were displaced three or four times while they awaited completion of transitional housing. Finally, failure of the governments to adequately address the risk of recurrent displacement by allowing people to return to flood-prone areas increased vulnerabilities and eroded resilience. In Pakistan, flooding the following year displaced many of the same people a second time.



In both countries, IDPs who did not return voluntarily ultimately were forced to do so as a result of government policies requiring that camps and shelters be closed after a certain period of time following the disaster, even for those who had nowhere to go, often resulting in secondary displacement.

In Colombia, the floods disproportionately affected those who had been previously displaced by the country's decades-long armed conflict. Yet because Colombia has separate government institutions for responding to people displaced by conflict and people displaced by natural disasters, and because Colombia's IDP law does not extend to

people displaced by natural disasters, none of the procedures, rights and protections Colombia has developed for providing emergency relief in the case of conflict-related mass displacements was triggered by the floods. Rather, an entirely different set of government institutions and procedures came into play, which proved far less effective.

In contrast, Pakistan places authority for responding to conflict- and natural disaster-induced displacement within the same institutions – the NDMA at the national level and PDMA at the provincial level. This institutional capacity was evident in the response to the floods in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the PDMA's experience in responding to ongoing, conflict-related humanitarian emergencies, and in working in cooperation with the international community, allowed for a far more coordinated and effective response when the floods hit.

In countries affected by both conflict and natural disasters, it is preferable to place responsibility for responding to both man-made and natural disasters within the same ministry or institution, thereby building capacity, promoting accountability, and maximising allocation of resources.

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This article draws upon Refugees International's research and observations in Pakistan and Colombia in 2010 and 2011.²

1. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre *Global Estimates 2012: People displaced by disasters* www.internal-displacement.org/publications/global-estimates-2012
2. Refugees International 'Pakistan: Flood Survivors Still Struggling to Recover' 2011 www.refugeesinternational.org/policy/field-report/pakistan-flood-survivors-still-struggling-recover
'Colombia: Flood Response Improves, But Challenges Remain' 2012 http://refugeesinternational.org/sites/default/files/032712_Colombia_Response%20letterhead.pdf