Disaster Response for Children after Kashmir Floods

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Abstract

The article shall provide a brief overview of children-focused disaster response activities conducted in the aftermath of the Kashmir Floods, 2014. Children are exceptionally vulnerable to disasters. Their needs are to be adequately addressed by disaster response programs carried by the government and non-government organizations (NGOs). The article shall explore and quantify responses of families towards comprehensive disaster response plan based on children specific relief material, child-friendly spaces and non-formal education camps that ameliorated the situation of floods-affected children.

Keywords: Children, Disaster Response, Kashmir Floods, Child-Friendly Spaces, Child-Specific Relief Materials

INTRODUCTION

Incessant rains in September, 2014 lead to the worst floods in Kashmir region of India. It is estimated that 5 million people across 2600 villages were affected by the floods, including 2.2 million children. The capital city, Srinagar, Budgam, Anantnag and Baramulla were the worst affected districts. The local government was not prepared to effectively respond for rescue, relief, and rehabilitation. Therefore, humanitarian agencies played a vital role in disaster response, especially focusing on children.

Children typically represent 50-60% of those affected by disasters.[1] Post-disaster phase can create situations of household displacement, disrupted food supply, contaminated water sources etc. that can not only result in malnutrition and epidemics but also have lasting psychological effects on the population. It has also been observed that after natural disasters schools often shutdown which disrupts the normal routine of children. The aftermath of a disaster is often marked by altered family relationships. Normally confident and protective adults may show terror, shock, and
fear, which can affect their relationships with each other and with their children. This can be in response to stressors like the loss of a family member, loss of property, uncertainties regarding the future etc. With the disruption of regular school activities children may find themselves more exposed to the response of their parents and other older family members to these stressors, which can impact their mental health and cause issues like withdrawal, lack of cooperation, sadness, anxiety, reckless, fear of the dark and feelings of guilt.

After Hurricane Katrina, work towards improving disaster preparedness done in the high schools, day care centers and pre-schools of Florida. [2] A formal disaster plan was designed by emergency management planners to identify the needs of the most vulnerable children and accommodate appropriate responses for disaster. This was an attempt to codify the emotional response of children and identify the least desirable emotional response. Further research through various sample surveys indicated that there was a strong need to train child care personnel to enable them to address the emotional needs of the children in their care after the disasters. Through this training program, by National Child Traumatic Network, child care personnel were trained to identify and address any unusual behavior among the children.

The faith-based organization can take a lead for children focused disaster response. [3] In a post-disaster situation children who are left with no surviving family are especially vulnerable to trafficking and child labor. Relief organizations can assist these survivors to cope with traumatic experiences by mobilizing volunteers who have experience working with children and organizing specialized training sessions to prepare them on how to interact with and assist children who are victims of disasters. Childcare centers should be established where children with similar experiences are accommodated as individual, unaccompanied children may get overlooked in relief camps. They should be encouraged to share and talk through various interactive group activities. Children build a sense of safety and trust by sharing common experiences with other children who have the same traumatic experience.

Children with disability are more vulnerable to disasters than their counterpart.[4] The disaster response plans should accommodate the need of these children. From the social vulnerability perspective, children with disability are more likely to have post-traumatic disorder and stress due to disaster. Raising a disabled is often stressful for the parents. Families with high poverty rates who may not be able to afford specialized education may prefer that their children find some sort of work to support themselves and their family financially. Children with disabilities are more susceptible to exploitation, child labor, and trafficking, in a post-disaster scenario. To protect them from exploitation, the disaster response phase should include medical support for children, outline social network support and ensure educational protection.

Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) is an important medium for NGOs to initiate interventions among disaster-affected communities.[5] The CFS is considered the entry point for NGOs as it acts as a physical space or structure that symbolizes the well-being for children. It works towards the psychosocial well-being of children through interactive group activities and counseling sessions with trained psychologists. CFS is the first step towards non-formal education for a disaster affected community, especially when the schools are damaged as a result of the
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By interacting with their former classmates, children share common experiences, which enables a long-term recovery for children. It helps in identifying the children who are most vulnerable in the aftermath of disasters, including those that are disabled, ones who have lost their parents or other family members or those that belong to low-income households. Counselors can identify these vulnerable children and present their cases to the NGO officials. These officials can use this information to initiate short or long term interventions like providing medical attention to children or livelihood support programs for the parents. In certain cases, due to limited allocation of funds for disaster recovery, school reconstruction may take time. In such a scenario, formal education can begin through CFS within the community. CFS can provide disaster preparedness skills and encourage communities to document their own disaster risk reduction plan. CFS should be created through community participation and consultation to build a sense of ownership and involvement among the community members. Involving the parents in the planning phase is important so as to build their confidence regarding the safety and well-being of their children within these spaces. In a post-disaster scenario, it is likely that the community may have eroded most of its resources due to which an external agency may allocate funds to improve the CFS. After the formation of CFS, roles and responsibilities of the locals regarding its budget and management should be clearly defined. Support of the local government is essential for the smooth formation and future maintenance of these spaces. CFS are to be inclusive and non-discriminatory. While building the CFS proximity to settlements of religious and ethnic minorities should be ensured. Children from these vulnerable groups may face discrimination from the dominant class, therefore, the CFS animator (care-taker) should be given proper training to deal with children from minority groups. Ideas of inclusivity and accommodation should be discussed with the children. In case there are multiple religious groups within the CFS, there should be enough liberty for each group to conduct its prayers and religious activities. The CFS should be accessible to children with disabilities. CFS animators need to ensure that all children, especially those that belong to vulnerable groups, feel comfortable and included. In case, the number of children attending the CFS are more than the space permits, classes should be held in rotation. These classes should have representation from all the minorities. Regular Monitoring and Evaluation activities need to be conducted within these spaces. Special staff, who can identify the gaps in logistics, resources and community mobilization need to be appointed. Monitoring is necessary to evaluate the improvement that children have gone through after the implementation of various activities in CFS. At the beginning of operation, CFS may include a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation plan after consultation with a local, active agencies. This plan should evaluate the behavioral development among children of different age groups, to understand the state of their psychosocial well-being and their recovery process. The children who are not participants or are missing sessions held in the CFS should also be monitored so that the program can be strengthened and improved. Monitoring will establish a certain code of conduct and permissible behavior during CFS sessions. It shall develop measurable indices to calculate the improvements in psycho-social well-being of children and enable the quantification of the resulting data to enable the identification
Continuation of education during an emergency is a challenging initiative. Education in Emergency (EiE) project in Bangladesh established 1000 primary schools across ten of its district to ensure that education continued even during the floods and cyclone. [6] This was done through programs where school staff members were trained to develop a contingency and preparedness plan to ensure the continued functioning of education systems during emergencies. A strategy known as alternative learning practice was introduced wherein it was expected that teachers avoid any leave and continue classes in any scenario. In case, teachers were unable to attend a class, a complimentary class was taken by other staff members so that no one missed out on important lessons. Parents were encouraged by the schools to send their children regularly to attend classes. Therefore, by developing a simple contingency and preparedness plan, schools in Bangladesh could continue education after natural disasters.

Children’s capacity development for disaster response is an essential part of Child-Centered DRR.[7] Children should be empowered through disaster preparedness knowledge, be given access to resources, and provided with equitable support, to maximize their resilience against disasters. The idea that children are completely dependent on adults for their survival during a disaster undermines inherent capacities like knowledge, creativity, and energy within children. Well-trained children on their own can take important actions that may be beneficial for the well-being of entire families during disasters. Children in Andhra Pradesh province of India conduct disaster mock drills that include rescue and first aid activities. Children in Sri Lanka are trained to participate in mapping their schools and identifying safe evacuation routes during disasters. Training children not only helps improve individual resilience but is also an important method of disseminating crucial disaster-related information to their family members and the community at large, creating capacities to deal with the aftermath of a disaster. Students who have school-based hazard education training are better equipped to deal with disasters and are less fearful than their counterparts as they have a better idea of risk perception than their peers.

METHODOLOGY
The interviews were carried out at a time when 6-month-long relief phase was ending. It includes field visits to 26 villages and wards across 4 flood-affected districts of the Kashmir Valley including Anantnag, Budgam, Pulwama, and Srinagar. 412 families were interviewed between the periods of 19th February, 2015 to 21st March, 2015. The areas for monitoring were geographically targeted to include the regions most affected by the floods and, drew upon existing operational presence and partnerships. Respondents included families with children, orphans, pregnant and lactating women, widows and disabled members. Interviewees also included people who were living in extreme poverty and that had more challenges after the flooding due to limited resources. The questionnaire for the interview consisted of 14 open-ended questions. The questions were based on quality and quantity of flood-relief material for children, how they are/were used by the children and what is the major impact of that on the
well-being of the children. The respondents were encouraged to freely express their opinions. Questions like “whether the product was child-friendly” were also posed to children for a better feedback about child specific supports. The major challenge was the severe winter in Kashmir. Heavy snow and cold weather limited mobility of the monitoring team in many ways. Moreover, culturally guests have less access to spaces belonging to women and children so the interviewers were sensitized to respect gender-specific mobility and space and build rapport before the interviews. Among the 412 families interviewed, 40.5% of the respondents were females and 40.8% of the interviews contain opinions of children. 7.5% families had expectant mothers and/or babies less than 1 year old during the time of the floods. And the respondents include 3.9% of women-headed families and 2.4% of families with a disability. Although the size of families varied from 2 members to 20 members, 60% of families had 4 – 6 members. The number of children in the family varied from 0 to 9 in which 68.9% of families had 1 to 3 children.

**FINDINGS**

Respondents stated that they faced an enormous amount of losses because of the floods. 42.2% people had completely lost their house and 57.8% people had reported partial damage. 28.6% respondents also mentioned the financial challenges they were facing. The respondents who lost their agricultural fields after the floods shared their concerns about food insecurity and their experiences of compromising on quality and quantity of the food they were consuming.

Most of the interviewed families received multiple relief items. Non-food items had the biggest coverage among respondents (347 families), which was followed, by Hygiene Kits (223 families), Food Items (192 families), Shelter Material (74 families) and Education Kits (68 families). We observed that shelters were given to the most marginalized families, with fully damaged houses. Among the 74 respondents who received shelter material, 94.6% stated that their houses were completely damaged and 5.4% reported partially damaged houses (which were not suitable for living).

Respondents, in general, were happy with the timing of the distribution. 98.3% of the respondents reported that the support was on-time and only 1.7% respondents gave the opinion that the timing was not appropriate. We believe that this could be because of the priorities during immediate response which included the most vulnerable families. Therefore other families might feel that they were left out, although these families were also covered in the second phase of relief.

It should be noted that during the early emergency phase, the priority was to supply essential food commodities so other materials such as Pheran (local winter clothing) and household items were supplied later. When respondents were asked about the quality of material, the most common response was “Asal!” (Very good in Kashmiri). Respondents were happy with the quality of material and the highest level of satisfaction was observed in Srinagar and Pulwama (both 100%). 4.0% people in Budgam and 2.8% people in Anantnag had some complains about the quality of relief material related with Solar Lights (battery back-up), Tarpaulin Sheets and so on but the overall satisfaction level was very high. All the respondents had a common
opinion that materials were very helpful. The most loved items were the Solar Lights, both the Mini Solar Lights for children and the larger ones for the use of the whole family. 34% of the respondents picked it as their favorite item while 17.5% people mentioned that “everything was useful”. After the floods the electricity supply was disrupted for a long time and most of the visited villages had electricity back in December 2014. So the families found Solar Light as the most useful item during this period. Due to bad road connectivity, there was a shortage of food supply so 10.7% people mentioned that food material was the most useful thing. The cold weather was a major reason for 14.8% of the people mentioning that the blankets were one of an essential relief material. Among the 412 families interviewed, 361 families had children. 99.17% of these families had the opinion that the material provided was child-friendly. The most important material for the children was the Solar Light – which allowed them to study in the evening. Children also mentioned that they really liked the Education Kits that included Study Material - like Pencils, Pens, Notebooks, a School Bag and an Umbrella. Some children commented that they “liked the smell of soap and shampoo” which were included in the Hygiene Kits. Respondents were of the opinion that the material supplied at the time of flood response was enough for them at that time, but now they have more expectations. 88.8% people suggested that the material was enough and 11.2% people believed that the relief material was not enough. We observed that the bigger households with members more than 6 had lesser satisfaction (80.8%) towards the quantity of material as compared to families with 4 to 6 members (92.7%) and small families with less than 4 members (91.4%). The respondents of the bigger households were of the opinion that food especially rice was usually less for them. Also, relief material including Blankets, Pheran and Thermal Wear were usually not enough for the large households. At the time of the interviews, the respondents were still using most of the material that was supplied, except food which was over. The materials still in use were the Non-Food Items including, Solar Lights, Blankets, and Hygiene Kits. During winter, power failure for time periods that can extend for a week or two is common after heavy snowfalls. In such a scenario the Solar Light proved to be essential for the families. Interestingly, it was observed that the Education Kits had a very low usage. Only 2.4% responders mentioned it. This result could be because a significant number of the respondents were adults and did not remember to mention the Education Kits since children were the target and actual users. The shelter was mentioned by only 4.4% respondents, but it does not undermine its utility. The reason why Solar Light had such a high response could be because of its higher visibility and as it was an item that was used by all family members everyday in comparison to other items which were meant to be used by certain family members such as Education Kit, Sanitary Napkins, etc.

The most common response for the significance of the material/support was that people could not imagine life without the support. Responses included “starvation”, “death”, “hard times” without relief. A high number of respondents (77.2%) mentioned that their suffering would have increased after the flood if there was no
support on time. 4.6% families stated that they would have faced food-related hardships while and 0.97% families said that they might have to take more loan which would increase the financial burden on them. 3 families suggested that their children may not be able to continue education without the support and start doing manual labor work.

Most of the respondents (94.7%) mentioned no difficulties while using relief materials. 5.3% respondents mentioned that they had problems while using some of the relief material. 14 respondents (3.3%) said that their Solar Light was not working anymore. We observed that there are only two cases when Solar Lights were not well functional since beginning and most of the problems started occurring after a month of usage. This could be because in winter there is less sun shine so Solar Lights do not get charged properly. 1 respondent said that Atta Wheat Flour was not of good quality. Another respondent suggested that tarpaulin had holes and buckets were broken. One Mini Solar Light stopped working after a child broke it.

In general, respondents are very satisfied with the distribution process and they all have signed the relevant documents including muster-rolls, family cards, coupons etc. In response to the question whether they had signed all the documents and they were informed properly, 100% respondents mentioned “yes.” The respondents were happy with the Village-Level Child Protection Committee Members who were always there to help them during the distribution process. People stated that the distributions that were organized within the CFS were more efficient as compared to those that were conducted in other locations. People waited at distribution venues for ½ to 1½ hour to receive the material, which they found was a reasonable time period. Some families in Humzapore village (Anantnag) shared that they had difficulties in arranging transport back to the village.

**CONCLUSION**

The respondents were happy with the support they had received so far and had more expectations for future recovery programs. Education related support was a major demand from the beneficiaries (34.2%). Parents, as well as children, expected Winter Education Camps and Child-Friendly Space (CFS) centers to be continued, so that they can get an affordable education and study material. In the aftermath of the flood in the aftermath of the flood, there was a need to replace School Uniforms, School Shoes, Textbooks, and other Study Material which were damaged/washed by the floods. School fees were also due. However, most parents stated that they could not afford these expenses due to financial losses incurred after the disaster.

Food is still a big challenge especially among large households (34.5%). People who lost their agricultural fields expect livelihood related support such as the provision of seeds and fertilizers (23.5%). People who lost their houses required support such as cement bags and bricks for house reconstruction (17%). District-wise, in Anantnag (33.3%) and Pulwama (40.2%) educational support was a top priority, whereas in Budgam (36.5%) and Srinagar (45.6%) people expected more food/nutrition related support. We collected many positive responses from our field visits regarding the flood response work.
The most useful thing was certainly the Solar Light as there was a shortage of power supply after the floods. Children feel more “safe” when they have Solar Lights. They could study or play for longer hours in the evening even without electricity. We observed that the children talked happily about the Thermal Wears, Pherans or Study Material that they received in the CFSs and Winter Education Camps. Thanks to the clothing material that they received, the children could go to CFS to play, draw or do something interesting even during cold weather. CFS serve as an informal platform for child related issues and provide them a safer space within the communities.

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