

Bridging divides: towards effective disaster preparedness and response in Kashmir

Shafat Ahmad

Summary

- In Kashmir¹, where governance structures and social relations between different groups are fragile due to conflict, practical mechanisms involving civil society-government partnerships and collaborative processes for preparedness and response should be implemented as part of an ongoing strategy to confront natural disasters.
- Preparing for and allowing collaborative responses to take place across the Line of Control (LoC) will make disaster responses vastly more effective, saving lives and also contributing to building confidence among diverse constituencies and stakeholders – in particular those most vulnerable living close to the LoC.
- Disaster preparedness should be mainstreamed into society. Recognising that this is a long-term ambition, steps should be taken to allow for a paradigm shift from crisis management to early response, enabling those likely to be impacted by natural disaster to be far better prepared to confront them and mitigate their impact.
- Responses to disasters must be conflict sensitive, gender sensitive and region specific (taking into account the geography, culture and language of different regions).

Introduction

The need for cross-LoC disaster preparedness and response

Natural disasters present both opportunities and threats for peace. In the highly securitised and controlled context of Kashmir, the failure to address underlying conflict dynamics in society can impede collective efforts towards disaster response and preparedness; and ineffective responses to natural calamities can sometimes exacerbate existing tensions and conflict dynamics. But disasters can also open up space for opportunities to effect larger change and even for conflict to be mitigated.

The region of Kashmir is prone to natural disasters. Recent natural disasters in this region have generated debates on preparedness, management and ways to mitigate damage. Yet, given the magnitude and frequency of disasters, rehabilitation and prevention measures have on the whole been insufficient. Furthermore, Kashmir's divided nature makes responses all the more difficult.

Improving disaster responses would greatly benefit people on both sides of the LoC and a large number of lives could be saved as a result. This would be all the more impactful and effective - capacities and

management could be enhanced exponentially - if cross-LoC collaborative management mechanisms for responding to disasters were supported and implemented.

This would also have immense value in terms of people-to-people contact - moving away from adversarial relations and divisions towards collaboration and cooperation. Measures for collaborating to both prepare for and respond to natural disasters would contribute to dismantling the thinking that supports the highly securitised division of the region and to creating the trust which is essential for the region's progress.

If local capacities are supported and communities within the different regions across the LoC in Kashmir develop to become more resilient, then responses which are far more timely and effective would be possible. Such resilience would enable communities to better confront other types of issues or challenges (including those relating to conflict and social and political tensions).

Regardless of the political positions of India and Pakistan or those of different groups within Kashmir with regards to the Kashmir issue, the need to improve how to confront natural disasters effectively in the region is extremely pressing and patent.

1. The term 'Kashmir' is used to refer to all the regions of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. These include the India-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir (which consists of Jammu, the Kashmir Valley, and Ladakh), and the Pakistan-administered territories of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan.

Map of Jammu and Kashmir region



Interface between natural disasters and conflict

Natural disasters can lead to the exacerbation of pre-existing communal, religious and political faultlines in society. As peacebuilding organisation International Alert explains:

“Disasters can overburden and undermine the capacity of already fragile institutions to adequately respond, heightening grievances among communities. Disasters particularly impact fragile and conflict-affected contexts, as the capacity of institutions – both governmental and in society – to prevent and respond to disasters is weak.”²

During the 2014 floods in India-administered Kashmir (IaK), the limitations of the government’s capacity to handle the situation and the existing political sentiment among people in the Kashmir Valley hindered relief and rehabilitation efforts in the affected regions. The result was a sentiment

among certain groups in the Kashmir Valley, of being further alienated, and a sense of frustration at the government’s inability to effectively confront the challenges.

The existence of the LoC isolates the many remote areas on both sides of Kashmir which remain inaccessible due to extreme weather conditions or difficult terrain. These areas are more prone to disasters, but have restricted access and comparatively less infrastructure. Furthermore, many of the families living along the LoC are divided (some members of which reside on the Pakistani side and others on the Indian side). Poor responses to natural disasters can further marginalise the population of these areas.

Opportunities to ‘build back better’?

In spite of the negative impact, disasters can also provide opportunities to ‘build back better’ – both in terms of building more adequate infrastructure and robust buildings and also in terms of strengthening community resilience. Under the

2 Mitra, Shreya, and Vivekanada, Janani. Compounding Risks: Disaster, Fragility and Conflict. London: International Alert (2015).

History of natural disasters in Jammu and Kashmir

- Over the past 40 years, South Asia has faced as many as 1,333 disasters that have killed 980,000 people, affected 2.4 billion lives and damaged assets worth US\$105 billion.³ Risks of natural disasters are particularly severe in the Himalayan sub-region of Kashmir.

Kashmir 2005 earthquake

- The earthquake of 8 October 2005 mainly hit the Muzaffarabad, Bagh, and Poonch districts in Azad Jammu and Kashmir in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (PaK), and Kupwara & Uri (Baramulla) in the Kashmir Valley in India-administered Kashmir (IaK), impacting both sides of Kashmir across the LoC, although the major damages were suffered in PaK.⁴
- The earthquake was the deadliest in the recent history of the sub-continent; it resulted in more than 80,000 fatalities, left 200,000 people injured and more than 4 million people homeless.
- In northern Pakistan and PaK, the earthquake had a huge impact on the education sector: 17,000 students died at school, and 50,000 were

seriously injured, many disabled; 10,000 school buildings were destroyed and a total of 300,000 children were affected. In some districts, 80% of schools were destroyed.⁵

Other major disasters

- On 18 February 2005 a snowstorm occurred in the villages of Waltengu Nad, Pachgam and Nigeenpora Kulgam district in IaK, claiming 175 lives (54 men, 48 women and 73 children). The incident also led to significant loss of livestock.
- A cloudburst in Leh, Ladakh in IaK in August 2010 resulted in a devastating flash flood, killing more than 250 people and damaging properties worth crores of rupees.⁶
- The September 2014 floods in IaK were some of the worst to hit the state in over 100 years. The death toll after the floods was at 280, and 253,000 houses were damaged in the state. More than 2,500 villages and a total of 17 out of the 22 districts in IaK were affected by the floods, flash floods, landslides and prolonged water logging.⁷

right circumstances, natural disasters can actually contribute to restoring trust, increasing empathy among divided groups through shared grief, and can enable those affected to learn from one another. They can thus contribute to strengthening or building relationships. In an environmentally fragile and conflict-ridden region like Kashmir, natural disasters can create opportunities for increased cooperation and understanding within and between the communities on either side, and across the LoC. Indeed, the 2014 floods brought people together across divides: several volunteer response groups were formed spontaneously, especially among youth,

and there were vast efforts among civil society, but also by state actors, to respond to the floods.

During the disasters that have impacted Kashmir, there has also been a desire among many to collaborate, respond and provide relief across the LoC. However, there have not been any meaningful or substantial ways to plan for or respond to disasters that transcend the LoC and allow divided communities to support one another. Joint disaster preparedness and impact mitigation could create opportunities for building peace and trust among communities and governments.

Confidence building measures: from trade to disaster management?

The peacebuilding potential of collaboration in conflict contexts lies at the heart of 'confidence building measures' (CBMs). The Center for

Strategic and International Studies defines CBMs as "measures that address, prevent, or resolve uncertainties among states."⁸ CBMs are designed

3 Sharma, Suman. Existential Threat to Human Security in South Asia and Regional Response: A case study of Climate Change and SAARC Initiatives. World International Studies Committee (2011), 573.

4 Earthquake Engineering Research Institute (EERI). Learning from Earthquakes: First report of the Kashmir Earthquake of October 8, 2005. Oakland, CA: EERI (2005). See also the United States Geological Survey record of the earthquake at <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eqinthenews/2005/usdya/#details>

5 Petal, Marla. Disaster Prevention for Schools: Guidance for Education Sector Decision-Makers. Geneva: United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (2008).

6 Jammu & Kashmir Environmental Information System. Recent Disasters. Available at: http://www.jkenvis.nic.in/disaster_recent.html

7 Oxfam. Jammu and Kashmir Floods. Available at: <https://www.oxfamindia.org/kashmirfloods>. See also Indian Red Cross. Unprecedented Havoc in Jammu & Kashmir: Report. Available at: <http://www.indianredcross.org/press-rel13-sep2014.htm>

8 Glaser, Bonnie, Confidence Building Measures. Center for Strategic and International Studies (N.D.): <http://csis.org/programs/international-security-program/asia-division/cross-strait-security-initiative-/confidence-b>

to avert an escalation of hostilities and build trust over the long term. They are especially suited to protracted political stalemates which require buy-in at multiple levels for peace processes to gain support and be productive.

“If the LoC can be opened for trade and travel, why not during the time of disasters so that relief and response efforts can be more effective? It matters most for those living close to the LoC.”

Javed – Resident of Uri, India-administered Kashmir

In October 2005, when Kashmir was hit by one of the worst earthquakes ever to impact South Asia, five crossing points were opened along the LoC between the India-administered and Pakistan-administered regions of Kashmir to facilitate the flow of humanitarian and medical aid to the affected regions. The opening up of the LoC during this humanitarian crisis was a historic move that further enabled the initiation of travel (in 2005) and limited trade (in 2008) between the two sides – CBMs agreed by the governments of India and Pakistan as part of their overall peace process. The cross-LoC travel and trade processes, as well as the ceasefire along the LoC (reached in 2003 and largely respected since then), constitute the two main Kashmir-specific CBMs between India and Pakistan. These CBMs remain a key factor within the broader regional dynamics

which keeps open the possibility of constructive engagement between the governments, as well as providing opportunities for Kashmiris to be brought into the wider peace process.

The cross-LoC trade has by and large continued since 2008, even at moments of escalating tensions between India and Pakistan. This trade process nurtures hope and encouragement for the overall peace process and some claim it is the single biggest achievement of India-Pakistan dialogue in Kashmir.⁹ As well as creating new possibilities for relationships – economic, cultural and even political – the trade is saving lives by deterring the Indian and Pakistani armies from combat in the areas where it takes place. In order to safeguard and consolidate the process, the Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industries (JCCI), a shared representative organisation that binds all major chambers and business organisations and LoC trade organisations, was formed and consolidated. This was a milestone in institutionalising the CBM between the two sides.¹⁰ There are also demands coming from certain groups and lobbies to open up travel and trade on the other historical routes across the LoC, such as Kargil-Skardu and Nowshera-Khoirata.

⁹ Senguptal et.al. Cross-Line of Control Trade Peacebuilding and economic potential. Conciliation Resources (2012).

¹⁰ Ibid.

Guiding principles for CBMs

The success of existing CBMs like cross-LoC trade and travel provides some guiding principles that could help inform opportunities for cooperation and collaboration in relation to disaster preparedness and response. These highlight what practical efforts are required to make CBMs which are initiated and supported by the governments more effective and meaningful on the ground.

Local ownership - CBMs involve sensitisation among a range of stakeholders so that the measures are locally grounded and can earn broad based support and appeal.

Support structures - In order for CBMs to make a difference on the ground they need to be supported by local institutions and infrastructure. For instance, in the case of cross-LoC trade, the Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industries supports the process and advocates for more effective trade policies.

Wide range of stakeholders - CBMs relating to disaster response should involve a wide range of stakeholders. This is a way of bringing a larger number and more diverse range of people into peacebuilding and broadening support for the peace process.

Strong communication channels - Establishing channels of communication between different actors across conflict divides enhances coordination, confidence and efficiency of effort.

Ongoing coordination - Sustaining mutual trust in the implementation of joint responses requires the organisation of ongoing coordination mechanisms and processes with key institutions and stakeholders, to demonstrate reliable, accountable and trustworthy patterns of behaviour.

Suggested points for action

Increased collaboration for disaster response

- A mechanism should be agreed between the Indian and Pakistani governments for the opening up of the LoC in cases of humanitarian crises. Recognising that the LoC is often vulnerable to military hostilities and escalation, this could also be an opportunity for a CBM to be established between the militaries.
- The crossings (on the Uri-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakot routes) which are already open and used for limited trade between both sides of the LoC should also be used to facilitate rescue and relief efforts in the case of natural disasters. These could be used by civil society as well as the governments on both sides in order to allow relief and aid to be more efficiently distributed.
- Other LoC crossings (such as the Chilyana-Teetwal crossing in Neelum Valley and the Kargil Skardu road between Gilgit-Baltistan and Ladakh) could also be used to facilitate rescue and relief efforts.
- Facilitated dialogue among diverse stakeholders in Kashmir could contribute to disaster preparedness and response. Keeping in mind the regional diversity of Jammu and Kashmir, it is important that an inter-regional as well as intra-regional dialogue is initiated to sensitise communities about the need and importance of disaster preparedness and to explore ideas for collaborative responses to disasters. Such dialogues would generate discourse at various levels of society and help in materialising the development of pragmatic and collaborative early warning and disaster response mechanisms.

Information sharing and joint hazard mapping

Information sharing is essential before, during and after natural disasters.

- Systems for sharing information on hydrological, meteorological and seismological trends could be linked up across the LoC. This could involve the disaster management authorities on either side – including the AJK State Disaster Management Authority, the Gilgit-Baltistan Disaster Management Authority in PaK and the Jammu & Kashmir Disaster Management authority in IaK.
- Engagement with academia would support information sharing and the sensitisation of youth groups. University departments such as geology, earth sciences, environmental studies and engineering are the most relevant to engage with in this regard. The cross-LoC Consortium of Vice Chancellors, an informal platform that supports collaboration among higher education establishments across both sides of Kashmir, could contribute to further disaster management-specific academic collaboration in terms of information sharing and training and working with youth.
- Experts in natural disaster mapping or university departments related to natural disasters from both sides should share information for joint hazard mapping. In particular, university centres should have a significant role in inputting into disaster preparedness and response efforts.
- Deciding upon appropriate and effective means for communication in disaster scenarios is crucial, as telephone signals are often unattainable. For example in remote areas like Neelum Valley in PaK and some areas of the Ladakh and Kupwara districts in IaK, sirens and loudspeakers could be ways of providing immediate warnings to communities when other communication methods are not effective.
- In areas where people have access to mobile telephone services, telecom companies should be engaged as key actors in issuing warnings with the help of database-generated SMS alerts. These could be provided to key actors on either side of the LoC. Telecom corporations can be motivated to include this as a component of their Corporate Social Responsibility.
- Villages across the LoC could be connected through a model of 'twinning'. This could enable the villages or groups linked on either side of the LoC to better share information with one another. Although communication can be more difficult at times of crises, this system could enable risks and threats to be more adequately communicated directly between those communities affected by natural disasters, as well as sharing information following disasters on the needs of the communities in terms of rescue and relief.

Improved coordination mechanisms at various local, regional intra and inter-Kashmir levels

- A network of different actors – embedded within and spearheaded by university departments – could aim to map out and respond to the basic needs of all villages in terms of equipment and infrastructure for disaster response, as well as working with governments to respond to these. Monthly or bi-monthly meetings could provide a forum for such a network to take shape.
- Increased coordination between the meteorological departments who issue warnings and media outlets on both sides could help to adequately communicate risks and, at the same time, avoid undue panic being provoked.
- Some of the mechanisms used for conducting travel and trade across the LoC – such as registers and communication channels between civilian authorities - could be replicated or utilised for information sharing in relation to natural disasters.
- Improving coordination within local governments on both sides, and between local governments and civil society would contribute to the efficacy of responses. There should be more opportunities for local disaster management authorities to interact with and work more closely with communities.

Strengthened institutional and civil society capacities to confront disasters

- Strengthening institutional frameworks would improve pre and post disaster management within the local governments, among civil society and between civil society groups and the local governments on both sides. This includes providing practical training for civil servants, civil society and communities.
- Trainings in first aid and disaster preparedness should be conducted for young people at different levels, in each of the respective regions of Kashmir as well as cross LoC joint trainings. These joint trainings could focus on how to practically instigate effective collaborative responses across the LoC.
- International actors and donors could play a key role in facilitating increased collaboration across the divided regions of Kashmir through supporting and funding joint activities to prepare for disasters – such as first aid and relief and rescue training.
- The military forces of India and Pakistan have played a major role in rescuing and delivering relief to communities in previous disasters in the Kashmir region on their respective sides. Training for the militaries in conflict and gender-sensitive responses could enable their role to be all the more effective and impactful. The efforts of the military should be properly coordinated with civilian government efforts, as well as those of civil society and should be defined by humanitarian principles.

Sensitisation and awareness raising

- As well as contributing to a CBM and responding to the conflict context of Kashmir, ideas of preparedness should be mainstreamed into society so that a culture of safety and resilience can be instilled across the region. For this, efforts should be made by the civilian administrations, education departments and civil society organisations to facilitate public education and increase awareness of risk. To contribute to this:
 - Information, such as places to go in case of emergency and emergency contact numbers, could be publically displayed on billboards and in buildings such as mosques, temples and community centres.
 - Such buildings could also be used in a more organised way to provide spaces for people to gather in case of emergencies.
 - Disaster management departments could do a yearly awareness raising campaign on disaster preparedness and response.
 - Youth and women's groups, civil society organisations and media houses could provide platforms for sensitising the communities and for raising their awareness about disaster risk and management.
 - Drills could be practised and integrated into curricula in schools, universities and work places. First aid and disaster response, as well as sports like swimming and boating, could also be made a more significant and regular part of the school curriculum, which would mean that children and young people are vastly better prepared for dealing with floods and earthquakes.

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About Conciliation Resources

Conciliation Resources is an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We provide advice, support and practical resources to help divided communities resolve their differences peacefully. In addition, we take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.

Conciliation Resources

Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road
London NW5 1AL
United Kingdom

Telephone +44 (0)20 7359 7728
Email cr@c-r.org
Website www.c-r.org

[Facebook.com/ConciliationResources](https://www.facebook.com/ConciliationResources)
[Twitter.com/CRbuildpeace](https://twitter.com/CRbuildpeace)

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About the Kashmir Initiative Group

The Kashmir Initiative Group is an intra-Kashmir peacebuilding platform which aims to build bridges between community perspectives and policymakers. The group is made up of residents of Jammu and Kashmir with deep commitment to peace and stability in the region. The members, drawn from diverse backgrounds and regions, engage in peacebuilding through informed discussions, research and analysis.

Kashmir Initiative Group

Residency Road
Srinagar-190001
Kashmir

House No. 148,
Sector F-2, Mirpur,
Azad Jammu and
Kashmir – Pakistan
10250

Email: 7kig2012@gmail.com

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