

OP-ED-CONTRIBUTOR**Sindh: the big picture**

By Ayesha Khan

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THE displacement of some 20 million people and one-fifth of the country under water is a colossal catastrophe. Surely our electronic and print media should be the first source of information on the big story, with the urban public glued to their screens, horrified to watch the floods across Pakistan.

Unfortunately, this is the story being covered instead: a news personality arrives in a hapless community of dispossessed people, thrusts the microphone towards an exhausted flood survivor, and says, "How long has it been since you fled your home?" Without waiting for much of a response, he goes on, "has any relief been offered to you yet? Has the government sent rescue missions to you or your villagers yet?" Inevitably, the response is in the negative.

Pleased, the journalist will thrust his mike under the nose of the villager standing next to the first respondent, and ask the same question — until the point is drummed home to the viewers. The story being followed is, in fact, nothing more or less than the ineptitude of the civilian government and all its useless administrators, right down to the district and local administrative levels. But the big story should really be the poverty of the displaced that we are looking at. It needs to be explained to the viewers that the victims were almost as poor before the floods as they are now. The question to be posed is: what are we as a nation going to do about spreading our wealth more evenly?

If we limit ourselves to looking at rural Sindh then according to one poverty headcount estimate by the World Bank over 28 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line in 2004-5. An earlier estimate put the figure at almost 50 per cent in 2001-2. While the figures show some decline in poverty since the 1990s, there is likely to be a dramatic reversal in that trend due to the floods.

We must become familiar with what daily life entails in such a setting. Poor households across the country spend around 70 per cent of their income on food. A major study found that 36.3 per cent of the people surveyed in Sindh consumed less than 1,700 calories a day and another 25 per cent consumed between 1,700 to 2,100 calories per day.

Our poorest compatriots in the rural areas rely on a staple diet of roti and water, and they add to this milk, ghee, chutney, lentils, rice and vegetables as fortune permits. The storage of grains is an important aspect of food security that can tide families over during hard times. Tharparkar, Umerkot, Jacobabad and Sukkur were ranked in 2003 among the most food insecure districts in rural Pakistan.

The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2006-7 found that the vast majority of rural households are more than 10 kilometres away from basic services that include district administration headquarters, ambulances, functional maternal and child health centres and hospitals. Rural populations access drinking water through a range of methods of which tube-wells, boreholes or hand pumps account for more than half of such sources. But only 2.8 per cent of the rural households in Pakistan use an appropriate treatment method, such as boiling or filtering.

The threat of diarrhoeal disease is preoccupying relief workers in camps and the media alike. The PDHS finds that 10 per cent of deaths of children under the age of five in Sindh are caused by diarrhoea. The risk of death among newborns is also high; among the killers is pneumonia.

The leading causes of death for women of reproductive age in Pakistan are pregnancy, childbirth and the period immediately following it. For Sindh, the figure is 24 per cent including both rural and urban populations. Efforts by NGOs to provide services for pregnant flood victims are much needed. Among them will be women who never had any sort of medical care during pregnancies.

WHO reported a few years ago that of all malaria cases in Pakistan, 30 per cent were reported from Sindh — the highest rate at that time amongst the provinces. The PDHS reports the proportion of children who slept under mosquito nets was only five per cent in Sindh. Worse, if we take rural Pakistan as a whole, their use is only 1.8 per cent.

These statistics tell us something we have not wanted to see or hear. As flood victims stream out of their ruined

villages onto the national highways and into urban hubs, we should acknowledge that their poverty and marginalisation has always remained a constant struggle for them, even before the floods. In fact, for many the vaccinations, clean water, medication and food they might receive would be an improvement on what they have known.

The debate that ought to be taking place on our television channels is far more serious than which political party has bungled more, or how much better the army has been at rescuing flood victims, and so on.

Perhaps it is correct that the feudal system and inept bureaucracy lie at the root of the poverty in our rural areas. But what about the vast accumulation of wealth in our cities? Why is the gap between the rich and poor so extreme? Why is it that had it not been for the floods, we may never have noticed what rural Sindh looks like? Perhaps it is time that we identify our own blind spots, and begin to build bridges with our people.

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