

Chapter 8.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most important conclusion of this study is that the 1998 Bangladesh floods had a lower impact on the affected population than the 1988 floods, even though the 1998 floods were of a considerably longer duration in most places. The study has argued that there are three main reasons for this: the political environment, which saw increased accountability and transparency after 1991 (if still lacking in some areas), and a phenomenal rise in NGOs as both direct providers of resources and advocates for a more open society; economic growth of about five percent, and poverty reduction, through the 1990s, and a significant increase in employment in the garment industry; and investment in emergency preparedness. The policy of the GOB allowing imports of rice by the private sector also appears to have played a significant role in terms of keeping the price of rice stable. These are significant achievements which all fed into improved recovery.

The level of recovery is all the more impressive given the relatively low level of new external resources which flowed into Bangladesh, for example in comparison to Honduras after Hurricane Mitch.

The allocation of a significant percentage of recovery resources to infrastructure deserves further exploration as to its impact on recovery. In particular, the GOB and donors need to pay greater attention to understanding and evaluating the longer-term impact of infrastructure projects, including the socio-economic and environmental impacts. There is a tendency to under-evaluate these areas, as it is assumed that infrastructure development will lead to economic growth, which will in turn lead to poverty reduction. But in the Bangladesh context, where infrastructure is often not planned adequately and is subject to constant threats from flooding and poor maintenance, the link between infrastructure and poverty reduction is less than clear (see CIDA 2000). Choice of emergency funding channels for longer-term rehabilitation may also lead to less scrutiny of infrastructure projects than if they had been funded through regular channels.

The focus on infrastructure may be one of the reasons why the understanding of, and attempts to build on, livelihoods after the floods was patchy. There is almost no discussion of livelihoods in the major infrastructure projects, a situation which the GOB and donors need to address. Given the corruption that has often surrounded infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, the questions should be asked: whose interests does infrastructure meet - donors and the GOB, or the poor?

In terms of livelihoods, perhaps the most important finding of reports reviewed is that there was insufficient credit available during the recovery period. The nexus of exploitation and lack of resources which ensures the proliferation of poverty in Bangladesh is maintained in part by the vulnerability of poorer households to floods. One key way for these households to escape this net is to receive credit to buy productive assets. This is an area on which donors could usefully concentrate greater activity during the recovery phase.

The following were the key areas of entry for support of livelihoods of poorer households:

- Access to reliable sources of credit at low interest rates;
- Provision of seeds, particularly vegetable seeds and tree seedlings that will be of use to landless households able to grow vegetables on their homestead land;
- Replenishing the asset base of the poor, in particular provision of small livestock such as chickens, ducks, and goats;

- Cash and food for work programs which involve rehabilitation of local infrastructure used by or of use to the poor;
- Reconstruction of education and health facilities with local materials and labor;
- Support in reconstructing housing that is based on indigenous design and adaptable to flooding, such as movable housing or housing made from sturdier materials, using local materials and labor where feasible. This housing must be of the kind that can be rebuilt, repaired, or expanded by owners; and
- Provision of information as to recovery resources available from the GOB and NGOs.

Lastly, it may be useful to develop a more differentiated approach to recovery from floods, based on the actual livelihoods of poorer households. Many of the households most vulnerable to floods, for example those in the *char* areas, are in a semi-permanent relief phase and are using a relief to development approach. Even the sustainable livelihoods paradigm may be of limited use in terms of developing responses in relation to these households. Instead, the starting point for interventions should be a clearer understanding of the livelihoods of these households and how these might be supported. Areas close to poor people's livelihoods – such as agricultural wage rates, access to natural resources and productive assets, and access to non-exploitive credit – may be useful starting points.