

Children in emergency situation — a red alert for Pakistan

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Emergency or disaster as defined by the center for Research on the Epidemiology is a "situation or event, which overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to national or international level for external assistance".¹ Of all the three types of Emergency situations i.e. Natural disasters, conflicts and accidents, it is the children who remain the most vulnerable and worst affected population of the society, be it natural or man created. Natural disasters like Flood, Earthquake, draught ,cyclone etc. particularly affects children as they are not only at increased risk of communicable diseases and malnutrition but also fall victims of neglect, child abuse, violence, child trafficking, child marriages, illegal adoption and economic exploitation. Injury and death toll are particularly high among children during an emergency situation or disaster.²

An estimated 230 million children live in countries affected by armed conflicts, nearly 15 million children are caught up in the violent conflicts currently affecting central republic Iraq, South Sudan, Palestine, Syria and Ukraine.³

South East Asia particularly faces huge challenges as the region is highly populous (1/5th of world population) and experiences frequent emergencies, environmental changes and political instability. Asia has the largest share of disasters, accounting for 89.1% of globally reported natural disasters victims¹ It is reported that of the total 111 countries affected by natural disasters, eight Asian countries, (Pakistan among them), share more than 60% of the globally reported deaths.² Children represent 39% of the overall population in the eight worst affected countries.

Pakistan too has faced worst natural and man created disasters in the last two decades. Be it the Earthquake of 2005, super flood of 2010, Internally displaced people of war affected areas in 2009 or an unprecedented, brutal murder of over 100 children and school teachers at Army Public School in Peshawar, it is the children who suffered the most. During the devastating earthquake in 2005 that hit the northern areas of Pakistan, more

than 19,000 children died.⁴ Another Earthquake in the southern area of Pakistan (Baluchistan, 2008) affected a large population of 108,000 million, 50% were children less than 5 years of age.⁵ Most causality was reported among children during the earthquake affecting Awaran and other areas of Baluchistan in 2013. During the super flood of 2010, an estimated 1.4 million children were affected. Nearly three and half million children were at risk of communicable diseases during the floods.⁶ Recently reported worst ever cases of gang rape of over 200 children at Qasur, Punjab⁷ calls for an emergency action by the Government

Being the prime victim children are facing severe protection issues. The children Rights are continuously being violated. This most vulnerable group is not strong enough to raise a voice against suffering and injustices met to them. No political parties have even included the plight of children in their mandate.

Pakistan still lacks a state of art procedures and mechanism for child protection in worst circumstances. Child protection system though exists in all countries, it needs implementation in true spirit. A number of Legislative measures for disaster management exist in Pakistan. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) formed after 2005 Earthquake proposes a cohesive response structure for district Government; children need to be given prime importance as they are the most vulnerable segment of population. With the child protection authority bill still pending since 2011⁸ the need for properly designed and structured disaster management and risk reduction strategy should be the number one priority for the Government of Pakistan. A number of private and NGO will willingly render their services if properly taken into their fold. It is ironical that Pakistan being signatory of United Nation Commission on the Rights of children (UNCRC) in 1989 has yet to establish the obligatory National Commission on Child Right. Child Rights issues need to be given proper and prior attention by the parliamentarians and Government. It is now or never.

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