Disaster Induced Mental Disorders: Obstacles on the Way toward Development

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Abstract

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to natural hazards. The disaster-affected individuals do need and benefit from the relief; however, they also need support to cope better with the psychological trauma they undergo. The number of published studies on disaster related psychological distress in the Asian region is limited. Thus, using the sustainable development framework, the present study analyzed situation of two coastal communities: Banshkhali in Chittagong district (devastated by cyclone of 1991) and Patharghata, of Barguna district (devastated several times by cyclones in the last decade). The aims were 1) to reveal disaster, and development interlink; 2) to compare the past and recent experience with specific focus on possible pre, during and post disaster mental health related issues and 3) thus to explore the field level realities with a view to draw attention of the advocacy experts, policy makers, practitioners and relevant stakeholders to identify necessary actions to ensure safety, health, well-being, and human rights of people within the context of disasters. The study revealed that in the absence of any mental health care, many disaster victims develop mental disorders and thus hinder the development at both household and community level. Again, no change in the fate of the disaster victims could be identified in terms of mental health vulnerabilities and services.

Key Words

Disaster, vulnerability, cyclonic casualties, psychological trauma, Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLA).

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Introduction

Bangladesh includes the world's longest unbroken sandy beach of 120km, sloping gently down to the blue waters of the Bay of Bengal. Three geo-physical characteristics that distinguish the coastal zone from rest of the country include interplay of tidal regime, salinity in soil and water, and cyclone and storm surge, with economic and social implications on the population (Project Development Office for Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan, PDO-ICZMP, 2004). The impacts of the disasters are deeply related with the socio economic conditions, tradition, culture, and climate of the communities (Pandey and Okazaki, 2005). The coastal morphology of Bangladesh increases the negative impact of natural hazards on the area. Again, disaster risk arises when hazards interact with physical, social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities. Natural hazards increase the vulnerability of the coastal dwellers and slow down the process of social and economic development (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2006). The country is one of the worst sufferers of all cyclonic casualties in the world. The recorded history shows occurrence of some of the most devastating tropical cyclones that led to high casualties in this region, the present Bangladesh. Among the most devastating was the 1970 Bhola cyclone. Which caused approximately 500,000 deaths (Source: Wikipedia), while the cyclone of 29 April 1991 caused a death toll of 138,882 lives and the economic loss was US$ 1,780 million (Chowdhury, 1998). People of coastal areas also experienced cyclone SIDR in 2007 and Aila in 2009. For cyclone Sidr (2007) the official death toll reported was 3,268. Over half a million men, women and children were lost to disaster events between 1970 and 2005 (WEDO; 2008). The overall losses were enormous. Still, a very large number of poor in Bangladesh are compelled to live in the vulnerable coastal areas.

The disaster-affected individuals do need and benefit from material assistance and physical healthcare provided to them as part of relief work; they also need support to cope better with the psychological trauma they undergo during and after the disaster (WHO, 2005). As mentioned by Jean-Luc Martinage[1], IFRC communications and advocacy officer, global health "Responding to a disaster is not just about treating physical injuries - it is also about healing psychological wounds". Although psychosocial/ mental health care facility is a century old problem but still it remains untouched by the Government and NGOs in Bangladesh. No development plan is prepared considering the issue. The impact of disaster on mental health is well established. The impact goes far beyond mental health and do impact on development process. But the matter is never considered for sustainable development.

[1] IFRC: Post-disaster psychosocial support an obligation, not an option. Retrieved on: 10/02/15. http://www.ifrc.org/fr/nouvelles/nouvelles/common/ifrc-post-disaster-psychosocial-support-an-obligation-not-an-option/

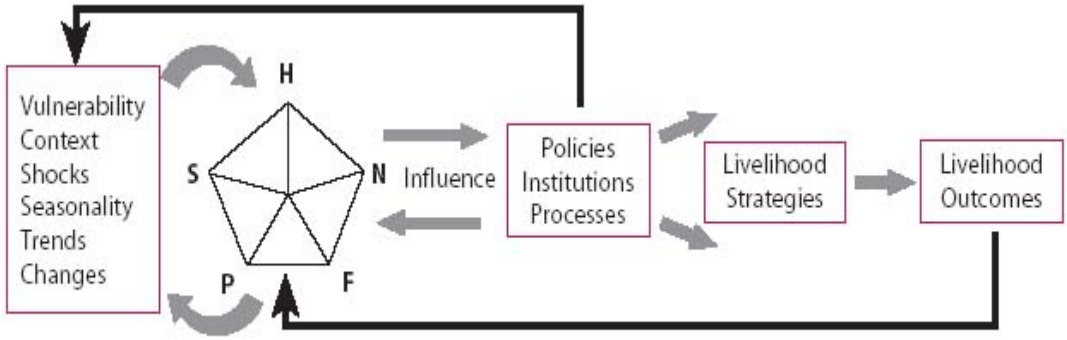
Research objective

The aims of the present study were to establish disaster and development interlink with focus on possible pre, during and post disaster mental health related issues and possible interventions to ensure safety, health, well-being, and human rights of people within the context of disasters.

Theoretical framework

For the present study, the sustainable livelihoods framework is used. The word 'livelihood' means 'occupation' or 'employment', that is, a way of making a living. Recently, the meaning of term is expanded in the development literature to include broader systems that encompass social, economic and other attributes. The sustainable livelihoods approach aims to promote development that is sustainable not just ecologically, but also institutionally, socially and economically and to produce genuinely positive livelihood outcomes (rather than concerning themselves with narrow project outcomes, with resources or with output) (Ashley and Carney, 1999). Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLA) emerged as a means for more effective and more relevant poverty reduction through understanding poverty from the perspective of the poor (Neely, C, Sutherland, K and Johnson, J, 2004). Norton and Foster (2001) identified the potential for SLA to be used in the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP).

The framework follows:



Key

H = Human Capital **N** = Natural Capital **F** = Financial Capital **S** = Social Capital **P** = Physical Capital

The left hand section of the figure shows how the vulnerability context impacts on the livelihood assets of rural people - denoted by a pentagon. Livelihood assets are also influenced by outside policies, institutions and processes. Livelihood strategies of different categories of households are shaped by their asset base and by the policy and institutional context in which they live. Livelihood outcomes of different types of households are influenced by the vulnerability context - people's exposure to unexpected shocks - and their ability to withstand the shocks, which depends on their asset base.

Research areas

The present study was conducted in two spots of two different districts in the coastal belt which are prone to cyclone. Banshkhali in Chittagong district is near to coast line people of the locality experienced the devastating cyclone of 1991 that caused huge damage of lives and property. Another research area Patharghata of Barguna district is also near the coast line. Recently, on 19th September, 2006, many fishermen of this area died being victim of a severe cyclone in the sea.

Procedure

Using focused group discussion and individual interview, data was collected. The questions for both group discussion and individual interview were semi structured open ended.

Results and Discussions

Using the sustainable livelihoods approach, the following results are arranged for both the study locations.

Borguna (recently experience cyclone):

Vulnerability context includes: Flood, cyclone, heavy wind, heavy rain, draught, signals (inaccurate, source of panic), death, diseases (cholera, dysentery, diarrhea, skin diseases cancer, pneumonia, diabetes, etc.), population explosion, unhygienic life style, behaviour pattern (taking loan without considering the consequence; some run away with family not being able to find any way to pay the loans back), no job during March-June (natural calamities, cannot catch any fish; depend only on gathering pona fish), borrowing money for high interest, women having no job, no income, pirates, dacoits, robbers, inactive administration, absence of law enforcement, trawler owners don't allow them to return to the shore even when the signal requires them to, lack of awareness, personal clashes, pollution of the sea water, etc.

Human capital:

Household members: On an average 4-5.

Active labour: 1-2

Education: Most of the children are sent to the primary school but those (very few) who complete education up to S.S.C. or H.S.C. level don't get job and thus parents prefer their children to work as fishermen as they grow adolescents.

Knowledge and skills: they learn only fishing. In some areas where crop is cultivated, some become farmers.

Physical capital:

Livestock: Poultry and cattle. NGOs provide loans but no training to rear poultry and cattle successfully and to treat them when having diseases.

Equipment: no tube-well.

Vehicles: Vans.

Houses: small, 1/2 rooms.

Natural capital:

Access to land: land is mostly infertile due to salty sea water coming.

Forests: Almost destroyed to meet the need of the people.

Water: small ponds for drinking and washing.

Fishing: the only source of income.

Wild products: being destroyed due to pollution and over population.

Biodiversity: reducing; birds are no longer coming and found. Different varieties of trees are getting lost.

Financial capital:

Savings/debt: take loan from the *dadon* (money lender who lends money with a very high interest) person and pays back the loan taking loan from one NGO. They become members of several NGOs at a time and pays back lone of each with the loan from the other.

Gold/ jewelry: no/ very small amount.

Income: during the season for fishing,

Credit: from different NGOs.

Social capital:

Kin networks: not very strong

Group membership: NGO, trawler owner and employee association.

Socio-political: discuss but no formal organization exists.

Voice and influence: nil.

Policies, institutions and process:

Relief: insufficient, no training or way to have sustainable livelihood.

Government institutions are mostly ineffective; NGOs work but situation do not change they take loan from different NGOs and finally being unable to pay the loans back runaway from the village. Recently law enforcement authority (coast guards) has become active and that is of great support.

Documentation: No accurate and complete data could be gathered regarding the number of total fishermen and fishing boats lost in the cyclone. Partial information gathered by

different NGOs are available and the information are only about the areas covered as their working areas.

Relief: government and non-government organizations along with the trawler owners and employees could save a few fishermen about 14 hours later that the cyclone hit. Dead bodies were floating even after 10-12 days of the disaster. Some of the dead bodies were buried and many who were lost had not been found or identified. Immediate food relief, 6 kg rice was given to most of the families of the lost fishermen and first aid was provided by government and the local NGOs to most of the victims who survived.

Major Observation

Many fishermen, who could survive, lost their jobs or occupational equipment. Due to the experience of the disaster, they were having fear, night mares, and disturbed sleep. The cyclone affected many fishing boats and many fishermen died and were lost. Thus it left many families bereaved. Children were perhaps the most affected. Many children lost either father or brother. Children could not go to school because of the severe stress having lost the father or brother or both. The wives of the lost fishermen were found to be the most affected mentally. They have no source of income. They don't know how to survive with 2-3 children. Both livelihood and health consequences are negative.

Banshkhali (Affected severely in 1991)

Vulnerability context includes: Flood (sea water entering the farm land), cyclone, heavy wind, heavy rain, draught, signals (inaccurate, source of panic), death, diseases (cholera, dysentery, diarrhea, skin diseases cancer, pneumonia, diabetes, etc.), population explosion, unhygienic life style, behaviour pattern, (extravagant lifestyle), no job during March-June (natural calamities, cannot catch any fish), borrowing money for high interest, women having no job- no income (only a few repair nets and sell fish), religious conflicts (marginalized due to religious identity), pirates, dacoits, robbers, inactive administration, absence of law enforcement, trawler owners' dominance, lack of awareness, insufficient cyclone shelter, etc.

Human capital:

Household members: On an average 5-6, most of the people who could be old by now died in the 1991 cyclone, they don't adopt family planning measures because of the insecurity of loosing the children in the disaster.

Active labour: 1-2.

Education: Most of the children are sent to the primary school but those (very few) who complete education up to S.S.C. or H.S.C. level don't get job and thus parents prefer their children to work as fishermen as they grow adolescents.

Knowledge and skills: they learn only fishing. In some areas where crop is cultivated, some become farmers.

Physical capital:
Livestock: No poultry and cattle rearing due to having very insufficient land for living. NGOs provide loans but no training to rear poultry and cattle successfully and to treat them when having diseases.
Equipment: no tube-well.
Vehicles: Vans, rickshaws, taxis.
Houses: small, 1/2 rooms.

Natural capital:
Access to land: land is mostly infertile due to salty sea water coming.
Forests: no.
Water: ponds for drinking and washing.
Fishing: the only source of income.

Financial capital:
Savings/debt: take loan from the *dadon* person and pays back the loan taking loan from one NGO.
Gold/jewelry: no/ very small amount.
Income: during the season from fishing,
Credit: from different NGOs.
Insurance: have been started.

Social capital:
Kin networks: not very strong (cause to be identified)
Group membership: NGO.
Socio-political: discuss but no formal organization exists.
Voice and influence: nil.

Policies, institutions and processes:
No policy to create alternative job opportunity except fishing. No policy to provide them with security from robbers.
Government institutions are mostly ineffective; NGOs work but situation do not change. Law enforcement authority inactive.
Documentation: Data can be gathered regarding the number of total fishermen and fishing boats lost in the cyclone. The disaster was severe and some research was done afterwards. Hossain et al (1992) conducted a research after the devastating cyclone of 1991. The cyclone extended from Teknaf in the southeastern seaboard to Barguna – a

coast line of 644 kilometers. The study dealt with peoples' immediate responses to disaster in the context of providing support to the survivors, governments' relief operation, problems and contributions of women during disaster, warning system, support from NGOs, health, conditions of children and others. In the book, "Living with Cyclone" (Talukder, J., Roy, G.D., and Ahmad, M., 1992), the authors discussed about storm surge prediction and disaster preparedness in the light of 1991 cyclone.
Relief: government and non-government organizations provided food relief and health services. One NGO built a cluster village where the homeless (who lost their homes due to the disaster) are still living. The houses are never repaired.

Major Observations

Most of the fisher men died. The then children are now adults and are engaged in fishing. The experience of the disaster is still alive among the alive aged. They still remember the fear, the sorrow of loosing the family members.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, it is worth mentioning the reality that, the recovery of the human capital was not initiated. It could be done through proper policies to lead to future sustainable development and the disaster affected people could not overcome their vulnerability and fall into the trap leading to negative livelihood outcome and are still could not come out of the poverty trap.

When they were discussing the events, they concluded that the short term material support helped them to survive but could not bring them back to normality as they could never feel confident in their work and could never overcome the fear of the cyclone. Both physical and psychological effects were evident, after the disaster. Unresolved financial concerns that are directly or indirectly related to the incident were found to form a lingering source of (post-traumatic) stress. As Kleber, Brom, (1992) pointed out, such concerns were found to be impeding the psychological processing of the disaster in many. Most of them no longer feel that they enjoy appropriate support and understanding. The consequences of the disrupted or insufficient processing of events, what Raphael (1986) named "disaster after the disaster", was found to be the prevailing situation in the context of development.

The respondents seemed to have understanding of their problems related to mental health as a consequence of disaster but are much more concerned about their poverty situation. For them, "it is firstly necessary to survive but what life are we living?" indicating those who were still having trauma they asked, do these people have to go back to fishing in the sea, having no alternative livelihoods?

The term "disabled person" means any person unable to ensure by himself or herself, wholly or partly, the necessities of a normal individual and/or social life, as a result of deficiency, either congenital or not, in his or her physical or mental capabilities. The signs and symptoms of mental illness and mental health problems are still so much equally prominent in both the study areas that these become obstacles on the way of development of the families and community. What happens due to this is that the sufferers carry the burden of stress, and their productivity as well as personal and social life get affected because of such untreated mental condition. The study revealed that in the absence of any mental health care, many disaster victims develop mental disorders; they become disable and thus hinder the development at both household and community level.

In this country, providing psychosocial/mental health supports along with other supports to communities that get affected by quick onset disasters like; tornado, cyclone/tidal surge, earthquake and flash flood are essential to ensure development.

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