

RETHINKING DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

The economic damage from global warming has global ramifications. File | Photo Credit: [Thulasi Kakkat](#)

It is time to stop thinking of the extreme weather events hitting us with increasing frequency as bolts from the blue. Kerala bravely endured the monsoon storms, but it would be a mistake to think that disasters of this magnitude are “once in a hundred year” events.

Weather disasters are being affected by climate change that is caused by humans. The devastation is worsened by the collective failure of governments and businesses to invest in building resilience despite the evidence on runaway climate change. The lesson from the Kerala floods, Hurricane Harvey (Houston, U.S., 2017) and Typhoon Haiyan (the Philippines, 2013) is that responses to disasters must be proactive, not just reactive.

First, reconstruction efforts must involve rebuilding in a better way. Climate proofing in Kerala calls for structures to be built with wind- and water-resistant materials. The higher cost will be more than offset by avoided repairs. Second, people need to relocate out of harm’s way. After Haiyan’s storm surges, distances from coastlines that were considered safe for settling were extended. During the 2015 floods, Chennai illustrated the price of unrestricted urban development. Third, early warning is vital. Because of investments in these systems, Cyclone Phailin (2013) claimed less than 40 lives in Odisha, whereas a supercyclone in 1999 in the State had killed 10,000 people. In Kerala, there was no timely forecast from national weather services. The State needs a reliable flood forecasting capability. Fourth, there needs to be tougher implementation of logging and mining regulations in fragile ecologies. Deforestation worsened the effects of Kerala’s floods and mudslides, as the report of the Western Ghats ecology expert panel 2011 had warned. Lastly, there is the climate conundrum: Wayanad, which just saw record rainfall, is expecting a severe drought. Kerala by itself has a small carbon footprint, but it can have a voice in helping one of the world’s largest carbon emitters reduce its carbon footprint.

The economic damage from global warming has global ramifications. The 2011 floods in Thailand’s economic heartland disrupted not just national, but global manufacturing value chains. The Kerala floods are estimated to have shaved off about 2.2% of the State’s GDP. Bolstering resilience must be central to recovery. Multilateral agencies including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank may be well-positioned to provide financing, which is vital when budgets are stretched, and, crucially, knowledge solutions to tackle climate disasters. Kerala gets high marks for its participatory approach to relief and rehabilitation. Invaluable as this is, the new climate reality is raising the bar on disaster resilience.

The writer is a former Senior Vice President, World Bank, and author of “Climate Change and Natural Disasters”

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