



# Disaster Response and Potentials of Social Capital

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## Abstract

The paper examines the hidden potentials of social capital in disaster response especially with reference to societal construct of Pakistan. Reference had been made in the paper to tribal culture of FATA (Federal Administrative Tribal Agency) in managing local emergencies and recovery seen in Swat owing to spirit latent in their society. Social capital allows people and societies to manage action to achieve desired goals. It has proved to be an important product in shaping regional development models and since managing disasters is a function of development, this form of capital has a definite impact on managing disasters. In Pakistan, the social structure of families is interwoven with trust, traditional values, religious motivation and cultural bindings. This allows them to retain capacity to withstand odds in severe conditions at their own without outside support. They strive to generate their own volunteers in case of any calamity. Recent examples are the resilience of people of Swat in 2009 military operations and by urban residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) in 2010 Floods. Finally, the dissertation offers some pliable recommendations and a road map to strengthen social capital in effective disaster response.

**Keywords:** Social systems, social capital, human capital, inter-personal trust, resource potential

## 1 Introduction

The frequency and ferocity with which disasters have struck vulnerable communities around the world in recent times has made people even more resilient and steadfast. From local to international disaster management related organizations, focus remains on preventing, mitigating, responding to and effectively recovering from a disaster. While all efforts are put in place to minimize loss of precious life and prevent damage to property and environment, what is there to come from nature's side can best be predicted (*Belinde et al. 2013, Okmyoung and Bob 2009*). At the same time, there has been little attention given to how social systems might be used and modified to deal with disaster.

As the disaster strikes, response activities gear up and whole machinery is seen moving in sync with already prepared plans with donors and volunteers rushing to play their part. In the midst of these response activities and processes, we usually hear accounts of inefficiency of state machinery and insensitive attitude of the local community. Such behavior or attitude creates serious gaps in response operations besides hindering outside help, may it be monetary or in kind. This aspect can best be described as a hidden dimension of response phase of a disaster, which if not considered while planning, may have serious repercussions for managers at all levels. It also proves that if social structure of a society is so weak, the disasters can create unfathomable problems (*Tim and Ivan, 2012*). However, despite of these misgivings and social voids, societies not only

continue to grow but have withstood disasters. This only happened due to strength of their character, trust in themselves, traditional values, culture, pride and identity and belief in their faith; all forming essential traits of social construct of a society. The study of social capital, therefore, plays an important part in response planning as well as execution of response and recovery activities (*Ilan 2009, Yong and Dan 2011*).

In a desk based exercise, the paper takes into account the hidden potentials of social capital latent in Pakistani society. Case studies from disaster prone regions especially the tribal belts, Kashmir and Northern Areas have been considered for evaluation of the concept and proffering suitable recommendations for defining a road map for harnessing existing social capital for any potential disaster response (*Tetsuya et al. 2013*).

## 2 Social Capital - Defined

As one of the emerging concepts in theory of human behavior, social capital has very rich potentials for application in variety of human resource management areas. It is urged to understand the relationship between the societal norms and its probable outcome. While theoretically, the concept has been discussed in length; its practical manifestation is still far to be truly understood. Social capital refers to characteristics of a group, norms and traditions, unity, its ability to socialize and volunteer and the trust that it enjoys which affects various socio-economic activities. The emergence of this concept is not new as trust and social networks help cutting down economic costs immensely (*Morton 2010, Daniel and Karen 2007, Victor et al. 2007*). Mere accumulation of social capital can accrue huge benefits to political and economic performance of a civic body. Social capital can be defined as the combination of

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resources, actual or implicit, that builds up to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a resilient network and best practices. It implies that the term is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having some common aspect of social structure at the same time facilitating certain actions of individuals who are within the structure.

To further clarify the concept, let's compare it with economic capital which lies in people's bank accounts whereas human capital is inside their heads. For a person to possess social capital, he must be related to others, and it is these others, who are the real source of his or her benefit (Erica et al. 2002, Brian and Stephania 2007). Figure 1.0 illustrates the various elements of social capitals (Robert and Joshua, 2007).

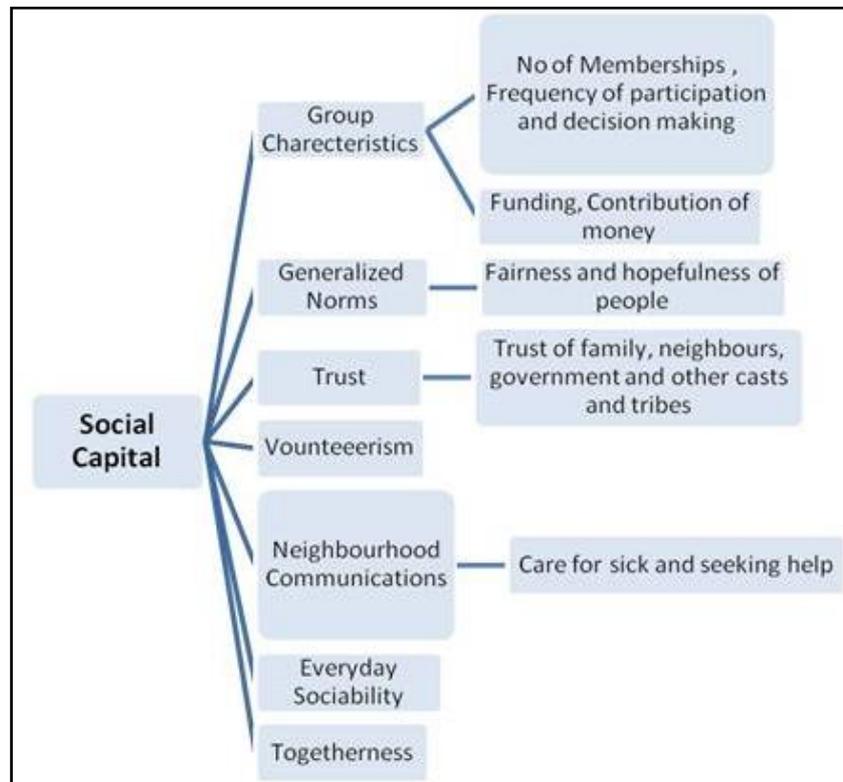


Figure 1: Different elements of social capital

### 3 Importance of Measuring Social Capital

Social capital has gained wide approval as a theoretical concept for accepting and predicting the traditions, cultural heritage and public relations entrenched in the social structures of societies. This blueprint of societal interrelationships actually allows people to manage action to achieve desired goals. Based on this theoretical concept, contemporary researchers recognize social capital as an important element in efficient running of modern economies, as an important base for multidisciplinary cooperation in liberal democracies and finally as an important product in shaping regional development models.

The way social capital is embedding in social structures may contribute to the public good. On the contrary, the negative impact of social capital embedded in autocratic, tightly woven social networks not accountable to citizens' results in corruption and cronyism in political and government institutions. It is therefore clear that social capital is of immense significance in safety and welfare of a society (Iran and Tam 2010, Stephane and Patrice 2009). The desirable facets of this concept are inter-personal trust, traditional values and cultural bindings while other that are more instrumental are optimism, contentedness, perceptions of government institutions and political involvement (Jerry, 2000).

For both individuals and communities alike, managing risk and opportunities is a key ingredient in the quest to achieve sustainable development. Whether these hazards manifest themselves in terms of economic, political or environmental disasters, the social entities that may be able to withstand the disaster will be only those that are more likely to prosper (James and Durairaju 2013, Ayse 2012). A social capital perspective seeks to go beyond primitive cultural values for response strategies, to look instead for structural and relational features. Since managing disasters is a function of development, it can be safely concluded that besides economic investment, this form of capital has a definite say in managing disasters and therefore must not be ignored.

### 4 Recognizing Social Capital in Pakistan

The fact that most of the recent disasters in Pakistan including Earthquake 2005, Floods 2010 and 2011 and Landslides in Kashmir / Northern Areas of Pakistan had limited success in effective response by individuals and local communities reinforces importance of social capital as a tool to manage disasters. Contrarily, history is rife with examples of locals of FATA and neighboring Afghanistan resisting interventions in case of complex disasters like insurgencies (Ognian and Dimitroy, 1996). Notwithstanding the societal values harnessed over the

years by tribes through strong cultural values and traditional practices, it was ultimately the social intangible that made the difference and prevailed.

Traditionally speaking in almost all regions of Pakistan, social structures of families is geared to retain capacity to undertake additional responsibilities in case of emergency. The customs and traditions of these tribes play a vital role in shaping their social outlook. Likewise, customs from birth to death and even after death are of an integral part of the life of Pakistani people. But Pashtuns are predominantly strict in observing their traditions, which has been inherited over ages. Pashunwali, traditional way of life of Pashtuns, is also regarded as an ancient honor code or unwritten law which governs day to day life of individuals and tribes as a whole. The tribal system of FATA works on the principal of self sufficiency by virtue to their intrinsic human values. They vie to hold their own defense mechanisms and generate their own volunteers in case of any calamity. People of Swat showed same resolve just after the Army flushed out terrorists from the valley in 2010 (*Jan and Sarah 2007, Adam 2007, Marrit 2010*). Since the community and affectees are the first responders almost all search and rescue activities are done by them. Likewise the tribal identity is important in urban regions of KPK but class dynamics are driven more by formal land ownership than tribal identity. Similarly in Punjab, the established landlord and clans assert their control over resources through influence over local administration, rather than through a constant state of tribal mobilization, as in upper Sindh and eastern Balochistan.

Although, experience shows differential access of two different gender classes to communication means, yet there is evidence that warning messages are arbitrated through traditional social structures like loud speakers and young boys through door to door dissemination, rather than outside sources. The simple reason for this traditional approach is because while men are out working, mostly the women and children are present in their houses. Those who lived beyond hearing distances of the loudspeakers were informed through couriers and young boys.

Another important aspect in the aftermath of disaster is losing of livelihood by affected communities. As a case study of insurgency in Swat in 2009, livelihood which consisted of tourism industry, fruits and gemstones totally vanished. The inherent characteristics of the Swat Valley with its rich flora and fauna having enormous potentials for tourism have been restored through community self help basis. Owing to enormous potentials in housing and development sector, the skills and expertise of related locals must be fully utilized. It is the strong will power and resilience of the locals which if exploited through a specially designed national programme can bring rich dividends.

Taking lead from basic philosophy of philanthropists, it is the religion based organizations that took a lead role in emergency response during Floods 2010 and 2011. The Jafaria Disaster Management Cell (JDC), Al Khidmat Trust affiliated with the Jamaat-i-Islami, Al Rasheed Trust and Al-Rehmat Trust linked to the banned Jaish-i-Mohammad are some organizations exclusively engaged in charitable activities and programs for affected people. The capacity of these groups and organizations to raise funds has traditionally witnessed a sharp increase after natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods

(*Masako and Ryo, 2012*). Just by virtue of the strength that is provided to righteousness of the cause of these organizations, it has immense potential to effectively respond to any calamity in Pakistan.

In developed countries, there had been evidence that locals provided mass shelter for a large majority of affected populations whereas planned shelters were useful only for a small segment of the population.

## **5 Roadmap to Incorporate Social Capital in Disaster Response**

Having established the importance of social capital in Pakistan's context and the fact that it can provide a pliable base for response and recovery phases of disaster management, it is pertinent to suggest some worthwhile measures. These are:-

1. Pakistani society consists of small family units which might be based on caste, tribe or religion. These units have an inbuilt strength and given the governmental and social support may prove instrumental in responding to disasters. The resource potential available with these family units must be integrated in community emergency services.
2. The traditional structure of societies must be utilized instead of creating new ones. Additional authority for emergency response services must be dovetailed in this existing structure to raise stakes and make system even more resilient. Local leadership, if supplemented with outside resources, will boost confidence of community.
3. Whatever measures are adopted, the social identity of the community or a society must not be disturbed. Civic and religious organizations, if taken in the loop, can be tasked to build awareness and remind community that the greater the disaster, more the community will have to depend on its own resources.
4. Dovetail all social, religious, private, semi government and nongovernmental organizations in planning process. Prepare an inventory of community resources for both people and materials. Persuade organizations to build up certain useful disaster skills. For example, development and housing industry including local hardware vendors may develop skills in mass provision of shelter and communication infrastructure, transportation industry including private entrepreneurship to hold pool of vehicles, farming and agriculture alongwith local grocers to hold feeding operations and lastly all local pharmacies alongwith private health practitioners to act as second line medical response force.
5. The responsibility of collapsed building search and rescue can be assigned to local building contractors through community awareness and capacity up gradation.
6. Interpersonal communication skills of people are best source to get information about any potential disaster risk rather than relying entirely on electronic data. Any effective emergency plan is based on independent decisions of many to take appropriate actions that are more effective when communication is enhanced than restricted.
7. Lastly, efforts should be made to reach social outcasts, minority groups, disabled and senior

citizens to fully utilize their rich experience of social capital.

## 6 Conclusion

While managing disasters, most of the efforts are directed towards physical and infrastructural aspects of communities and societies like building codes and land use planning, while only lip service has been paid to make social systems more resilient. An effort had been made to focus attention of readers on how social capital might be effectively used to augment existing disaster response mechanism. The potentials of social capital rich in its essence in Pakistani society, if exploited, under diffuse disaster environment can reap rich dividends. Moreover, the paper also offers food for thought for further research for scholars of developing countries.

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