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Resilient abodes

Naseer Memon | Published September 6, 2024 | Updated 12 minutes ago



The writer is a civil society professional.

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IN rural areas a house in most cases means a thatched hut built over ancestrally owned land

without any supporting documents. Most of these houses are built either on empty public land or on the farm of a landlord where the family provides peasantry services against a paltry share of the harvest. These rickety structures are often made of straw, reeds, leaves, branches and trunks of trees. A better version is made of unbaked bricks covered with mud plaster. Such rickety structures are frequently battered by strong winds and seasonal heavy showers every year.

The Development Statistics of Sindh-2022 report issued by the Sindh Bureau of Statistics reveals that approximately 70 per cent of houses in rural areas are katcha. Housing data of five worst flood-hit districts in 2022 depicts abject poverty in these areas. Percentage of katcha houses in rural areas of some of the districts are: Dadu (56pc), Jamshoro (65pc), Qambar-Shahdadkot (65pc), Khairpur Mirs (51pc) and Mirpurkhas (71pc). Moreover, the report also reveals that 72pc of rural houses are just one-room structures. The recent census data of 2023 also confirms that 71.35pc of rural houses in Sindh are one-room structures. An astounding number of 268,371 jhugis/caves/tents have also been reported in rural areas. An average household size of 5.65 in Sindh puts the estimated number of dwellers in these primitive abodes to 1.5 million.

This explains how rural Sindh lost over 2.1m houses in the 2022 floods, rendering more than 12m people shelter-less in 24 districts. Forty-eight per cent of the affectees were women. Demographic profile of these hapless people reveals that most of them were living under extreme penury. According to the data of Sindh People's Housing

for Flood Affectees (SPHF) 94pc of the affectees were earning hardly two dollars per day, including 31pc with income as meagre as one dollar per day.

Seldom has this scale of loss of housing stock of the poor occurred in a natural disaster. Rebuilding these structures on the principle of 'build back better' is an inevitable need and a gigantic task as well. Climate-proof housing is the cornerstone of creating resilient communities. Income levels of these affectees are a testimony of their sheer abjection rendering them incapable of reconstructing their collapsed houses.

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SPHF was established by the government of Sindh as an independent company to undertake this mammoth task of reconstructing over two million one-roomed flood-resilient pucca houses. In addition to engineering features, social augmentation of communities is the real transformative impact of such large-scale development projects. Half of the beneficiaries of this initiative are expected to get ownership titles of their houses. Half of them would be women, a stride forward towards empowerment of rural women.

So far, the project has mobilised over Rs550 billion through various funding agencies, including a contribution of Rs100bn equally shared by the federal and provincial

governments. Since financial transactions are made directly through the beneficiaries' bank accounts, the risk of conventional kickbacks has also been circumvented. Technical backup and social handholding is being facilitated through non-governmental organisations. These measures ensure transparency which is often compromised under the contractor model of public sector projects. SPHF claims that over 600,000 houses are at different stages of construction, including 200,000 that are fully constructed. Since the number of affectees is enormous and the process of compliance is stringent, a sizeable population still await construction of their shelters. Nevertheless, considering the complexity and scale of the project, this is noteworthy progress.

Whereas a large number of families are expected to own an improvised house, external infrastructure of these settlements continues to be a weaker link. A resilient house situated in a vulnerable settlement will remain prone to climate shocks. The scope of this initiative ought to be extended to create resilient settlements. Salient features of a climate-proof settlement encompass provision of clean drinking water, toilets, sewage network, paved streets, metalled link roads, protective dykes, emergency shelters and access to primary health and education.

Converting a flood disaster into an opportunity, it would be pertinent if the provincial government can implement a long-term project of upgrading all settlements as climate-resilient. Rural areas need a new approach towards settlements that can improve the lives of the masses, and give them at least a basic standard of living.

The writer is a civil society professional.

nmemon2004@yahoo.com

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