



Caste discrimination in Humanitarian Assistance – the case of Pakistan

IDSN is urging the international community to incorporate measures against caste discrimination in disaster relief operations as well as development programmes. Humanitarian agencies, whether multilateral, governmental or non-governmental must accept the responsibility to ensure that Dalits are not discriminated against and left out in relief and rehabilitation operations.

The devastating floods in Pakistan have caused much suffering, and members of the country's Dalit population are particularly vulnerable. As early as mid-August, the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) reported that Dalit families in Sindh province were being doubly affected by the floods. The actual disaster had displaced them, and they were facing caste discrimination during relief efforts. According to PDSN, hundreds of thousands of Dalits are affected by the floods, many of whom have been denied access to relief camps and experienced other forms of discrimination when seeking assistance.

The concerned organisations and communities are now much encouraged by President Asif Ali Zardari's response to their call. On 1 September the President called for an inquiry into the reports of discrimination. The President demanded that appropriate measures be taken to ensure that the relief work is not affected by caste discrimination and called for action against officials who practice discrimination during relief and rehabilitation efforts.

There are an estimated 260 million caste-affected people in the world, and wherever they exist, they are almost certain to experience discrimination during disaster relief operations. Thus, the situation of Dalits in Pakistan is highly predictable and similar to what has happened during disasters in other parts of South Asia, including the 2004 tsunami and the Bihar floods in 2008-9. Evidence from these disasters demonstrates the pattern of discrimination and has highlighted time and again the degree to which Dalits - at the bottom of the caste system - have been systematically excluded from relief and rehabilitation efforts. Caste discrimination by default has also been found to entrench and enhance inequity in post disaster communities.

Yet humanitarian standards do not currently require providers of humanitarian assistance in caste-affected countries to respond to caste discrimination with specific considerations and measures. IDSN is therefore urging the international community to incorporate measures against caste discrimination in disaster relief operations as well as development programmes. Humanitarian agencies, whether multilateral, governmental or non-governmental, must accept the responsibility to ensure that Dalits are not discriminated against and left out in relief and rehabilitation operations.

Governments and key humanitarian actors should understand and respond to caste discrimination as a key impediment to achieve the humanitarian principles of non-discrimination and protection. Humanitarian standards, such as the SPHERES standards, must be revised to take into consideration this form of discrimination, and instruments should be developed for use by humanitarian agencies and governments to ensure equal access, non-discrimination and full socio-economic inclusion of Dalits in disaster and rehabilitation responses.

Commendable initiatives have been taken over the last decade – mainly by NGOs - to monitor, document and address caste discrimination in relief efforts. However, there is clearly a need for the international humanitarian aid community and affected governments to thoroughly analyse the caste aspect of disaster relief operations. Such an analysis, combined with determination at the highest political level, should enable new standards and mechanisms to replace ignorance and end caste discrimination “by default”.

IDSN, Copenhagen, 3 September 2010

Further information:

[Press clippings from the Pakistan disaster](#)

[Making Things Worse, Dalit Network of the Netherlands, 2007](#)

[Report from a national consultation in India on Dalits and disaster response, 2010](#)

[Statement from the same conference](#)

[Statement from the same conference, addressed to the government](#)