

## **Life after Floods: Coping with Livelihood Uncertainties in post-flood Kerala**

### **Abstract**

Natural disasters take a heavy toll on the livelihoods of affected households and communities. While efforts are made to repair and restore infrastructural losses, the short and long term impacts of livelihood deterioration are not given equal attention. The proposed study attempts to assess the manner in which the floods and landslides that hit the state of Kerala in 2018 and 2019 led to short and long term displacement and affected the livelihoods of vulnerable households in the affected area. It also explores ways in affected households coped with the livelihood shock as well as the manner and extent to which livelihood restoration was integrated into rehabilitation programmes led by the state.

### **Summary**

Natural disasters take a heavy toll on the livelihoods of affected populations. This is particularly so in the case of socially and economically vulnerable households and communities. Post disaster changes in rural livelihoods are however rarely taken into account while planning for recovery and rehabilitation (Yang et al 2018) in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Kerala has been noted for its achievements related to human development, particularly for its achievements related to literacy, education and health. The state has also been viewed as a model in the implementation of panchayati raj reforms. It is however being acknowledged that all sections of society have not benefited from Kerala's unique development trajectory, the outliers comprising of the poorest and most vulnerable, especially the tribal communities, fisher folk and the economically weaker Dalit communities (George and Krishnan, 2008). Another neglected dimension in the Kerala model of development has been the growing degradation of the natural environment. Degradation of forests, shrinking wetlands, increased quarrying and mining in the mountains, and widespread land use changes as a part of accelerated urbanisation<sup>1</sup> has rendered the state vulnerable to climate disasters. It has also affected the livelihoods of natural resource dependent communities, viz. small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, tribal communities and fisher folk.

Between June and August 2018, Kerala witnessed torrential rainfall that manifest itself in widespread flooding (seven out of the fourteen districts were severely affected) and landslides in the hilly districts (341 landslides were recorded across the state) (UN, 2018). 5.4 million people were considered affected, 1.4 million were in relief camps and 433 lives were lost (ibid). Damage to housing, public infrastructure, communication networks, land and agriculture as well as water courses was widespread. The landslide affected areas were concentrated in the hilly districts of the state, leaving glaring physical testimonies on the land. Entire slopes were washed down, bringing down houses and other structures. Flooding in the densely populated midlands affected a much larger population, but the floodwaters receded within a week. In the backwaters however, the flood waters did not recede for until a month, prolonging the damage and displacement. A year later, some of the highland districts faced a second bout of severe landslides, that resulted in serious environmental degradation and loss of lives.

While physical damage and income losses captured a lot of attention in public discussions, employment and livelihoods did not receive as much (UN, 2018). This has been found to be true in

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<sup>1</sup> Urbanisation, as measured by the share of urban population of the State, has shown a sharp increase from 25.96 per cent in 2001 to 47.72 per cent in 2011. Corresponding levels for India were 25.52 per cent in 2001 and 31.16 per cent in 2011 (Govt of Kerala, 2016).

post disaster situations across the world (Yang et al 2018). The UN led PDNA<sup>2</sup> exercise, undertaken within a month of the disaster, estimated that the worst affected livelihoods were those in the informal sector, who constitute 90% of Kerala's work force. Serious crop loss, land degradation, soil erosion, destruction of irrigation systems and other agriculture assets affected the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers, livestock farmers (majority of whom are women), agricultural labourers and plantation workers.

Livelihoods of the poorest and vulnerable sections are sustained by resorting to a range of mechanisms. Many of these are linked to the immediate natural resource base, the destabilisation of which has affected their livelihood security. Many families could not return to their homes for many months. While the state government announced interest free loans through the Kudumbashree mechanism, it is learnt that many did not opt for the same, fearing a future debt burden (field visits undertaken by the researcher to flood-affected areas in Allepey in 2018). The state administration announced an immediate relief of Rs 10,000 per affected household, along with financial assistance for house construction and renovation. The focus on livelihood restoration however has been piecemeal. While agriculture, fisheries and livestock departments have provided compensation for losses, the actual impact on livelihood security is not clear. In addition to the losses incurred by way of damaged assets, the long term impact on household livelihood options and security has not been assessed. Similarly, the manner in which affected households coped with this stress has also not been studied. This is particularly the case with vulnerable households.

A unique feature of the relief and rehabilitation processes in the state has been the involvement of voluntary civil society members as well as registered NGO networks. Some of these groups have continued to engage themselves with the rehabilitation process. However, their focus too has largely been on building houses for the affected population.

The proposed study aims to examine the manner in which floods and landslides in Kerala affected the livelihood profile of the most vulnerable households in the affected area. It will look into short and long term displacement that affected households underwent, and will also examine the various ways in which such households coped with livelihood shocks, looking into whether it induced or accelerated outmigration. Given the large numbers of migrant labourers in the state, the study will explore the extent to which their livelihoods were affected in the study area. The study will examine the extent to which livelihood deterioration and livelihood restoration was addressed in the rehabilitation package offered by the state government through various schemes and programmes, in particular through the Rebuild Kerala Initiative of the state government as well as initiatives by civil society organisations.

The study will be located in three parts of the state viz. landslide affected pockets in the highland districts, select areas in the midlands which were exposed to riverine flooding and the backwater regions where floodwaters took considerable time to recede, precipitating a prolonged livelihood crisis. Detailed interviews will be conducted with the most vulnerable households from amongst the affected population in these three pockets. Vulnerable households will be identified with assistance from the panchayat. Discussions will also be held with respective panchayat elected representatives and officials, in addition to officials from the revenue department who have coordinated rehabilitation activities.

## References

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<sup>2</sup> The UN led Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA).

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