

Some background to coordination*
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Proper planning has to be done now so that we are better prepared for the future.

Consequent to the earthquake much has been said about coordination or the lack of it. What is lost by the wayside is, what generates the means to bring about coordination.

Effective coordination is a result of a tight knit administering of the time related outputs of the agencies involved to avoid loose jointedness. In a hurry we tend to address the symptoms and not the disease resulting in adhocery. A systematic approach can ensure sustainability.

Given the general management or administrative ethic in the country, we need to accept that whatever is happening today is born out of a feudal mindset, meaning generally that merit is ignored, and even more importantly, transparency is thrown to the winds in a judicially justifiable mode.

Transparency calls for systems and standard operating procedures (SoPs), which must be kept updated and the operatives involved be trained to implement the SoPs. Further, a feedback system is required for monitoring, for purposes of evaluation to determine what needs to be done/controlled to move towards achieving the desired goals.

A beginning has to be made to understand the nature of coordination as it is more than obvious from TV and newspaper coverage much can be done, despite the best efforts of the army in the initial stages of the various train of activities which have been set in motion, to ultimately (it is hoped) reach a semblance of normalcy.

Suppose a housewife is asked to provide dinner for 3000 guests or a tailor to stitch 3000 suits in double quick time they will not be able to do so because the nature of the problem changes on account of size. This means in simple situations, there are simpler logistics

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thus coordination is not a problem, one person can put all things together. With the vastly expanded scope must come the acceptance, conceptually, of a qualitative shift in the nature of the problem, essentially to provide exactly the same output ie a meal or a suit. The need to provided for several functions will be essential such as procurement, inventory control, time keeping, quality assurance, cost accounting and other needed support functions.

If some of the resources received during the Besham/Pattan earthquake of December 28, 1974, had been invested in setting up an effective 'organisation' for disaster relief, things would have been far different today. If disaster systems had been introduced, they would have required continuous maintenance to ensure sustainability, which means a continued commitment of funds and training.

Because we do not have a good word for maintenance in Urdu, it is no wonder that we do not have a good concept of maintenance. It therefore, follows that we do not understand the activities/procedures required to ensure good preventive, predictive or breakdown maintenance.

What is important and is usually forgotten is that whilst the critical activity ie productive work lies in the hands of the top tier of managers etc and their juniors who implement the same at ground level ie where results are obtained. The need is to set up the relevant support/supply functions, that oil the wheels of work flow. This means that such "non-technical" activities ultimately control the speed of achieving results. Forgetting this important aspect, we try to get around failures by setting up task forces that ultimately do more administrative harm than good.

It is clear that the productive/cutting-edge activities are fully dependent on the individuals who do the physical work, whereas the support/unproductive functions do not depend on any one individual and have to be put together systematically, hence the need for a system. The former is individual-centric but the latter are system-centric. This essential different must be understood.

A system demands relevant, up-to-date operating procedures, which in turn require detailed definition and the very inconvenient 'continuous maintenance'. This may be difficult to understand because the 'system' is an intangible and that it requires capital investment! The activities are similar to designing an irrigation minor that later requires desilting, could be increasing its size, or even remodeling it. Continuous maintenance, tediously requires continuous budgetary support as well as training inputs.

It follows, therefore, that the army is best suited, under the existing conditions, to handle the grim situation facing the country. They do have operating procedures which their personnel have been trained to implement. This works perfectly within the army because all the concerned know their SoPs.

The problems that will rear their heads after the initial phase of relief will be at the interfaces between the army and those directly affected by the earthquake as also between the army and civil agencies/individuals trying to help, who do not have SoPs that mesh in smoothly with each other.

Proper planning has to be done now so that we are better prepared for the future. This requires the input of experienced system analysts with familiarity of both manual and computer routines. Having squandered away the opportunity that we had in 1974 to set up a system of dealing with emergencies involving both government and the private sector, the opportunity has come our way again.

Let us make sure we do not miss out this time! We have the donated resources to do this. 2% of what we get must be spent intelligently on the software and also the training of the operatives of the system and procedures. Further, those higher up in the hierarchy need to undergo orientation training to be on the same wavelength as the operatives.

Since 1974 one big development has taken place and that is that many tools of information technology are available. Packaged computer systems exist that can be of

tremendous help in integrating a number of loose ends, even through currently we cannot use them to the maximum advantage, but it is better than not having them at all.

However, to make really productive use of the power or the computer, we need to ensure that the SoPs are defined right down to the minutest detail and kept current. The boss should have been training (as a junior) to use them so that dust cannot be thrown in his eyes, when he is several rungs higher up.

Such detailed definitions are totally missing in Acts, Ordinances, Rules or By-laws. They have to be flow-charted (mapped) to be really understood, because they are interlinked with other activities as several agencies are involved. One picture is worth a thousands words. Let us see whether we are equal to the task this time. Since so much depends on accurate mapping to ensure effective coordination it may be added that ultimately it includes all in the relevant communication chain; seniors, middle managers and juniors each being exposed to the relevant scale map which assists in strategy implementation at the operative or tactical aspects at ground level and of course the systems and procedures at the mid level which needs some explanation.

/Some background