

Reforming GB's disaster management for a safer tomorrow

Wajhullah Fahim & Muhammad Faisal Ali | 08th May, 2025



The breathtaking landscapes of Gilgit-Baltistan, which are referred to as the water tower of Pakistan, are under severe threat due to rising global carbon emissions and consequently climate change.

Almost 30 percent of GB's terrain is dominated by the glacial mountains and another 40 percent is blanketed by the seasonal snow. GB serves as the primary freshwater resource of the country. However, accelerating glacier melt has triggered a surge in climate-induced disasters such as landslides, devastating flash floods, glacial lake outbursts, avalanches, etc., putting both lives and infrastructure at risk.

The frozen reservoirs of GB are shrinking at an alarming rate and this melting has not only disrupted the supplies of water but intensified the frequency and severity of disaster events. The real worry is not that glaciers are melting, they are melting faster than anticipations. This seriously calls for urgent action otherwise consequences will be catastrophic for GB as well as for downstream Pakistan.

Spotting the mounting threats, the GB Disaster Management Authority was established some 8 years ago in 2017 to streamline the response efforts and disaster risk reduction. However, the region continues to suffer from natural calamities, and victims of recent landslides, and floods claim that disaster-handling efforts remain sluggish and uncoordinated. Structural and non-structural inefficiencies both have hampered the GB-DMA effectiveness, leaving communities highly vulnerable.

Although disaster risk insurance is an effective soft intervention, however, despite high demand the insurance market is virtually non-functional in GB, which means residents are without financial safeguards. Therefore, a strong and efficient administrative setup can only help climate and disaster-resilient GB. However, GB-DMA is struggling with limited funding, outdated early warning systems, and a lack of trained personnel.

While dealing with disaster vulnerability, GB struggles with inadequate disaster preparedness largely due to the systemic gaps. While early warning systems exist, their insufficient coverage restricts real-time data

collection, which means GB-DMA forcefully depends on outdated historical records. This undermines accurate risk assessments and timely responses.

Trained human resource deficiency further cripples effectiveness and efficacy. Only two Assistant Directors oversee four districts of Baltistan, compromising oversight. Disaster planning is rudimentary, limited to two contingency plans rather than holistic strategies covering prevention, response, and recovery.

Unfortunately, even after 77 years of independence, most of the public sector administrative setup in Pakistan follows the British colonizer's practices. Therefore, inherited bureaucratic bottlenecks worsen this crisis, as emergency funds remain under the control of senior officials such as the chief secretary, Commission of Division, and Deputy Commission of District, delaying critical allocations during disasters. This top-down approach, coupled with interdepartmental delays, hurts the emergency responses which was evident by the recent Nalter GLOF in July 2024 where poor coordination exacerbated the infrastructure loss, agricultural losses spanning thousands of acres, destroyed power infrastructure, and numerous road infrastructures due to flashflood from Baltoro glaciers.

Moreover, GB's vulnerability to climate disasters is outpacing its capacity to respond. GB-DMA remains critically under-resourced, inadequate staffing and with outdated machinery. For example, Skardu District, which spans over 10,186 km, has just two wheel dozers, four road rollers, five tractors, and two excavators; none of which meets modern standards. This lack of equipment, combined with bureaucratic hurdles and untrained staff, severely limits disaster response.

To build resilience, GB must modernize early warning networks, train dedicated staff, and decentralize decision-making. Without these

reforms, climate disasters will continue to outpace the region's capacity to respond.

The government of Gilgit-Baltistan should adopt internationally recognized practices to strengthen the administrative framework of the GB-DMA. Capacity building and technical human resources are vital elements of any administrative structure to deliver its dedicated assignment. The Philippines' National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council is the best case. Under this programme, the government provides continuous professional training along with the recruitment of well-qualified staff. GB-DMA should follow this programme.

The GB government should develop a Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Policy, aligned with the Sendai Framework's four priorities, mandating risk assessments for all infrastructure projects, allocating a minimum of 5 percent of the provincial budget for DRR initiatives, and conducting third-party audits for accountability and transparency. This approach mirrors Chile's National Policy for Disaster Risk Management, which integrates risk governance, financing mechanisms, and community participation.

For more collective action towards climate-resilient GB, a participatory approach should be aligned with DRR policies and measures. All government departments, NGOs, and the local community should collaborate to facilitate real-time data sharing, joint response planning, and resource mobilization. Furthermore, each of them appoints a focal person who meets regularly and aligns their activities under one umbrella of the GB-DMA.

Now, Gilgit-Baltistan stands at a critical juncture. With increasing climate-induced events, inaction is no longer an option. Strengthening the GB-DMA through capacity building, policy reform, and international best practices is essential for a climate-resilient Gilgit-

Baltistan. Without immediate action, modern equipment, trained personnel, and decentralized decision-making, climate disasters will continue to devastate the region. The time to act is now.

[Wajhullah Fahim](#)

Wajhullah Fahim serves as a Young Researcher Development Intern at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) in Islamabad

[Muhammad Faisal Ali](#)

The writer is Research Fellow at Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad

[Website Link](#)

[Newspaper Link](#)