

FLOODS AND A 'PREVENTIVE MEASURE' THAT NEEDS REVIEW

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“A hierarchy-based approach, with scaled levels of responsibility based on impact area or ‘target population size’, may work” | Photo Credit: PTI

It has been many days since Cyclone Michuung passed, but every resident of Chennai still experiences the consequences of a slew of decisions taken for them, or on behalf of them, by an army of people.

All these choices had consequences. And so these decisions should be accounted for. Some consequences were visible and obvious, while others were hidden and subtle.

In the rains in 2015, many believed that the choice to hold off the release of water from a nearly full reservoir — until later events forced an urgent decision to do it without due warning or precautions — was what led to the most tragic outcomes of the flooding then.

The choice to stop electricity supply to areas where cyclonic winds can damage power cables and cause live wires to drop into flooded streets appears logical and sensible. But there is another side to this, especially when the practice is carried out as a ‘preventive measure’, extended across a wide area, and continued well after the natural event has passed or an accident has been reported. Homes and neighbourhoods plunged in darkness can be dangerous by themselves.

That an elderly relative can trip, fall, and break a hip is a worry as it can be as life-threatening as suffering a heart attack.

In 2021, Tamil Nadu had 13.8 crore people over the age of 60 years. Of Chennai metropolitan area’s estimated 12 million-plus million population, 5,00,000 people are above this age, and over 50,000 are aged 80 or above. Many live alone, or with limited assistance. An area-wide power disruption is a significant hazard.

There are also the security and safety concerns of having no electricity in domestic households. Accidents and injuries are more likely to happen in the dark. Simple tasks become fraught, and even dangerous. Reptiles and insects could crawl into the house. So could miscreants.

The choice to turn off the electricity supply during a cyclone, and to keep it that way even after

the rain stops, has to be looked at in the backdrop of the facts given above. There is no objectively “safe” choice here. It is a constantly evolving, dynamic balance. And, that is why decision-makers should be held accountable for the choices they make.

Decision-making in any crisis can be emotionally challenging and psychologically stressful. When the scale of these decisions is large, and the nature of a disaster is cataclysmic, the process also becomes an extreme test of intellectual and analytical judgement, as well as that of personal strength and confidence.

The potential cost of mistakes looms large in a decision-maker’s mind, which tends more often towards conservative options being preferred. And, yet, the dangers from inadequately considering the ‘flip side’ can lead to equally serious (even if less dramatic) complications due to inaction. Shutting off the electric supply in the event of a storm can be life-saving. But, restoring supply promptly afterwards is also vital to save lives and safeguard against terrible individual consequences.

A bureaucrat or government employee who has been granted executive power to decide to turn off the electricity supply power to a region, neighbourhood, street, or small area/home should be able to justify the decision and document the reasons, in real-time, in the event of a review. Just as premature restoration of power to areas with damaged cables carries the risks of electrocution and infrastructure damage, the unjustifiable extension of a power cut also has a real, and significant mortality risk for thousands of people in their own homes. However, this is not a reductionist argument.

Making tough choices in a phenomenally complex, poly-dimensional, multivariable scenario such as a natural disaster is a challenge that can be mind-numbing. And the experts tasked with making them deserve unstinted appreciation, gratitude and respect.

Some people make the disingenuous argument for more public transparency to these complicated decision-making processes. But clearly, in view of their specialised (and even confidential) nature, any such review should remain in the realm of specialists and subject-matter experts. A complex calculus should not ever be allowed to become a contest of cheap populism. The consequences of going that route during the floods in 2015 are still fresh in our memories.

And yet, this is not a case for elitist exclusivity either, where all decisions are from the top. In a healthy democratic system, no individual or group ought to have unfettered, unquestioned power over such choices, or be permitted to make them based on little more than a whim and fancy. It is time to hold the decision-makers accountable for their choices, especially when their choices impact the lives of millions. An ‘ideal solution’ may never be feasible, but we should strive towards one.

A hierarchy-based approach, with scaled levels of responsibility based on impact area or ‘target population size’, may work. The decision-making cell should be more granular and definitely faster, quickly developed and implemented to meet rapidly changing circumstances. Perhaps more than one person should be involved when it comes to making major decisions. In an evolving crisis, periodic review, done every few hours, by an oversight team, might help challenge and reverse questionable choices.

Regardless of the specifics, the principle at play is that a decision-maker’s rationale and evidence in support of a choice or preference should be subject to review. If found indefensible or unsupported, such decisions must be overturned or modified at the earliest. And, responsibility is fixed squarely on the individual(s) who make such sub-optimal moves, even

banning them from such decision-making positions in the future.

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