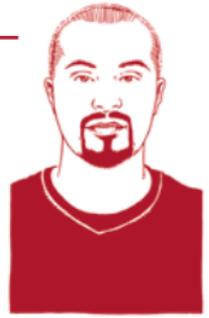

RIZWAN BAJWA

Disaster Response: Institutional Memory and Flexibility Save Lives



In August 2010, torrential monsoon rains submerged nearly a fifth of Pakistani territory, putting 20 million people at risk from disease, hunger and loss of property. Rizwan Bajwa, MPP Graduate Class of 2007, was working in Islamabad for the United Nations World Food Programme when he was deployed to help airlift provisions to far-flung and isolated pockets of the flooded countryside

The Pakistani native took part in several of the hundreds of sorties flown by the UN. Arriving by helicopter, he was often greeted by desperate and expectant crowds of people. Making order out of this chaos, reaching the most vulnerable citizens in the crisis, and setting up a system that served people fairly, even after the helicopters had flown away, was—and is—his job.

“The WFP operates on the frontlines of humanitarian relief and recovery,” he says, noting that he often draws on his MPP education, whether organising aid in the wake of natural disasters, or helping those caught up in political conflicts, such as setting up a school food programme in war-torn Syria.

Institutions that enable good governance are the pillar upon which such recovery programmes are built, he says. Registering the displaced, identifying the needy, getting help from the police and locating NGO partners

are much easier when tried-and-tested structures are available.

“Particularly in Pakistan,” he says, “I felt that the humanitarian response to the conflict in the northwest and the floods in the central and southern parts could have been better if we had the institutional memory and historical experience within the structures we draw upon.”

Bajwa helps to build governance capacities at the local, provincial, and national levels. He also trains first responders—working with school authorities, as well as local government and NGO officials.

“In 2009, two years after graduating from the first class of the MPP programme, I saw conflict spill over from the border regions to the heartlands of Pakistan, both in the form of terrorism as well as all-out war,” Bajwa says. The soft skills he honed in Berlin, such as negotiation, leadership, and management have been very useful.

“I have been able to display the professional flexibility needed to shift gears in ever-evolving scenarios,” he says.

Those experiences will help the WFP handle the next disaster: “It is unfortunate to be expecting the worst, but it’s better to be prepared.”

Rizwan Bajwa was a member of the Hertie School’s first MPP class and worked at the Asian Development Bank before joining the WFP.
