

BETWEEN THE RIPPLES

MAPPING THE LIVED NARRATIVES OF THE 2025 PUNJAB FLOODS

Authors: Kashika Chawla¹, Vivek Kant¹
Affiliations: 1 Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur
kashikac24@iitk.ac.in

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Overview

Floods are one of the most recurrent of hazards that leave a widespread impact on communities around the world. India, especially the northwestern region, faces recurrent river floods that are triggered by heavy monsoons, snowmelt from the Himalayas, and the worsening effects of climate change.

The state of Punjab is home to three major rivers - Sutlej, Beas, and Ravi - and has faced recurrent seasonal floods over the years, resulting in significant destruction and damage. The 2025 flash floods were one such high-impact disaster caused by heavy monsoon rainfall combined with upstream water releases from the Pong and Bhakra dams. The unprecedented floods affected all 23 districts of the state with widespread damage to infrastructure, agriculture, and livestock, primarily in rural areas.

Where was the impact?

Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Ferozepur, Kapurthala, Pathankot, Fazilka, Hoshiarpur, Moga, Tarn Taran, Moga, Sangrur, and Barnala were some of the heavily impacted areas (Bahga 2025). Gurdaspur was the worst-affected with 329 villages affected and 1.45 lakh people impacted. Amritsar followed closely with 136 lakh people impacted (Sphere India 2025).

In order to establish a defined boundary, the areas affected by the floods in Punjab were observed. Out of which five villages from the Amritsar district in Punjab were selected for qualitative research.

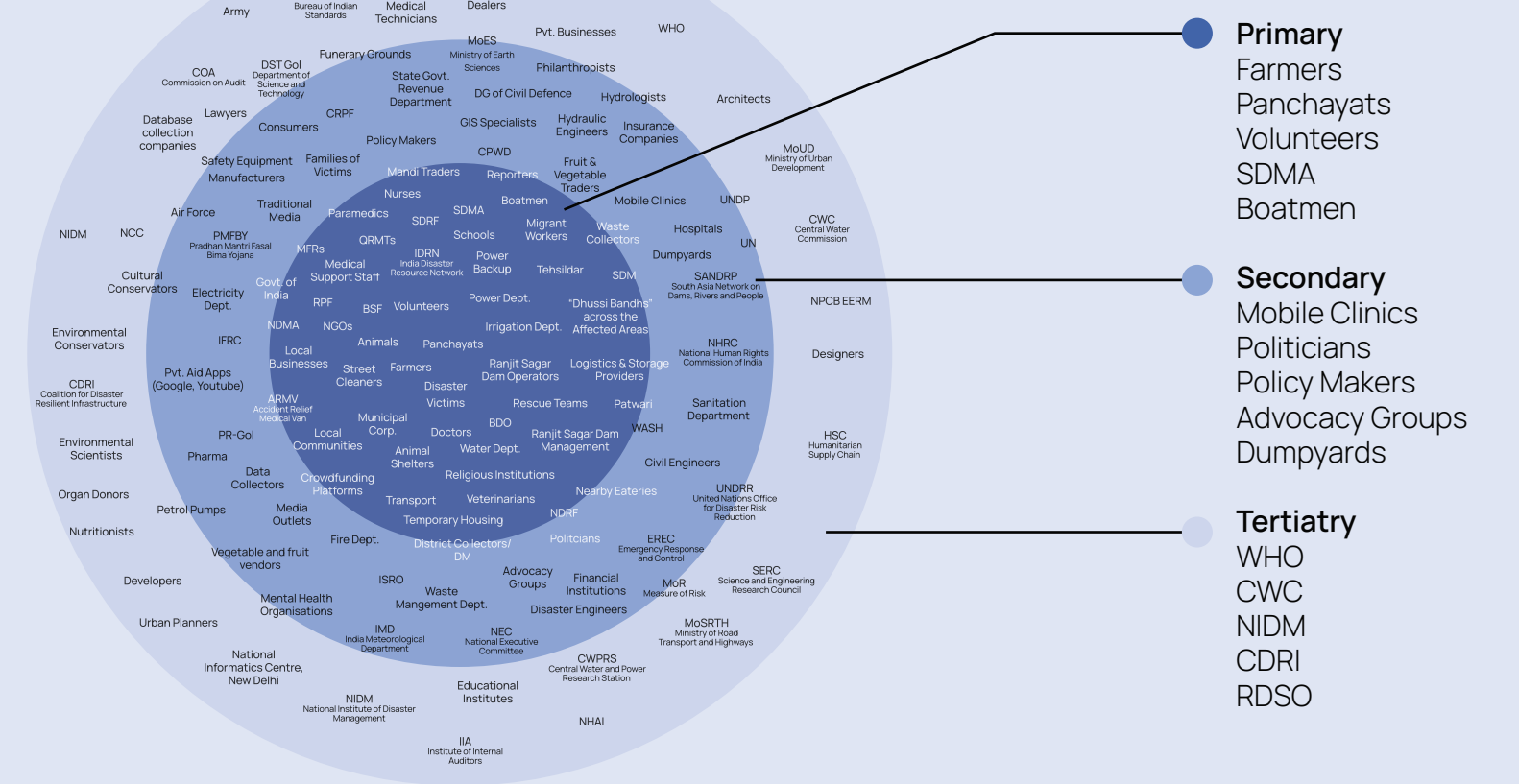
Why capture the Lived Narratives?

The conventional flood research largely focuses on data collection from administrative and economic perspectives as well as large-scale physically observable data, including hydrological risk, satellite imagery of destruction, statistical data on casualties, displacement, infrastructure damage, and recovery and rehabilitation costs.

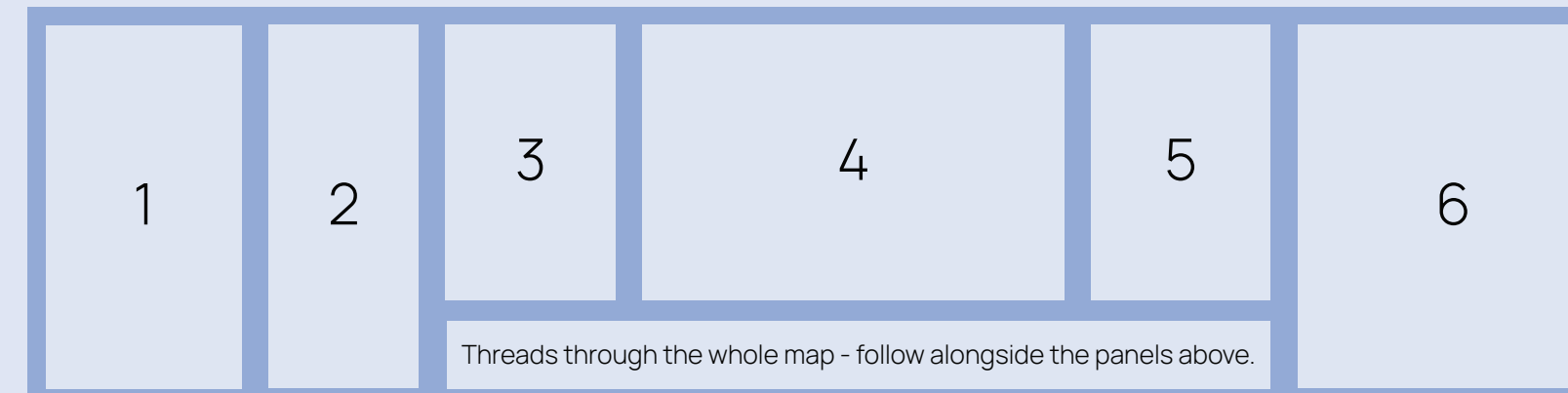
This needs to be augmented by psychological and cultural dimensions of flood experience which remain underexplored often overlooking the problems at grassroots level. The experiences of the flood-affected communities are systematically underrepresented, and their local knowledge may remain absent from formal disaster response frameworks, creating a systemic gap.

Who was impacted?

The 2025 Punjab floods did not impact everyone equally or in the same way. Across the state, the crisis rippled outward, touching different stakeholders at different levels of proximity, power, and loss.



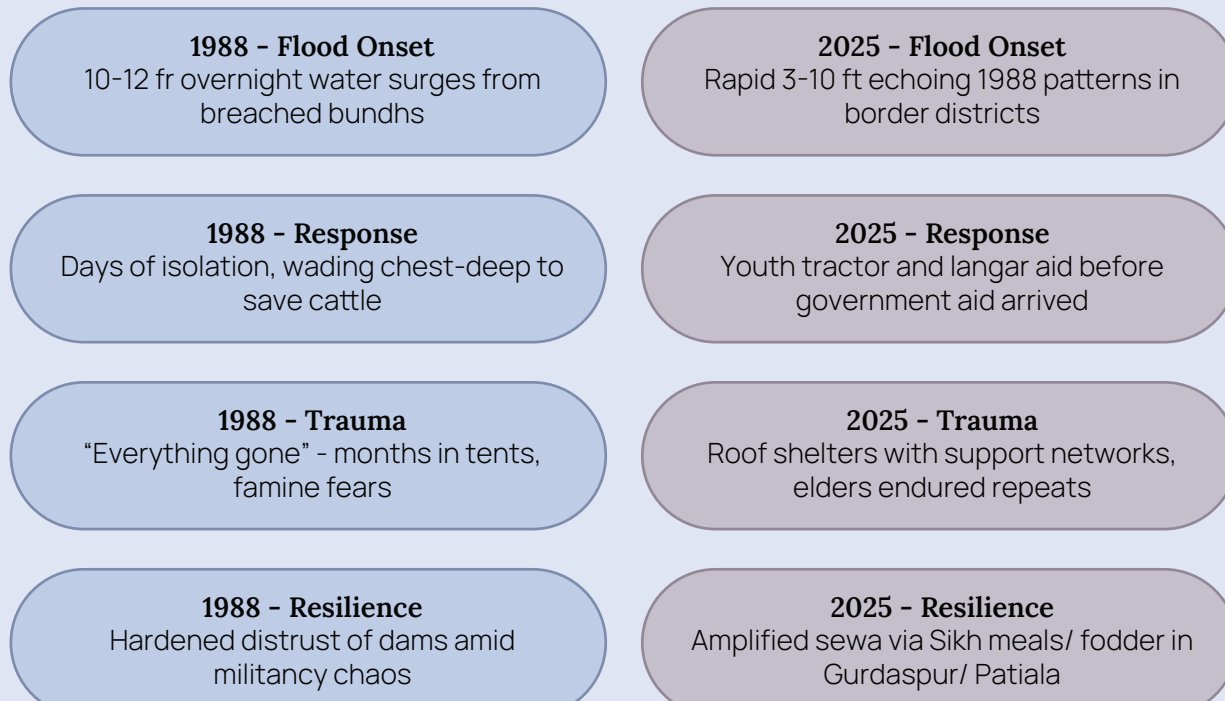
How to read the map?



The Flood Memory

One crucial narrative that emerged was that the 2025 floods were very similar to the 1988 floods in terms of severity. Response dynamics and personal trauma from the latter led to community self-reliance and quick response systems during the 2025 floods.

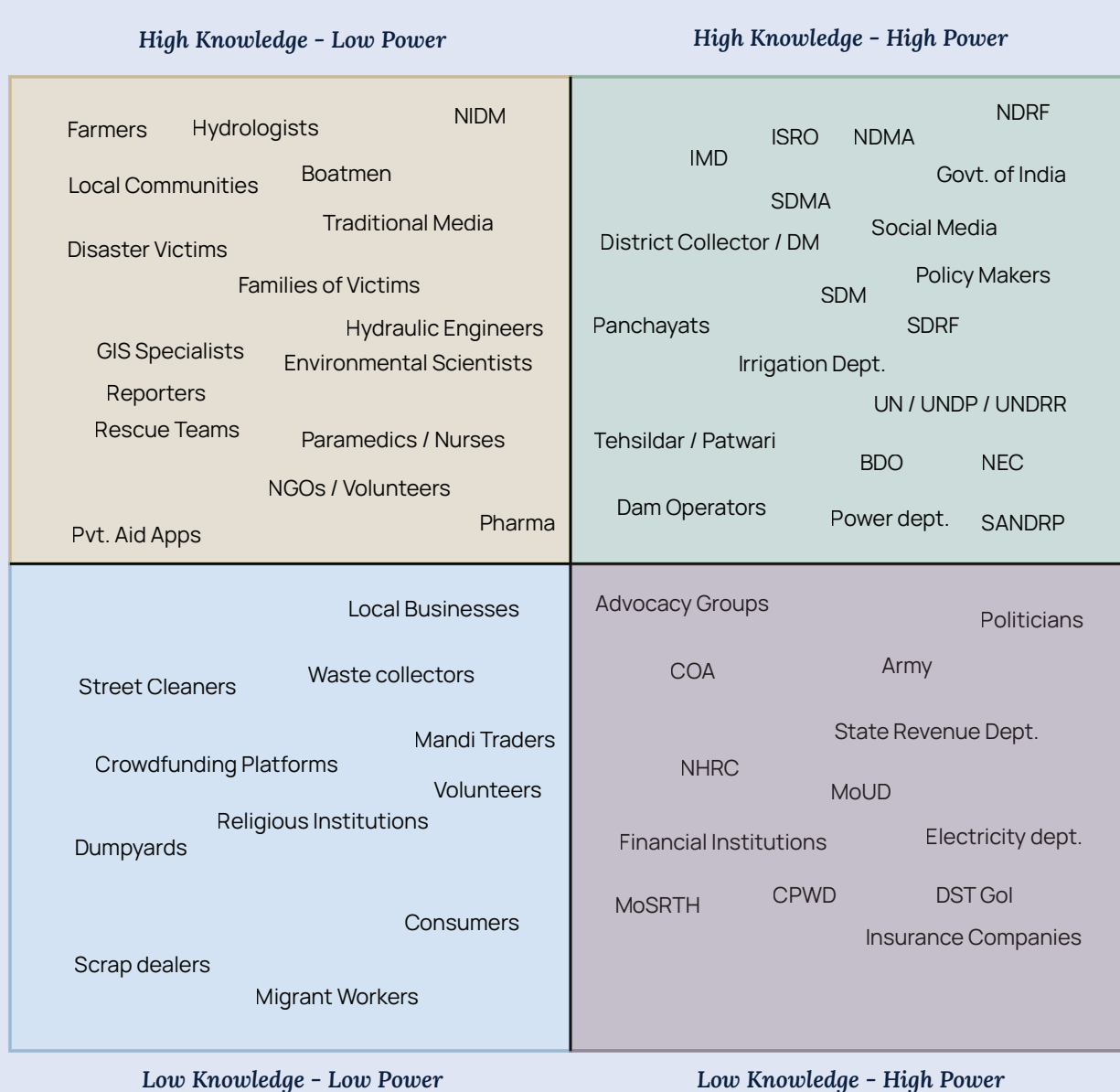
The central theme of the map revolves around an old man stuck in the 2025 Punjab floods, encountering the reflection of his younger self from the 1988 Punjab floods.



The Knowledge-Power Dynamic

Flood response has historically been measured in a standardised way, using technical knowledge. This deepens the vulnerability with each passing flood due to the gap between local knowledge and the power to act.

Those closest to the flood - farmers, victims, local communities - held the most granular knowledge of what happened. Those furthest from it held the power to decide how it was recorded, resourced, and remembered.



Desicion-making : Where & How?

In any crisis, administration plays a critical role at every level. From state policy to village response, decisions made across this hierarchy can determine survival. But under pressure, no level is immune to bias - all decisions, top to bottom, are shaped by decision-making heuristics born of urgency, incomplete information, and the weight of past experience.

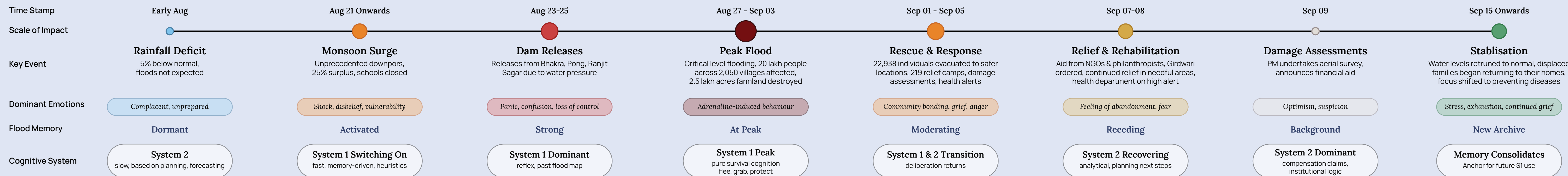
- Availability Heuristic** - decisions driven by the most recent, vivid, or widely reported flood events rather than statistical likelihood
- Anchoring & Adjustment** - responses calibrated to past flood benchmarks (1988, previous budgets, old records) with insufficient adjustment to present conditions
- Representative Heuristic** - situations judged by how closely they match a known "flood victim" or "flood-prone" profile, causing atypical cases to be missed



How the Floods Unfolded?

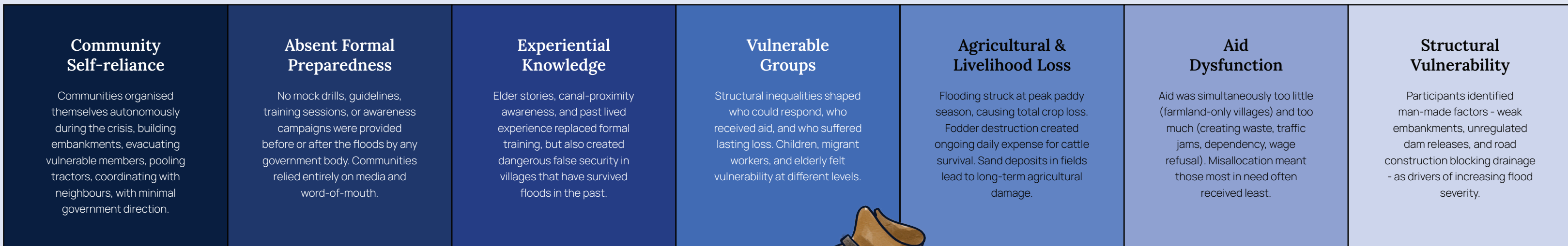
Eight weeks. Five stages. One crisis that moved faster than the systems meant to contain it.

Mapped here across key events, scale of impact, dominant emotions, flood memory, and the cognitive systems that shaped how communities and institutions responded at each turn.

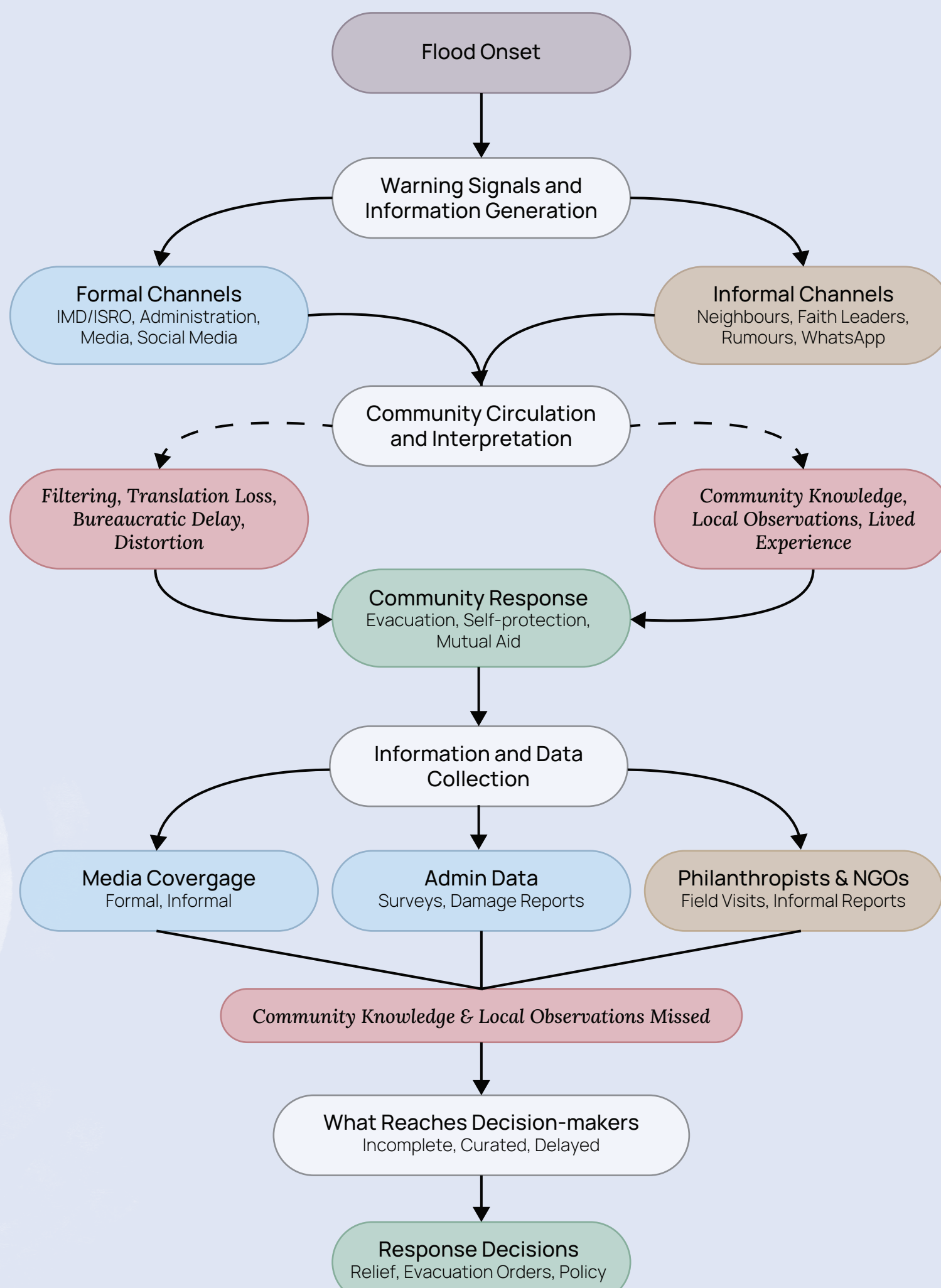


The Anatomy of the Ripples

Interviews with flood-affected individuals revealed the texture of a crisis that official records could not fully capture. Participants described the sudden rise of canal water, the breaking of chussa bundhs, submerged fields, and the weight of 1988 still alive in their memories. Thematic analysis of these interviews revealed seven core experiences of the 2025 Punjab floods. Like ripples from a single point of impact, each theme radiates outward from the community at the centre of the crisis - together mapping what formal systems missed, and what communities carried on their own.



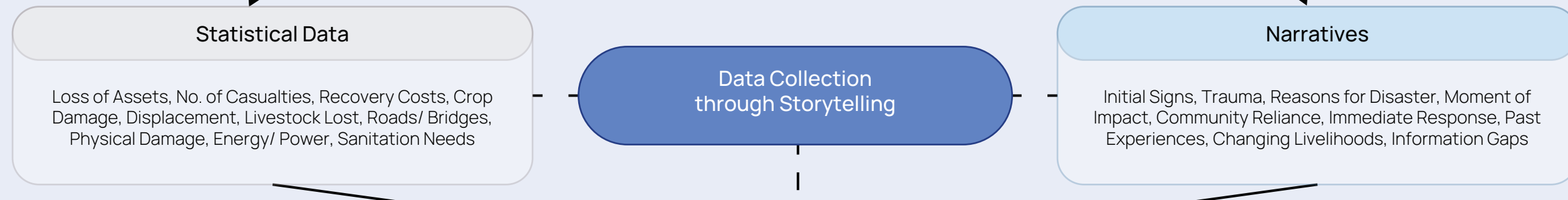
The Flow of Information



"One crisis, two methods, and still the full picture was never assembled."

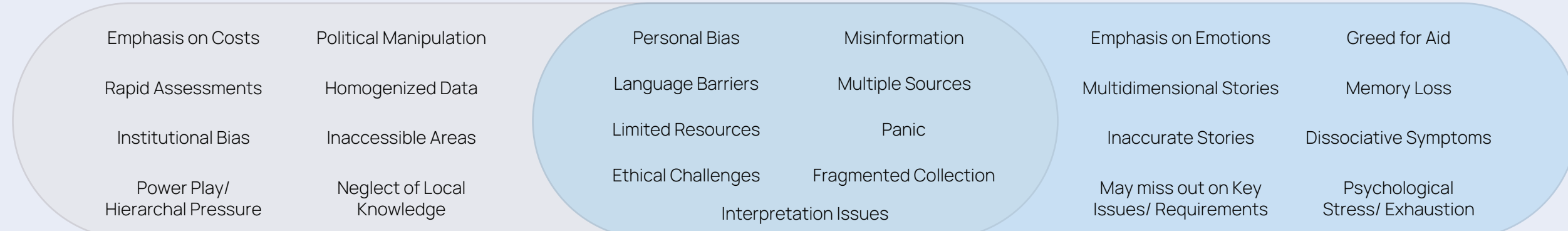
A flood generates more information than any single system can hold. What gets recorded depends on who is asking, how they are asking, and who has the power to make it official.

Measuring the Flood



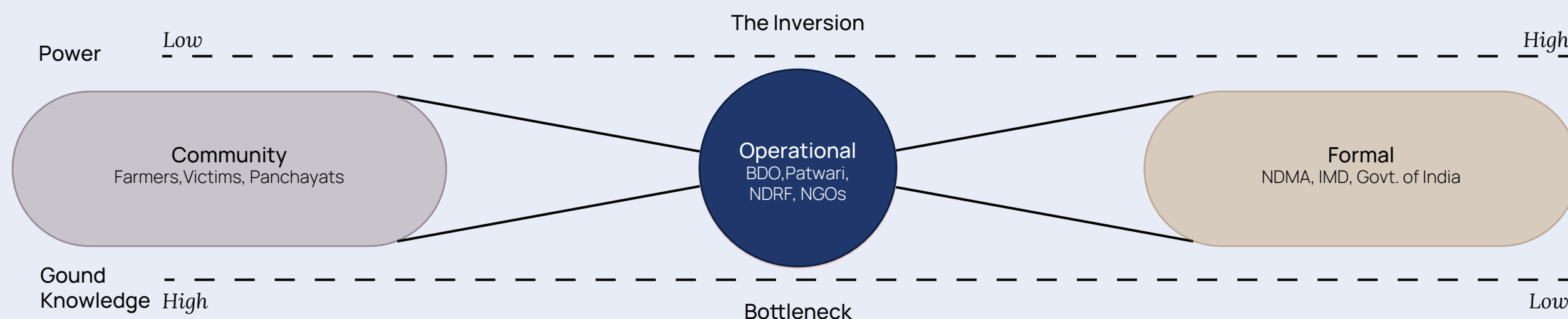
Where the Information Breaks Down

Both methods have their own limitations. Statistical data captures scale but strips context. Narratives carry depth but resist aggregation.



The Structural Gap

These gaps are not failures of method. They are features of a system designed around those with power to report, not those with proximity to experience. The closer to the crisis, the further from the decision.



What the Ripples tell Us?

