

Issues in land management



Orthodox in thinking and tyrannical in approach, there are many working contrary to the interests of the future generations of Pakistan

■ By Dr Noman Ahmed

THE Indus basin, its tributaries and many aligned locations have faced cyclic catastrophes in the form of floods and torrential rains during 2010 and 2011. Damages worth billions of rupees were caused to standing crops; produce storage yards; irrigation, communications and farming infrastructure.

During the heavy rains, the absentee land-lordism have been cited as longstanding vices that did not let the real farming potential blossom to the full. Successive land reforms towards the re-distribution of land did not yield the desirable results due to several counts.

A powerful coterie of feudal lords thwarted all attempts to deprive their class from vast and mighty scaled land-holdings that accounted for political influence, social control and economic

According to a research conducted by Ghulam Kibria, an eminent development practitioner, time and revenue losses due to litigation and administrative encumbrances cause an enormous impact on the overall output of farmers and farms. The gradual decline of village-oriented indigenous institutions that were used to settle land-based and other disputes are being replaced by ordinary courts of law.

inter family and inter-tribal quarrels that cause progressive bankruptcy.

The absence of a credible mechanism of land records and description is perhaps a cardinal problem in farm management. It is believed that more than 14,000 *patwaris* manage the entire repository of land information across the country.

Due to an overall decline in governance, frequent changes in the apparatus of administrative

now becoming a serious issue. Many studies have informed that the top soil layer, which used to be on an average six inches thick along the prime alluvial belts of river plains is being depleted due to heavy rains and poor capacity of farm managers to take preventive measures.

The construction of highways, roads and culverts create hindrances of smooth farm drainage. Since our farmers continue to depend upon the archaic

farming infrastructure.

During the heavy rains, the Left Bank Outfall Drain (LBOD) in Sindh flooded and spilled onto the adjoining areas and caused enormous damage to the tracts of land that fell across its right of way.

Local farmers in the affected districts were of the view that the present damage and loss shall need years of investment and input to reincarnate the affected lands. But farming land in Pakistan has been otherwise impacted by several issues which are vital to be addressed on a priority basis.

Without doubt, land is a finite asset that is gifted by Nature to the mankind. Apart from the forests, natural reserves and other vegetated/non-vegetated categories, croplands constituted the single largest land-use category in the national land register in Pakistan. Whereas the contribution of the farming sector to the GDP oscillates around 20 per cent or thereabouts, it extends direct employment to about 40 per cent of the labour force.

Thus, farm-lands virtually become the reservoirs of productivity that stabilise the national economy, livelihoods and food supply to the end consumer. Pakistan has inherited a vast complex of Barani (rain-fed) and irrigated lands, parts of which were called the granary of the subcontinent.

The existence of feudalism and

accounted for political influence, social control and economic influence over the common folks. Pirs (spiritual leaders), extended clans, chieftains of large tribes and dynastic descendants of erstwhile lords constitute the category of owners from the old traditional order.

Orthodox in thinking and tyrannical in approach and conduct, this combine of stakeholders kept self-interests and objectives as paramount against the normal progressive options in the modernisation of agriculture.

Scattered surveys reported that due to carelessness, lack of consideration or petty predicaments, many large landlords do not utilise the full scale of farming land under their ownership. A further dent to this decadent order is made in the form of division and sub-division of landholdings as a consequence of inheritance.

At the level of second and third generations, the fragmentation of land-holdings often reduces land parcels to dimensions unviable for extensive farming. According to one study, there are over four million family farms with an average farm size of 4.7 hectares.

It is further estimated that half of the farmers are owner-operators while the remaining are tenants and landless class or wage labourers. The farmer to land relation is affected by a number of factors.

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Thus, farmers, owners, occupants and contestants end up spending exorbitant time and money to arrive at basic resolution of disputes. Small time differences of opinion often acquire the status of intense conflicts and evolve into bloody feuds of ultra-dangerous proportions.

Easy availability of firearms leads to settling petty matters in a violent manner. Routine loss of life in ambushes often causes unending enmities between extended families. Instead of reaping the full potential of land resources and other potentials, the folks become entangled in

governance, frequent changes in the apparatus of administrative system during successive military and democratic regimes and sliding competence in land administration, enormous corruption emanates from the scenario. Several reform attempts have been initiated during different time periods in various regions of the country.

Land Record Management Information System Programme (LRMISP) in the Punjab and Participatory Information System (PIS) in Balochistan are two recent examples. Each attempted to introduce scientific procedures, use of information and computer technology, ensuring access of land-based information to common folks and reduction of corruption were core foci of the initiatives.

However, the systems were merely tools with little change found in the mindset of beneficiary officers of the Revenue department and the powerful landlords who benefited from the unclear status of the ownership of land.

Disbursement of agricultural credit, in many cases, deviates from the standard procedure of demanding proper collateral which may encourage several to use it as a lever to straighten the anomaly.

Agricultural land management is also affected by several physical constraints. Soil erosion and consequent loss of fertility is

drainage. Since our farmers continue to depend upon the archaic methods of flooding the fields in the name of irrigation, the demand of drainage rises enormously.

As roads and highways are constructed on higher levels without provisions of allowing adjoining fields to drain normal irrigation-based runoffs as well as flood or rain water, the issues related to water-logging and salinity continue to cause destruction.

The incessant use of pesticides makes the farm drainage a more stringent pre-requisite for ensuring productivity and conservation of fertility. Besides, the strange practices of clearing wild bushes and vegetation in the *katcha* areas lead to soil erosion at a massive scale.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, the clearing of forests to make room for farm footprints was done extensively during the past three decades. No regulatory control of any sort is visible to curb this undesirable practice.

Land for farming in Pakistan requires modern and scientific inputs of various kinds. To raise productivity, the introduction of corporate arrangements must be experimented with.

Bankability and easy acquisition of land by professional farming groups is one alternative. Scores of private enterprises have precious expertise to transform wastelands into cultivable

“AgriQuote”

The land too poor for any other crop is best for raising men.

— R. Pocock

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tracts. Similarly, many agro firms have credible potential of enhancing crop cycles from conventional two to three and even four a year.

But the unfriendly business environment, in the absence of innovation in agricultural land allocation, large-scale malpractices in land administration, orthodox mindset of 'men behind the plough' and a general resistance of positive change are core handicaps that confront this vital sector.

Value-added farming, which is capable of generating windfall profits, is also a strategic avenue that can be undertaken in lands meeting the appropriate parameters. Precious herbs, spices, medical ingredients and assortments of fibres are possible choices. At the experimental farm level, many locations have shown positive signs of productivity in this respect.

A centre for horticulture under the auspices of a private university in Deh Bund Murad Khan on the outskirts of Karachi is an example. With the right inputs, methods and technology, the centre has been able to produce invaluable herbs and medicinal plants in an otherwise tough farming terrain.

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With declining subsidies, the country needs a very progressive farming strategy. Needless to say that without a modern land management, any change in agricultural practices shall remain elusive.

A regional land use plan at the district and tehsil levels is another option to modernise land management and promote scientific farming. Basic records about land, its ownership and farming details, infrastructural thresholds available, cropping preferences and related variables can be made a part and parcel of this much-needed initiative.

With accurate information, not only will the farm-land utilisation shall benefit, but will also help eradicate corruption and malpractices from this vital domain of our national life. ■