## Policy needed to solve water problems

## **By Khalid Hussain**

PEOPLE are worried. Newspapers are screaming. Political (read military or military-appointed) managers are looking around for solutions. A drought is persisting into the fourth dry, lifedrenching year.

Salinity is on the rise all over the Indus basin. Dams are silted up. Drains have collapsed. Irrigation management has gone to the dogs. Prescribed institutional reforms are not working. Sindh is sinking into greater waterlogging. Ground water is fast depleting in the Punjab and Balochistan. Chemical pollution threatens drinking water supplies from aquifers in most urban centres. Water quality has deteriorated in all our rivers with mighty Indus the worst off. Folks in the coastal areas are helpless in the face of unprecedented inland intrusion by sea and the damage to fish nurseries. Sindh and the Punjab are again embroiled in water disputes.

Pakistan is in the grip of a water crisis. Attempts at an agreement between riparian provinces on how to share the scarcity brings out still unsettled issues despite the so-called "water accord"

The conflict becomes unresolvable when the question of drainage effluent disposal from the Punjab ultimately crops up. Sindh has serious reservations on allowing massively saline (20,000+ parts per million of salts from 573 SCARP tubewells) effluent from drainage projects located in the south of the Punjab on the border of the Sindh province. Around 0.65 million acre-feet of drainage effluent is discharged by SCARP-VI (Salinity Control and **Reclamation Project in Rahim** Yar Khan area) containing over 5.3 million tons of salt load. This effluent is presently drained

Cholistan desert. Serious environmental hazards are evident in the area with salinity steadily advancing onto the nearby fertile lands.

Sindh already has a massive problem of salinity and waterlogging. The Left Bank Outfall



Drain (LBOD) was until recently the single largest development undertaken by the government with a total price tag of Rs. 30 billion by the year 2000. The lynchpin of the LBOD was the Tidal Link, a euphemism for the drain where it was supposed to empty its load into the sea. It has already been damaged beyond repair. The five districts that were supposed to be dewatered by the LBOD system are still squashy ponds. The drought, however, has dried the upper crusts and water no longer is visible as extensively as it used to be. However, this does not mean that the LBOD has succeeded in its stated objective of reclaiming the waterlogged area left of the Indus.

And how could it be otherwise? Corruption is rampant in the institutions responsible for water management in the country. Starting from the federal ministry of economic affairs, planning commission, federal ministry of water and power, the notorious Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and its various research institutions and an army of local and foreign consul-

into evaporation ponds in the tants, to the provincial irrigation and drainage authorities (PIDAs), institutional decay is evident. All equity has been routed out of the system. Tailenders do not get water.

But then it is also worth asking what has the National Drainage Programme (NDP) achieved. Pakistan accepted \$785 million in loan money for the NDP from a consortium of donors led by the World Bank. It was conceived as an umbrella programme with a massive research input by scores of national and international consulting firms expressly to overcome the various problems and issues of sustainability in the world's largest contiguous irrigation system. WAPDA and the World Bank assured everybody that this is the cure for the system. Pakistan took the bitter pill despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of Pakistani technical experts were totally against the undertaking.

Four years down the road we find the same problems aggravated to a greater degree. This is despite the fact that we have spent substantial amounts of loan money on hundreds of projects to improve the environmental performance of the system. But then it is also very much understandable for we did use parts of the NDP loan for desilting of canals and procurement of imported machinery which is now rusting, lying useless at countless places with the PIDAs.

We also used that money to dig new drainage channels that have been choked before draining the lands even for a single season. Institutional reforms are their still in infancy. Independent studies show little hope of improvement through the suggested model now being tried in a pilot phase on one canal command in each of the provinces.

The NDP has indeed not changed anything save the nomenclature of the institutions involved. A major justification for the NDP was that it would ensure that the system recovers its operations and maintenance costs. But costs are still ahead of revenues. The SCARPs are the main culprits, eating into over 50 per cent of all budgetary allocations for irrigation. But we are still importing inappropriate technologies for drainage that have failed in the IBIS in the case of SCARPs. Ironically, the NDP itself is funding disinvestment of the earlier SCARP projects on the one hand and providing Rs. 488 million for new ones on the other.

Nothing has changed. It is about time that it did. It is about time that we acknowledge the linkages of water management with the way our macro-economic management is shaped. Water does not need imported expensive technologies for improved

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management. When the English colonisers started the Three Canals Project, including the Upper Jhelum Canal and the Lower Chenab canals in 1905 they did it with donkeys and pick axes. Why do we need foreign loans for digging drainage channels and putting in tubewells when we can do that all by local resources. We need jobs. We do not need loans that transfer jobs outside of our economy.

The inability of dams to come to the rescue of the people in trying times like the present one is a further reinforcement of the global experience that construction of massive structures is not the way to ensure water security. But this is still eluding most of our water managers. Some call for building of more dams. The federal minister for agriculture in consultation with others is considering outlandish science-fiction fixes for the drought. He wants to melt the Himalayan glaciers with lasers! It is the same mindset with differing orders of senility that is fixated upon spending more illcontracted loans to put the system back in shape. Loans and foreign advice are the two real maladies responsible for the current state of the system in the Indus Basin.

It is in this context that the present drought and scarcity are compounding national injuries. There are well-researched and tested methods available for stretching the existing water for as many of our needs as the society deems necessary. We still have plenty of water despite the drought. But to share that we need an articulated water policy ensuring transparency in our water management instead of

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secret deals over loans and procurements. The crisis calls for a thorough review of our pastefforts at improving the situation of water in order to determine the way forward for a sustainable future.

Water is a reflective medium. It will reflect our approach, attitude and relationship to it. It is time we tried out some human solutions without foreign advice and without foreign money. Let's begin by asking all corcerned what can we do with our water within our own resources.