

Worsening irrigation water problems

Agriculture

By Ahmad Fraz Khan

PAKISTAN'S water woes refuse to go away, rather are worsening day by day. No one seems to be interested in solving water problems in the spirit of federalism. The whole issue is seen through the prism of perceived provincial interests, mostly misplaced, if water experts are to be believed.

The federating units are trying to maximise their share of the cake, which, unfortunately, is getting reduced by the day. In such a situation, it is win or lose situation; one unit can only increase its share at the cost of others, and add to mistrust is complicating the problem further.

The water economy is collapsing, taking down agriculture with it. The statistical realities of water problems are mind boggling. Pakistan's per capita water availability has been allowed to drop by an unimaginable 500 per cent during the last six decades; it is currently floating just above the international poverty line.

How Pakistan, as a federation, has allowed this poverty to take over it is clear from its own failure to pursue its planning. After commissioning of Tarbella Dam in 1976, it had intended to develop storage by seven per cent per year. By that calculation, it should have built a dam of five million acre feet every seven years. That means, it should have built five dams (of 25maf) and executing the sixth one by

now. It has not built even one.

Its both dams have lost 28 per cent storage capacity – from 15maf in the late 70s to current just above 11maf. The effects of this on agriculture are more than evident. Its food security (wheat) hinges on Rabi supplies, which suffer 25 per cent water shortage even when both dams are filled – a rarity in itself – and it regularly suffers 35 per cent shortage during Rabi. Its main cash crop (cotton) suffers heavy water shortages during sowing (late Rabi and early Kharif) because there is no water during March and April.

The Tarbella Dam, which used to serve the agricultural needs up to mid-June, when the next filling cycle starts, now regularly hits dead level by early or mid-March. Silt eats up its storage by 100,000 acre feet – 10 days' irrigation supplies. By that calculation, it would start hitting the dead level by the end of January in next five years, leaving the country without second and third irrigation supplies for wheat and sowing needs of cotton – threatening both food security and nearly 60 per cent exports in one go.

Despite these hair-raising scenario, current class of politicians, in order to be seen doing something, has limited itself to interpreting and re-interpreting distribution mechanism instead of expanding its resources, without realising that such attitude has landed the federation in the messy situation in the first place.

The Water Accord of 1991, which finalised water distribution in the country, has undergone numerous interpretations and reinterpretations, all highly controversial,

since it was signed – each time satisfying one federating unit or the other, but creating problems for the federation itself.

Yet another attempt is under way to "re-interpret" the distribution mechanism, which, if the past practices are something to go by, means playing with the same statistics, forcing the hands of water bureaucracy to come up with new figures, which no stakeholders would believe, and taking a technical decision through participatory management – thus sowing another seed of discord among provinces.

This time, the entire effort is riveted at whether water supplies above 103 million acre feet should be distributed under Para-2 of the Accord or under historic usage formula. Without going into the merits and demerits of the attempt, the fact remains that if it succeeds, for which irrigation minister from Sindh was in Lahore three days back, one of the federating unit would benefit at the cost of other, and things would stand further complicated.

During the last three decades, Pakistan's water policy has remained based on five pillars: simply deny the facts, re-interpret them to avoid decisions, procrastinate when it comes to decision making, sacrifice agriculture and economy at the altar of politics and reinterpret existing realities instead of taking any new initiatives.

All governments and individuals on the top, politician or military dictator, have contributed their share in complicating the crisis. The original sin can be assigned to the late military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, who deliberately politicised the issue to

tion

S

create divisions among federating units and capitalise on proverbial divide-and-rule policy to save and prolong his rule.

The two PPP governments, during the late eighties and mid-nineties, swept the crisis under the carpet to avoid what could have been provincially controversial decisions. Third time, it simply has neither any water policy nor it seems interested in one. Instead of taking water matters to the National Assembly, the presidency is issuing decrees without even bothering to justify them.

With the benefit of the hindsight, one can claim that the PML-N botched up the issue even more; reducing the entire crisis to some statistical facts, and killing the federal spirit of the entire issue. Its creation – the Indus River System Authority (Irsa) – to manage and develop water resources has been part of the problem rather than solution; it has becoming a club, where all representatives take their emotive provincial points of view and fight it out among themselves rather than acting as a one authority and finding federal solutions to provincial problems.

Pervez Musharraf, during his days as a dictator, promised and tried to take the issue head on, but with political ambitions taking better of him, he backed off – leaving the issue festering. At the end, it has turned out to be bad politics, worst economics and disastrous for agriculture.

It is not a matter of arguing in favour of one dam or opposing the other reservoir. The sooner we, as a nation and a federation, revisit the water issue, the better it would be for the country.