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June 8, 2021

**Voices from Balochistan**

What keeps Balochistan poor was summarized succinctly by a local farmer of District Killa Saifullah while narrating stories of plight: “Our wretchedness and poverty lies in our riches.” Other farmers sitting around him nodded approvingly.

I want to dedicate this column to the voices of these local farmers. Those at the higher echelon of policymaking must take pause and reflect upon these voices which make great sense to build a prosperous Balochistan. Although this discussion was focused on District Killa Saifullah, it seems true for other parts of Balochistan too.

Killa Saifullah has great potential for agriculture as a key economic driver to attain prosperity because of its conducive climatic conditions for multiple crops, better access to urban markets and a functional karez system. Killa Saifullah is famous for its apples, grapes, peaches, cherries and apricots but production is on decline due to stress on water resources. Local farmers say that rather than growing apples and apricots, olive plants can be grown which consume less water but have high demand in the local and national market. Per the farmers, olive plantation, oil extraction, processing and packaging along with associated skills is key for economic transformation. Some have already started olive plantations and they are making good income despite having limited access to financial services to scale up their enterprise.

There was general consensus among all the local farmers that the government, private sector and development agencies must support long-term development planning rather than doling out cash and charity. There has to be an entrepreneurship development approach which must entail soft agricultural loans for local farmers, business development services for the youth and market linkage support for establishing reliable value chains.

In addition to olive, other high-quality fruits with less water consumption – like pomegranate, grapes, almonds and peaches – can be grown organically for high-end markets. People also grow traditional crops like wheat and corn while buckwheat can be introduced; it consumes less water and has high demand in urban areas as a nutritious food. The district is on the verge of facing spells of drought and its grazing lands and pastures have receded over the years. Traditional breeds of local livestock can be raised as a source of organic meat and dairy products if government and development agencies invest in integrated drought mitigation programmes. Investment in fodder storage for the winter and protecting grazing land through regulation will help improve the local economy.

District Killa Saifullah is one of the few districts of Balochistan where the Karez system is still functional, but it has been overburdened because of the increasing demand for water. The district faces an imminent water crisis while underground water sources continue to deplete due to conventional water intensive agricultural practices. For instance, the most agriculturally productive area of Kan Mehtarzai faces desertification as the underground water table has gone down to some 600 to 1100 feet due to excessive pumping and absence of aquifer replenishing technologies. Many farmers in the area are scared that they are losing their fruit orchards, the backbone of their income due to the scarcity of water.

Local experts of water and agriculture sectors suggest that government and development agencies must invest in integrated water management initiatives. This includes building rainwater harvest ponds, checking dams and small water reservoirs to store the monsoon downpour, snowfall in the winter, flood waters and other seasonal hydrological flows.

Balochistan does not have any aquifer regulation law to govern the use of underground water. Eighty percent of the population of Killa Saifullah depends on agriculture as a major source of livelihood and most farmers use solar-powered tube wells for irrigation purposes in absence of efficient technologies. Modern technologies like drip irrigation, use of water sprinklers and rain harvesting methods have not been introduced; they could reduce the burden on the depleting sources of ground water in Killa Saifullah.

One of the major reasons for deforestation is the use of wood as domestic fuel in the absence of alternate energy resources in the area. Winter in most parts of the district is harsh and local people use wood for heating and cooking purposes. The rural part of the district is plunged into darkness with 18 hours of daily loadshedding during the winter while in the main town of district people face up to 16 hours of loadshedding in 24 hours.

The district of Killa Saifullah has commercial potential to generate clean energy as a major source of domestic fuel from its existing hydrological, solar and wind resources. The district has a functional karez system, areas of high solar intensity and wind corridors as hybrid and cost-efficient sources of energy generation. According to the local stakeholders, some surveys were conducted by private companies some five years ago in Muslim Bagh to assess the potential of power generation from the karez system, solar intensity and wind corridor but nothing has happened since because of lack of support from the government.

Unemployment amongst the youth is one of the major factors of poverty in Killa Saifullah where 70 percent of young people are either unemployed or engaged in the informal sector, reportedly due to a lack of employable or entrepreneurial skills to earn a reasonable income. Two ICT centers were established in Killa Saifullah in 2016 where more than 100 young people were trained in various IT skills; they now earn a decent income. The local people see a great value in such initiatives.

Like other parts of the province, the local government structure is nonexistent in Killa Saifullah and there is no mechanism to address these development priorities of local people. In a brief meeting on May 22, 2021 in Quetta Zahoor Buledi, the provincial finance minister assured that the government of Balochistan will soon enact a new local governance act. I hope this happens soon and the development needs expressed by the local people are addressed as a priority.

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