**Clearing smog**

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It has now become an annual ritual at this time of year. Smog blankets paddy pockets in central Punjab with ever-growing intensity. What ensues is the usual inconsequential hullabaloo. Environmentalists, politicians, ordinary people, media, and even government representatives talk the talk – and then comes the administration’s turn.

Some farmers, factories and vehicles are fined; some brick kilns are shut down, and that’s about it. Governments await rains. Once rains begin pouring down, smog, and the ruckus around it, is washed away.

What else can a government do in an ungovernable country where consecutive federal and provincial governments could not even enforce a ban on single-use plastic bags – not even in one city, where violent mobs freely rob citizens of their rights to freedom of movement, and where charged crowds who target policemen are later defended by self-proclaimed intellectuals on the media as exercising their ‘democratic right’ and are called ‘our own people’ by state institutions which are supposed to defend the people.

But it is the same country where a sitting government gets 33 bills, some highly controversial too, approved in a single joint session of parliament. So that means that – when motivated – the governments in this country can make the impossible possible. We would need this kind of motivation and drive by the government for coming up with solutions to our problems such as the problem of smog.

First, let’s talk about the root cause of the smog problem: the burning of stubble in paddy fields. The solution to the problem is not only simple but would also provide seasonal employment to thousands of people, which would create goodwill for the government. But before we divulge the idea, it is important to have a look at some facts.

Fact number one: paddy farmers burn crop leftovers in order to evade the labour cost of clearing fields. Fact number two: mechanisation and weedicides have rendered numerous farm labourers out of work.

The idea is to combine these two facts to create a viable solution to the process of burning rice fields. The Punjab government should launch an annual scheme from next year to clear the fields of rice crop leftovers by recruiting farm labourers for the end season. The agriculture department should be given the task and budget to implement the scheme.

Even though the scheme will be carried out from the next season, the process will have to be started now. In the first phase, the authorities should mark the areas to be included in the scheme and ascertain the number of farm labourers to weed out and clear crop residue. Per-acre labour cost will have to be calculated based on the total target acreage divided by the required number of farm labourers. In the next phase, the registration of farm labourers will be made.

Usually it is labourers’ families who work on fields so they will have to be registered accordingly. To identify and register farm labourers based on their availability during the end of the rice season, the Punjab agriculture department may seek assistance from agriculture companies such as pesticide, weedicide and fertiliser marketers and field research agencies which enjoy deep field penetration in various crop belts.

Having been driven out of fields by mechanisation and weedicides, farm labourers have moved to cities for work in droves. They survive on a mix of temporary manual jobs and face intermittent unemployment; they should also be involved in the scheme. This would lessen population pressure on cities and enable unemployed farm labourers to work in their line of expertise. The rice crop stubble removed from the fields could be used in organic fertiliser, sediment control, livestock fodder and bedding, and construction material, etc.

If this proposed scheme is implemented, it would eradicate one of the major causes of smog as far as rice pickets on our side of Punjab are concerned. The Punjab government should start working on the scheme from now, it would significantly contribute to reducing the intensity of smog, improving people’s lives, providing employment to thousands of unemployed farm labourers and increasing the government’s popularity.

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