**[Iceberg in desert](https://www.dawn.com/news/1676251/iceberg-in-desert)**

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The writer is a poet. His latest publication is a collection of satire essays titled Rindana.

WE know very well that poverty is not just lack of resources. It is also the lack of access and opportunity. We also know that in order to make people care about something passionately, one has to create a stake in it for them. Most of the time the ‘stake’ already exists, but the real challenge is to connect the right dots for it to become visible to all.

What do you think my village folk in Tharparkar would say if one were to bring up the largest-ever iceberg, with a surface area of 4,320 square kilometres, splitting from Antarctica in May last year due to global warming? Besides wondering what an iceberg is and where Antarctica might be, their biggest question would most likely be ‘asaan jo cha wanjey’ (why should it matter to us?) Here lies the rub. No, they are not ignorant. They may be unlettered but they are not slow. To the contrary, they are very smart. It is just that poverty has kept them in the rut of day-to-day survival where sick children, leaking thatched roofs and lack of anti-snake serum and dog-bite vaccines leave them no time to think of the larger existential issues.

Climate change smacks the rural poor in the face with much more ferocity and frequency than it does the urban population. Increasing water scarcity, both for drinking and irrigation, the rising temperature and its impact on crops, rising prices of inputs like seed and fertiliser and supply chain disruptions are all in one way or the other caused or exacerbated by the effects of climate change.

How can the poor hari or sharecropper help in any of that, one may ask? More importantly, who will connect all of these dots for her? The government will not because it is part of the problem. It employs thousands of agriculture extension services staff who, like some teachers of public-sector schools, sit at home and draw their salaries. Governments hire them to get votes and cannot fire them for non-performance as it makes them unpopular and impacts their electoral chances.

Climate change is far more devastating for the rural poor.

The government is also part of the problem as it protects and supervises water theft. There is absolutely no accountability for what happens to the provincial share of water under the Irsa accord of 1991 once it enters the respective province. However, come the floods (an annual feature now) and the smallholders get more than their fair share of floodwaters that submerge standing crops and orchards because a) governments do not find drainage schemes ‘sexy’ enough for their vote-oriented tastes, and b) politically connected persons continue to encroach upon natural waterways and drains. Ill-conceived and politically motivated drainage fixes without any concern whatsoever for the LBOD’s (Left Bank Outfall Drain) capacity lead to overflows and submerge agricultural fields and towns in Mirpurkhas and the adjoining districts in Sindh routinely.

While governments are hamstrung by political expediency, NGOs and civil society have also not graduated from organising raids on ‘wadera jails’ under the full media glare, leaving the ‘rescued’ families on the road as soon as the camera teams leave. These families go straight to another wadera and take another loan but are unable to pay it off as no NGO has ever helped them with family planning, and the sheer size of the family makes it impossible for them to make ends meet — despite getting a 50 per cent share from the crop proceeds. As they continuously need loans, at some point their landlord refuses to extend a new loan till the previous are paid off. A new wadera seems like the only option for a new loan; they move out without paying off their existing loan. Another raid on the ‘wadera jail’ is assured if their movement is impeded, another photo-op and the vicious cycle continues.

Can we imagine the day when both the rural and urban electorate realise they need to ask for climate change-related measures, which are no different from your basic good governance if anyone wants their votes? Poverty keeps their imagination tied to getting government jobs, safety from the thana and access to the patwarkhana (land and revenue records). An occasional repair of a patch of road earns additional brownie points for the ruling political party.

Access to agricultural loans, connection to markets, absolute accountability and equity in water resources, drainage schemes with proper social and engineering inputs, a gradual move away from the excessive use of fertiliser and pesticides, and an urgent demand for machinery to do away with the age-old practice of burning crop stubbles is the order of the day. For this to happen, we need to explain the iceberg and Antarctica to my village folk. Anyone up for the challenge? Guess not. OK! Let us continue with cops and robbers games while the ill-bred hybrid system is ‘rebooted’.

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