[**Transformational change**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689274/transformational-change)

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A PROLONGED heatwave has engulfed most of India and Pakistan for the last several weeks, indicating the onset of a ‘new normal’ in the region. The residents of Karachi lost almost 2,000 lives and suffered 50,000 heat-related illnesses during Ramazan in June 2015. They and others in the country feel anguished that the government has chosen to be a spectator, rather than implementing the Karachi Heatwave Management Plan: A Guide to Planning & Responses that was subsequently developed in 2017 as a model plan for other cities. The provincial and federal governments have failed to mobilise their resources and stakeholders to implement the plan. Reducing the toll climate change takes on lives and livelihoods is not possible without undertaking transformational change.

Pakistanis have been missing transformative change for decades. Climate has added to their desperation. Regrettably, successive governments’ appetite for reforms has historically been dismal. Perhaps the last transformative leader we had was Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. The Sharif brothers have preferred to create parallel institutions to speed up action rather than make the effort to reform existing institutions. In fact, most of their success stories emanate from their newly created parallel institutions.

PPP-led governments, on the other hand, typically prioritised constitutional changes and federal-provincial relations that have changed the federal landscape, rather than undertaking any institutional reforms. Ziaul Haq reformed or deformed the constitutional and legal systems in his attempts to politicise Islam. Imran Khan, who was elected on the mandate of tabdeeli, did not initiate any systemic reforms. Instead, like Gen Musharraf, he preferred a series of top-down projects that could not always result in sustainable initiatives.

Despite a well-defined environmental agenda and institutions, no government since the early 1990s has undertaken any transformative reforms to protect the environment or slow down the onset of climate change. A series of projects, no matter how useful, cannot diminish the need for systemic reforms.

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The concept of transformational change has gained traction among sustainable development decision-makers and practitioners, in recognition of the fundamental changes in economic activity required to meet the global goals of the Paris Agreement for climate action. But what is transformational change? Simply put, it is a series of well-deliberated fundamental system changes to enable climate action with large-scale positive impacts. The purpose is to shift and accelerate the trajectory of progress towards low-carbon or carbon-neutral and resilient development.

The Word Bank’s Climate Investment Funds has defined five dimensions or attributes of transformational change: a) relevance: anchoring the alignment with long-term goals and contexts, b) system change: spearheading fundamental shifts in systems, structures and functions, c) speed: ensuring accelerated impacts to achieve the needed change d) scale: envisioning bigger and broader processes and impacts, and e) sustainability: nurturing adaptiveness and resilience to climatic changes.

Why should a coalition government that has a precariously thin majority and finds itself in the midst of a financial crisis that virtually borders on default even be thinking about transformational change? Because it has inherited a built-up throw-forward of at least 1,260 unfinished public-sector development projects, with an accumulated price tag of Rs6.2 trillion. It requires a moratorium on new projects for at least a decade to clear the deck. At present, the yearly level of PSDP allocation has already shrunk to about Rs500 billion to Rs600bn.

This is an opportunity for the government to avoid lock-in into maladaptation, climate vulnerability, inefficient energy use and associated high emissions, instead of low-carbon and resilient development. While the government may not be able to get the promised legislation on electoral reforms passed, the coalition partners that represent almost all parliamentary parties, minus the PTI, have a rare opportunity to weave climate considerations into the mainstream national development agenda through four transformational actions:

First, while the Ministry of Climate Change can prioritise the implementation agenda for the Nationally Determined Contributions, the Planning Commission can embed transformational change in development planning, including PC-1s, annual development plans and budgets. It can lead and leverage its position to overhaul and climate-proof the PSDP, particularly the throw-forward portfolio of already approved but unimplemented projects by working closely with the provincial planning and development departments.

Second, subsidies on water consumption must be ended by introducing the principle of full-cost recovery in agricultural, industrial, commercial and domestic water usage. The water markets in Pakistan are mature, and there is sufficient willingness as well as the ability to pay for quality water services. In fact, the construction of large reservoirs and the development of canal command areas outside Indus Basin areas should be only financed through payments for water services. The available fiscal space in water sector must be availed.

Third, Pakistan needs to shed the fallacy that hydropower is the least expensive option and needs to pursue other non-renewable options. We need energy all year round and not only when water is available in the reservoirs. For energy efficiency, the distribution companies need to be re-envisioned by enabling direct transactions between producers and buyers. This will also reduce demand for imported energy. Attractive lending terms by commercial banks can help solarise over a million rooftops every year to shave off the peak loads. Between solarisation and charging stations for electric vehicles, there may be an opportunity to create high-quality, sustainable jobs while pursuing low-carbon development.

Fourth, a very high percentage of the country’s population is food-insecure while malnutrition and stunting have assumed global proportions. Pakistan’s fundamental challenge in 2047 would be to produce sufficient food for a population of nearly 350m with half the water available. This requires transformational change in cropping patterns, productivity, and phasing out thirsty crops that are both uncompetitive and beneficiaries of inequitable subsidies on water, fertilisers, and floor prices.

In all, instead of spending his time overcoming implementation delays in projects by the last government, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif would be better advised to invest his time with his coalition partners to create a national consensus for transformational change and redefine the development direction of the country.

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