**Can we lead the climate charge?**

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Climate is a critical focus today due to the increasing impact of heatwaves and environmental changes on earth. Extreme weather patterns and long-term shifts in temperatures are affecting the entire globe. The year 2024 was the hottest on record, signalling the onset of new catastrophic trends in the coming years if not properly addressed by the global community.

For Pakistan, the situation is particularly alarming, as it has been ranked the fifth most vulnerable country to climate change. Natural disasters are increasingly affecting our economy, despite the efforts of disaster management authorities to mitigate these impacts. However, these authorities still have a long way to go to achieve the desired results and protect against future climate-related disasters.

The likelihood of rising temperatures in the coming years is high, driven by factors ranging from atmospheric carbonization and emissions to fossil fuel use, deforestation, and population growth. Extreme weather conditions are spreading globally, creating ripple effects that result in severe heat events, which reduce the capacity and working hours of the labour force.

Heatwaves can trigger a domino effect, impacting populations worldwide. The summer of 2024 was particularly challenging, especially in North and South America, where heat waves resulted in an incremental increase of 1.4 C. This trend suggests that similar extreme weather events will become more common in future seasons.

There are already numerous reports and research detailing the economic losses, deaths, displacement, and migration caused by climate change. It is reported that approximately 216 million people migrate each year to escape the effects of climate change.

By 2050, this number could rise to nearly 500 million, with as many as 1.2 billion people potentially displaced due to extreme weather conditions. The death toll from these events could reach one million by the end of this century if the issue of rising temperatures and heat waves is not properly addressed. Global warming could lead to a temperature increase of around 1.5 C by 2050, with devastating consequences for the world, as estimated losses suggest.

The world first started recognizing in the 1990s that rising temperatures would ultimately disrupt human life on Earth. However, it wasn’t until the start of the current century that this realization took solid form. Now that the dangers of climate change are fully acknowledged, there is an urgent need to focus on reducing the use of fossil fuels.

At COP28 in the UAE last year, the global community pledged to gradually reduce fossil fuel usage, but no specific timeline was agreed upon for eliminating it. With COP29 approaching, it is crucial to build consensus on eliminating the harmful factors contributing to global warming to protect humanity. Pakistan, being a disaster-prone country, must prioritize these efforts in the upcoming COP29 discussions.

COP29 presents a valuable opportunity to address global climate challenges, particularly for countries like Pakistan, which are disproportionately affected. It would be an ideal platform for Pakistan to highlight its climate-related struggles, the initiatives it has undertaken to tackle these issues, and potential solutions.

Despite contributing less than one per cent to global carbon emissions, Pakistan is among the most severely impacted by climate change. A comprehensive, regional, and inclusive growth model is urgently needed to tackle these challenges. Implementing a robust climate change policy and action plan is essential to safeguard the most vulnerable, including the poor and marginalized communities, who bear the brunt of climate-related disasters.

Pakistan’s situation is comparable to other countries facing extreme weather, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and South America. Humanity’s actions are exacerbating global warming, with the increasing frequency and intensity of heat waves and weather-related disasters. The cumulative effects of global warming are wreaking havoc worldwide, and the growing threat to food security and human lives is making developing countries even more vulnerable. Studies indicate that rising temperatures and heat waves are contributing to mental health problems, alongside increasing risks of mortality and morbidity on a larger scale.

Recently, Pakistan has experienced some of the worst torrential rains, compounded by glacial outbursts that led to devastating flash floods in the northern areas, sweeping away buildings and infrastructure. Two years ago, similar torrential rains affected almost all parts of Pakistan, severely impacting the economic landscape, particularly in Sindh, Balochistan, and the northern regions.

The scale of the disaster prompted a visit by the UN secretary-general, and a special conference was convened in Switzerland under the UN’s auspices. The estimated cost of damage from these flash floods and heavy rains was approximately $32 billion, with promises of $10 billion in aid from various countries and organizations to support recovery efforts.

Glacial outburst is a relatively new phenomenon impacting the earth’s weather patterns, and Pakistan is among the most affected countries. Recognizing this, the UNDP has initiated projects to address the issue. The phenomenon of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) is a critical concern, and it is essential to tackle it swiftly to prevent further losses in Pakistan. The second phase of the UNDP-funded project, GLOF-2, is currently being implemented. Projects like GLOF are vital for mitigating climate risks and reducing the damage caused by climate change, particularly in vulnerable countries like Pakistan.

Reports indicate that the UK plans to support Pakistan in implementing seven innovative climate change projects. Unfortunately, Pakistan is ill-prepared for such challenges, as evidenced by the devastating torrential rains and flash floods two years ago, which wreaked havoc on the economy. At that time, the country was unable to present adequate disaster response plans to donor nations to secure necessary support.

The upcoming projects include floating solar farms, the use of AI for emissions reduction, clean energy generation from agricultural waste, e-bikes, and other low-carbon initiatives for clean energy. However, more projects and policies are needed to reduce carbon emissions. There is significant potential for clean energy generation, particularly from wind, solar, and battery-based power, which could be effectively used in electric vehicles and bikes. These areas must be actively promoted and supported to achieve meaningful results.

Pakistan faces numerous policy challenges, such as operationalizing the Climate Change Authority, which was established under an Act by the Ministry of Climate Change. The ministry’s primary role is to engage stakeholders in formulating a comprehensive policy framework to protect the country from the impacts of climate change. However, the government is currently considering abolishing this ministry, along with others, as part of a downsizing effort.

This decision will be crucial, as it would shift all responsibilities to the Climate Change Authority. While there is no harm in centralizing these functions under the authority, it is essential that the authority be strengthened and empowered to effectively carry out its policy-making and enforcement duties.

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