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SINDH as the most vulnerable region of Pakistan, has braved climate-induced catastrophes. These have caused frequent harm to agricultural lands, livestock and entire human settlements, forcing the vulnerable to sink deeper into poverty. Millions have yet to recover from last year’s monster monsoon floods.

For centuries, land has played a pivotal role in Sindh’s power politics. The British used land as reward for loyalists, solidifying the jagirdari system. After the conquest of Sindh, Gen Charles Napier in 1843, displayed significant sympathy for indigenous jagirdars with the restoration of jagirs, which strengthened feudalism and blocked land reforms. Although it was clear that the abolition of jagirs would increase agricultural productivity and revenue for the British, Napier did not want to lose the political support of landlords. This land distribution was criminal as it created rural slavery, bonded labour and free labour. In the Gazetteer of West Pakistan: the Former Province of Sindh including Khairpur State, H.T Sorley says that the then revenue commissioner, Sidney Ridley, advocated abolishment of jagirs on legal grounds — after independence, the services of jagirdars were not required.

Thus, on Feb 8, 1955, this despotic system of control stood weakened with the cancellation of sanads by the Sindh government. And in 1959, the Land Reforms Commission abolished jagirs. But the feudal system survived and has a destructive impact on prospects of social and political change in Sindh, such as low agricultural productivity and exhaustion of land. Thus, obliteration of feudalism and illegal occupation of water resources will make disaster-management much easier. The recent floods caused widespread devastation in districts where the flow of water was blocked and bridges and embankments were broken by feudals to inflict losses on political opponents. But the poor who voted against the rulers faced the worst distress. People fear another bout of agony if natural waterways are not restored across Sindh.

The provincial bureaucracy has recently drafted a policy for resettlement and rehabilitation of people displaced by development projects. The policy was opened to public debate at the commissioner’s office in Hyderabad on Feb 9, 2023. An overriding objective of this policy is to provide reasonable compensation to people dislocated from sites and to mitigate their difficulties. However, it can be argued that it will not be sustainable without land reforms and subsequent redistribution of land and redefining land ownership rights. Also, the policy has deliberately ignored victims of climate disasters. It must, therefore, be revised keeping the ravages of climate change in view.

The feudal system survives with all its destructive traits.

The land allotment policy should also be revisited to ensure that land holders devote an area for cultivation of forests. The available forest land in Sindh is largely unmapped; digital mapping is imperative in order to understand the escalation in environmental degradation caused by deforestation. In addition, the provincial government as per orders of the Supreme Court, must retrieve thousands of acres of forest land illegally occupied by landed elite, to protect forest cover.

The draft policy in its present form has legal issues. For example, usurping ownership rights will trigger litigation and conflict. There is no mechanism to deal with such procedural complications without amendments in the colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894. Forced dislocation of people, free labour, exploitation of local resources should be avoided and the policy for displacement must be protected by legislative process.

The document is also devoid of a conf­l­ict resolution met­h­­od for disputes stemm­ing from disturbance in the social structure and must debate social and cultural aspects of resettlement and rehabilitation. Environmental degradation, caused by projects such as Left Bank Outfall Drain and Thar coal project, has been overlooked. Policy­makers must learn lessons from past rehabilitation strategies and the government should reduce the existing trust deficit by providing compensation to the displaced and the labour class. All stakeholders must participate in a dialogue at the policy formulation level. Growers and native communities must be consulted and convinced for the policy to be workable.

The policy draft is based on theoretical assumptions without scientific analysis. It must outline a path to success by assigning responsibility for implementation, installing accountability mechanisms and illustrate protection of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights of communities in times of climate calamities, exacerbated by underdeveloped water infrastructure and anthropogenic factors.

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