**Threat of Urban Flooding**

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On 6 July, 2023, in its Flood Management Conference, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) gave a wake-up call to the key stakeholders regarding the risk of urban flooding in all major cities of Pakistan. According to the World Bank, in 2022, Pakistan lost $30 billion to monsoon floods causing a dent in its economy. This time, the stakes are high and the fiscal loss is expected to be bigger due to high infrastructure development and maintenance cost in cities. Currently, Pakistan is only following ‘real-time flood forecasting’ as a strategy to mitigate urban flooding. This will decrease the fiscal and humanitarian loss, but it will not uproot the annual problem of urban flooding.
Pakistan, being a geographically diverse country requires different urban flood management models for effective implication. Pakistan could first target its major economic hubs like Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, and Islamabad for redevelopment to prevent urban flooding and economic losses. Karachi, being the financial and industrial centre with an estimated GDP of $164 billion, should be the first priority. For this purpose, policymakers could start working on non-structural reforms as they are less costly. This includes regulating solid waste management and clean-up drives, many of which were piloted in varying capacities in Karachi. However, the urban floods of August 2020 in Karachi point to the failure of policy implementation. It has been four years since campaign’s inauguration, but permanent waste disposal sites are still under construction or lost in a pack of files.
As urban flooding becomes an annual issue for all the major cities of Pakistan, structural reforms are required for a long-term sustainable solution. This includes runoff control measures such as control over housing developments, public squares, and main urban watercourse. For expanding cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad this could be very effective, as it would control new housing societies, along with redevelopment of old drainage infrastructure. Infiltration and percolation is another strategy to prevent water storage near the main roads and commercial areas. It enables more water to penetrate the ground, thus curbing surface runoff and keeping the traffic moving during heavy rainfalls. In addition, by increasing the runoff efficiency through canals and conduits, flood water could be timely drained out of the cities into the rivers. One of these efficient methods is community mapping. In Karachi, community mapping of Manzoor Colony drainage system has been chalked out by Urban Resource Centre that will increase the drainage capacity of the colony to 100 percent by widening the drains two feet from both sides. It will also sweep away the drainage water of adjacent societies. However, it requires demolition of houses, prompting ruckus by the residents. Government authorities and stakeholders are required to make urgent settlement with residents to save Karachi from urban flooding. If successful, it could also be implemented in other major cities like Lahore.
Keeping in view all these structural and non-structural reforms, the bottleneck is the dwindling economy of Pakistan. According to World Bank Group’s Country Climate and Development Report (CCDR), 2022, Pakistan should be spending 10 percent of its cumulative GDP till 2030 on infrastructural development to meet the global infrastructure gap. However, it spent just 2.1 percent of its GDP on infrastructural development in the FY21-22. Moreover, with the current trend of accelerating inflation, the cost of development is also increasing, making it a pipe dream for the government to combat urban flooding. Therefore, it is the test of time for the policymakers and administrative authorities to combat urban flooding when Pakistan’s economy is hitting its historic rock bottom. In FY24, the national budget of Pakistan reserves largest share of Rs950 billion for infrastructure development. The National Finance Commission should, therefore, lay out a budget plan for all major cities, keeping in view their economic importance and developmental needs. Moreover, for these reforms to be effective and successful, inter-departmental cooperation between central and provincial governments is required to ensure the policy implementation of urban flood models.