[**Monuments of maladaptation**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1728837/monuments-of-maladaptation)

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CAN we plan to reduce the cost of climate change to our people and economy? The loss and damage caused by the floods this summer have shaken the foundation of our economic planning. We have learnt that the monsoon has changed its pattern: it has become more unpredictable in terms of rainfall timing, location, and quantity.

In 2022, we learnt that non-Indus floods can be more destructive than riverine floods. The year 2023 provides us an opportunity to rewrite our flood manuals and policy documents to redefine the basis of our development planning. In 2022, we learnt about three climate threats that can recur at any time, but not in the same order.

First, the threshold of unusually high rainfall has changed. The previous averages are not reliable planning tools for flood preparedness.

Second, the era of compound extreme weather events has begun, where two or more climate disasters can coincide or spur on each other.

Third, except for cash disbursement through the Benazir Income Support Programme and despite some heroic efforts, Pakistan’s disaster preparedness model has failed, primarily because it does not have its feet on the ground at the district or sub-district levels.

It has also failed to provide community-based early warning systems, land-use planning and land-use change, human settlement mapping, climate-smart construction standards, designs and materials for both public and private sector infrastructure, storm-water management — and equally worse, post-disaster rehabilitation, resettlement and humanitarian assistance.

A climate-resilient infrastructure would have saved us most of the $19,191 million lost on account of housing, agriculture and livestock, and an additional $9,599m on account of public sector infrastructure. The war chest was unable to respond to the crisis without skimming from ongoing development projects, making the country even more vulnerable.

The year 2022 was a watershed in the history of climate change in Pakistan. The compound impact of heatwaves and glacial outbursts washed away infrastructure, making Gilgit-Baltistan a new flooding hotspot in the country. Instead of following their traditional route, rainclouds visited upper Sindh directly from Indian Gujrat and Rajasthan.

We learnt that non-riverine floods could result in the worst deluge in living memory over a vast stretch of Sindh.

We found that the rains that had started in the coastal regions, causing urban flooding in Karachi, could be sucked inland by drought-hit regions.

Not only was havoc wreaked on communities, robbing the province of its infrastructure, but the floodwaters crossed Koh-i Suleman into southern Punjab and the Kirthar range to destroy crops, housing and infrastructure.

We found that a cloudburst upstream of Nowshera in KP could cause riverine floods while the Mangla and Tarbela dams were not filled and most of Punjab had not recorded heavy rains or floods along the Indus. All this while, Pakistan was planning an investment of more than Rs800 billion under the National Flood Protection Plan-IV that was conceived after the 2010 riverine floods.

Pakistan needs to treat climate change and development as two sides of the same coin.

Some climate experts and policymakers want us to believe that since Pakistan is one of the most vulnerable countries, nothing can be done and we are doomed to live in a permanent state of insecurity, visited by frequent disasters.

Instead of pinning hopes on international finance or new borrowing, or hiding behind limited fiscal space, Pakistan needs to treat climate change and development as two sides of the same coin. All development projects and investments can promote adaptation by challenging some old practices.

In general, democracies enable us to empower communities for disaster-risk planning and climate resilience. In Pakistan, despite the transition to democracy, policymaking has continued to be centralised and top-down. All decisions are made at the federal or provincial levels.

Local governments are still not trusted or mandated to undertake community-led development or their adaptation plans. Their functions have been taken over by members of the provincial and national assemblies, whereby the governments approve the projects of their favourite members.

Most of these schemes reflect elite capture and aren’t connected to each other or to national/provincial priorities. They are rarely a part of any local or zonal development planning, but often reflect non-transparent and wasteful transactions at all stages of project approval, procurement and till the completion certificate.

These are often left incomplete for years after a change of government. This sad practice was initiated by Gen Ziaul Haq, who used this magic wand to control members of parliament elected on a non-party basis.

All successive PPP, PML-N and PTI governments have continued to buy loyalties with these ‘development’ schemes. This model of investments in local infrastructure is totally random and counterproductive. Far from contributing to adaptation, they have added to climate maladaptation in both rural and urban Pakistan.

The top-down policy planning cannot deliver climate resilience at the community level. Successive political governments since the early 1990s have failed to democratise policy planning and resource allocations.

Investments in maladaptive infrastructure locks our future to climate risks and disasters. No number of cash disbursements, international lending or financing can substitute revising PC-1s and other policy planning documents, manuals and procurement and construction standards.

Finally, far from leading on mega projects, the Planning Commission has reduced its role to managing local-level schemes and projects. No wonder, it has a throw-forward of at least 1,260 unfinished public-sector development projects with an estimated price tag of Rs6.2 trillion.

The result? Rather than build resilience, it has littered the country with monuments of maladaptation, adding to unsustainable, unsafe housing and other infrastructure. As apparent in the floods, many public sector projects have become hazardous.

Since there are no guiding documents available to the Planning Commission to climate-proof its portfolio, a moratorium on public sector development programmes is in order to undertake two actions: i) adopt tools to measure the level of adaptation and mitigation benefits of each public sector project, irrespective of its size or sector, and ii) undertake climate audits of all pending 1,260 projects valued at Rs6.2tr to ensure they contribute to climate adaptation and mitigation and not to climate loss and damage.

In 2022, Pakistan was the poster child of climate change impact. Putting our house in order can make us a global climate champion.

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