**The corruption link**

BY ALI TAUQEER SHEIK H 2021-03-17

CORRUPTION is one of the biggest enemies of healthy ecosystems. The government`s corrupt functionaries sell the banks of rivers, streams and nullahs to encroachers for building bastis, posh housing societies, plazas and even industri al inst allations and zones. They issue permits and licences for sand mining and direct outlets for water diversion for agricultural, commercial and industrial purposes. They allow industry to discharge its effluents into freshwater bodies. Weak governance emboldens them to dislodge communities and plan new cities on the beaches in Karachi and the riverfronts of the Ravi, Soan, Jhelum, Chenab and other waterways.

Many state functionaries give a nod to or disregard the conversion of agricultural or communal land into housing societies and golf courses by de-notifying public parks or allowing them to be encroached upon.

These functionaries have also been hand in glove with mafias that have robbed the country of almost half its forests. Timber like medicinal plants, birds, animals and rare species has emerged as an important trading and smuggling commodity. Selling biodiversity is like selling one`s soul.

Buying and selling votes in elections is indicative of the widespread opportunities for corruption in public finance, procurement and compliance. Otherwise, who would invest so heavily? Corruption is defined in narrow terms. It is more than bribery, graft and embezzlement, and includes lobbying, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, parochialism, patronage, influence peddling and conflict of interest. Unless specifically addressed, these realities will continue to destroy our political and social culture. Corruption is about the abuse of entrusted power for private gain and is evident in transactions both in the public and private spheres.

Corruption reduces the efficacy of investments on climate resilience. It contributes to the climate vulnerability of voters, consumers and citizens at large, particularly the poor, women and minorities. The corrupt occupy positions of influence and thrive on weak government systems and institutions. They undermine the strength and threaten the finances and human resource oflocalandnadonalinsutudons.

No wonder some of the most climate-vulnerable countries are also ranked as some of the most corrupt. It is not a coincidence that while Germanwatch has ranked Pakistan eighth on its risk index, Transparency International has placed this country as high as 124th on the corruption index. Their annual reports show that corruption and climate change are inextricably linked. If Pakistan continues to be ranked high on thecorruption list, there is little chance its climate vulnerability ranking will decrease.

Environmental laws are violated by everyone, especially the government. The Environment Impact Assessment, a mandatory review before starting any project, is seldom undertaken by the public sector.

Reputed public-sector engineering firms that design and construct dams, airports and bridges as well as the government`s signature buildings, ignore environmental standards, let alone lead with best practices. Engineering standards have stagnated, only to support contractors.

Several cartels control commodity prices, and influence import and export policies, duties and levies that can often be detrimental to local industry, producers and farmers and their livelihoods. The government machinery provides shortcuts to grow rich and accumulate wealth in the parallel economy. Successive governments, including the present dispensation, have periodically provided opportunities to whitenwealth accumulated through such shortcuts.

The government and its various arms have presided over the destruction of ecosystems, making a high percentage of population overlyvulnerable to climate risks. The loot sale is too attractive for aspirant politicians, including parliamentarians, to ignore.

Sadly, the interest in local government elections is often limited to tenders and bids for local infrastructure. Successive governments since Gen Zia have doled out cash disbursements to members of assemblies for local `development`. These non-transparent transactions often result in maladaptation unplanned and misplaced investments that add to the marginalisation and climate exposure of the local population.

Corruption and climate change hit the poorest first and the hardest. This segment becomes the victim of those who peddle influence for short-term gains, putting livelihoods at risk, and undermining the potential of the national economy. Corruption and political capture not only limits the quality of decision-making, it also obstructs ef fective climate actions and the strength of related institutions. Corruption adds to the climate exposure of a country`s population much more than the simple prevalence of poverty or low-income levels.  The writer is an expert on climate change and development.