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**Prioritizing environmental protection**

In our obsession with political news, we often forget the more pressing issues that confront the quality of life in Pakistan.

Climate change, air pollution, water scarcity, coal-based power plants, poor sanitation stare at us every day and rob the citizens of this country of their lives and quality of their lives. Yet, there is not much public discourse on this. We are going to refer to Kulsum Ahmed’s chapter on the quality of life in Shahid Javed Burki and others’ 2019 edited book ‘Pakistan at Seventy’ in this article.

Pakistan’s urban population increased from 22 percent in 1960 to 39 percent in 2016. Of course social scientists like Akbar Zaidi and Reza Ali estimate urbanization to be much more widespread than that. Even going by official figures, Pakistan is the most urbanized country in South Asia. Yet, the basic facilities for life like safe drinking water and sanitation are denied to the million in both urban and rural areas. Despite some improvements over the decades, 27.2 million citizens cannot access safe drinking water and 52.7 million do not have adequate sanitation cover within their reach.

Similarly, air pollution leads to almost 11 percent of all global deaths. Ahmed refers to a study that looks into the correlation between higher air pollution levels and visits to the hospitals and accident and emergency in Karachi. The study finds that this correlation is valid and consistent with other data on air pollution.

Air pollution can be both indoor and outdoor. In 2016, the WHO collected data on air pollution in all major cities of Pakistan and found high levels of “particulate matter”. This has many adverse impacts on health and is known to have caused lots of deaths. In some Pakistani cities, air pollution levels are even higher than Beijing, a city known for its pollution. This speaks of the adverse pollution conditions in Pakistan.

Climate change is also going to wreak havoc in the country in the years and decades to come – primarily on the fronts of rising temperatures and water scarcity which in turn will also have an adverse impact on food and energy security. Pakistan has already experienced two catastrophic floods in 2010 and 2012. On the Climate Risk Index of 2015, Pakistan is ranked seventh globally in terms of countries that had to bear the dreadful effect of climate change.

According to the FAO, the 2010 floods in Pakistan had a terrible impact on the livelihoods of 4.5 million workers; two-thirds of them were employed in the agriculture sector. Over 70 percent of farmers’ income was reduced by more than half. Due to climate change, a lethal combination of heat and humidity will adversely affect the agricultural Indus river basin. Also the rainy season will be pushed forward due to glaciers melting early. This means that when the crops would need water, there would be scarcity and droughts. Pakistan needs to take climate change risks really seriously.

Water scarcity could most critically affect the quality of life in the country. At the time of independence, Pakistan had 5,000 m3/caput of water and it was a water-rich country; now it is only 1,000 m3/caput and is a water-scarce country. A huge amount of freshwater (94 percent) is used for agriculture. In 2017, Pakistan only had 30 days worth of storage of water, only ahead of Ethiopia in terms of water storage.

Rainwater harvesting is not practised. The irrigation canals network is dilapidated and not well maintained, despite being highly subsidized – leaving so little space for initiatives to save water. British-era colonial regulations still govern the provincial irrigation departments with little innovation and modernization to bring the water governance infrastructure up to date.

Drip irrigation is needed to reduce the huge water usage and wastage in the agricultural sector. Drought-resistant varieties of seeds need to be introduced for high-value crops to encourage better farming practices. The industrial pollution of water needs to be checked. Some of the bigger industries still claim to have environmental consciousness; it is the small and medium enterprises that need the most help and technical expertise to treat waste water properly. Unlimited groundwater access to water also needs to be regulated as over 60 percent of water used is being pumped through the groundwater.

In ‘Shehla Zia and others vs Wapda’, the Supreme Court gave a landmark ruling in 1994 and accepted the right to a clean environment as a fundamental right of the citizens of Pakistan protected by the constitution’s Article 9 on the right to life. Pakistan has an environmental governance structure in place in terms of the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency (Pak-EPA), other environmental bodies, and the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act of 1997 to enforce National Environmental Quality Standards. Much of this environmental governance and the Ministry of Environment has been decentralized post the 18th Amendment.

Environmental Impact Assessments are a prerequisite according to the environmental laws. Yet, much of this governmental environmental machinery is sluggish with “poor record of action and poor technical capacity”. What is needed is not more government departments and laws, but a pro-citizen-rights’ implementation of environmental governance. We need better water, air, and sanitation for the welfare of this generation and for the future generations as well.

In Pakistan, extreme events and disasters catch sound-bites. The need of the hour is that the government, the judiciary, the media, the education sector, health sector, agriculture sector, and industrial sector need to make environmental protection a priority and work on it on a day to day basis by institutionalizing citizens’ right to life on a continuous basis.

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