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**Inadequate conservation**

Conservation strategies in Pakistan have remained problematic both for the government and for communities living in the protected areas.

State conservation policies do not support the inclusion of local communities in the process of decision-making, and national parks are created without consulting them and taking their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), regarding boundaries, regulations and management which create social tension in the region.

Instead of acknowledging the social ties of the indigenous communities with nature, many conservation institutions assume that the practices of indigenous communities pose a threat to nature. If these policies remain the same, it would deprive communities of their livelihood and this social tension would then become a security threat for the nation.

Gilgit-Baltistan covers an area of 72498 sq km, out of which 94 percent consists of mountains, four percent is forest and only one percent of the total area is cultivable. The livelihood of the locals is dependent on these natural resources but unfortunately, during each intervention for protected areas in Gilgit-Baltistan the government has ignored the rights, values and ownership of the indigenous communities. Today 33999 sq km (47 percent) of the total land of GB (72496 sq km) is converted into national parks which were once managed through customary laws.

Prime Minister Imran Khan during his recent visit to GB inaugurated the Himalaya and Nanga Parbat National Parks, covering another five percent of Gilgit-Baltistan's land to promote tourism and protect endangered wild species. Many communities across GB condemned the proposed national park program because their cultivable lands are included in the park without their consent. It is a matter of concern that half of the total land of GB is converted into national parks and these national parks don’t have any visible positive impact on the lives of the people.

Mountainous communities are the most vulnerable communities to climate change in the world. It is the responsibility of the federal government to accept the right of the indigenous people over their natural resources of their customary-owned areas and support them to build resilience against climate change and other environmental crises.

There are vital gaps in the conservation and mining policies of Pakistan which completely exclude local communities during decision-making for the utilization of their natural resources. The failure to involve local people and others interested or affected parties in conservation planning or management creates social tension in various regions, especially those in Gilgit-Baltistan.

In this scenario, the government should welcome the concept of ‘co-management’ to create a peaceful and prosperous environment in the country. The free, prior informed consent (FPIC) of the communities should be taken before making any decision about their natural resources keeping in view the environmental sensitivity of the areas, customary laws and international regulations regarding the rights of indigenous communities.

Pakistan’s conservation policy should be research-based and participatory. It is the duty of the federal government to safeguard the rights of indigenous people over the natural resources of their areas and help them in every walk of life to build resilience.

Pakistan was the first country to adopt the SDGs 2030 agenda but it would not be possible for the government to achieve these goals until they frame a comprehensive, public friendly long-term strategy for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

On July 8, 2019, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also urged the government of Pakistan to ensure that the indigenous and local communities of Gilgit-Baltistan are consulted for their informed consent prior to use of their land or natural resources for any kind of activity.

It is therefore suggested that the relevant national policies be revised to safeguard the interests and livelihoods of indigenous communities as they are dependent on the land and livelihood of pastoral communities.

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