**Politics of pollution**

Aneeqa Bashir

Friday, Feb 11, 2022

Once deemed a strong contender in the race to economic prosperity, Pakistan has since lagged behind, scrambling to sustain its ever-growing population through the proliferation of industrial enterprises. The country faces growing environmental threats including increasing urban migration, reliance on fossil fuels, lack of resource management, industrial water contamination, and carbon emissions.

Due to the necessity of economic growth in Pakistan, such byproducts, despite their adverse effects, are inevitable. Without any external financial assistance, the country is unable to adopt expensive alternatives that are too costly to implement and is compelled to rely on damaging fossil fuels. Gas that could potentially be used by industries to maximise their output is instead channeled to households which, unlike factories, possess the capacity to easily switch to alternative methods at a low cost.

As a result, factories are unable to operate at the optimal level and achieve economies of scale. Industries, if granted permission to put up renewables such as solar grids on undeveloped land outside cities, are likely to address electricity concerns through wheeling, a means of exchanging generated energy. On a positive note, Pakistan’s emissions are on the lower end of the spectrum, as highlighted at COP26.

In terms of environmental accountability, today’s wealthiest nations underwent industrial expansion at a time that preceded efforts towards environmental preservation. From undergoing expansion to developing burgeoning economies, no administrative body existed to hold these nations accountable in terms of reparation for damage generated as a byproduct of their growth and use of fossil fuels. It was only in the 1990s that issues pertaining to environmental sustenance were driven to the forefront, and the pernicious effects of climate change were starting to interpose on the daily lives of the common person. By this time, those countries were wealthy enough to switch to more sustainable energy. In contrast, developing countries which are now belatedly entering their growth phases are made to play by a different set of rules, and unlike their predecessors, are being held accountable.

It is unfortunate that emerging countries such as Pakistan which have worked tirelessly towards economic and industrial growth are considered perpetrators of the climate change crisis they are most vulnerable to. In fact, Pakistan has suffered an economic loss of over $1.3 billion in the last 20 years as a consequence of extreme weather according to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). On the one hand, Pakistan’s economic prosperity will enable the funding of safeguards against climate hazards but on the other, its expansion will be deemed problematic in terms of its adverse effects on today’s rapidly deteriorating environment. In stark contrast with its predecessors who predominantly industrialised without any restrictions other than those that were imposed in recent years, Pakistan will likely be held to account by international environmental agencies.

This situation is all the more frustrating as affluent nations have thus far neglected fulfilling the quota pledged for climate finance in the Paris Agreement; this financing is critical in assisting developing countries transition towards sustainable development. It is riling that the commitment made almost a decade ago to provide $100 billion annually by 2020 to developing countries has now been deferred to 2023, especially considering Pakistan’s emission reductions and energy transition were dependent on this financing.

How is the country to bridge this gap in the intervening period? The Ten Billion Tree Tsunami implemented by the Pakistan Government under Imran Khan first as a pilot initiative in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2015 and then adopted nationwide in 2019 has gained global traction and will serve to control carbon and counteract environmental damage.

Planting billions of trees across the world is arguably the most feasible means by which supplemental and potentially lethal levels of carbon dioxide can be extracted from the atmosphere. This is attributable to the unique ability of trees to absorb carbon dioxide and subsequently release oxygen into the air. Consequently, citywide temperatures can be reduced by up to seven degrees C, and annual flooding and soil erosion can be abated by the absorption of stormwater.

Similar nationwide planting schemes could serve to galvanise the public and provide an environmental solution to which citizens contribute. Industries can also participate in this project to foster goodwill by funding or planting green zones in their surrounding areas. The Ministry of Education could adopt a scheme similar to the one piloted in the Philippines where each student plants ten trees as a requirement for graduation and demarcate designated areas accordingly.

Awareness schemes as part of school curriculums would serve to educate the people about minimising wastage of electricity and gas as well as responsible disposal of waste. Simultaneously, it is crucial to preserve existing forest and allow it to regenerate where needed. Recent cadastral mapping data revealed that forest land valued at around 1.8 trillion rupees has been encroached upon by land grabbers. Ongoing efforts towards transparency through digitisation are needed to prevent any future encroachments and loss of precious forest cover.

Pakistan’s longstanding dependency on external support has borne little fruit. It is time we, as a nation, curtailed foreign dependency and prepared for the challenges to come. Spreading awareness without a call to action achieves nothing. It is time to make a change not tomorrow but today.

The writer is a freelance contributor. She can be reached at: aneeqa.bashir2@gmail.com