**Zero waste**

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On December 14, 2022 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution at its 77th session to declare March 30 as the International Day of Zero Waste, to be observed annually.

The first-ever International Zero Waste Day was celebrated on March 30, 2023. The objective of celebrating the day is to promote a sustainable pattern of consumption and production all over the world which will help achieve many Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Different kinds of waste require our attention to be reduced and disposed of properly. First of all, huge quantities of food are wasted on a daily basis. According to the World Food Programme, “nearly a third of all food produced each year is squandered or lost before it can be consumed. This amounts to about 1.3 billion tons per year, worth approximately US$1 trillion”.

There are many causes for the wastage of food including poor harvesting techniques, old storage capacities, badly handling or processing of food. This also leads to the wastage of land, water, raw material, and human energy. On the other hand, the World Food Programme also projected “An expected 345.2 million people to be food insecure in 2023 – more than double the number in 2020”. The lack of food or unhygienic food leads to many health problems. The adoption of a sustainable pattern of consumption and production can save millions from food insecurity and falling into poverty traps.

Similarly, water scarcity is another one of the biggest challenges due to lack of balance between consumption and production. According to a UNDP report, “The year 2025 has been marked as the year when Pakistan might turn from a ‘water-stressed’ country to a ‘water-scarce’ country”. There are several reasons for water shortage in Pakistan that include lack of enough reservoirs to store rainwater and wastage of water in our everyday use.

Another kind of waste that has had devastating impacts on our planet is carbon emissions. The unchecked process of the industrial revolution followed by the economic competition of developed nations led to an increase in the global temperature and caused climate change. Today, climate change disasters in the form of floods, glacier melting, heatwaves, and droughts are risking the lives and livelihoods of millions of people.

The recent floods in Pakistan caused a loss of $30 billion for the already deteriorating economy of Pakistan. Today, we are witnessing the extreme impacts of climate change due to the imbalance created by our consumption and production designs. The use of unrestricted fossil fuels and deforestation in a race to gain economic superiority and enjoy the comforts of life through innovations disturbed the natural equilibrium of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) in the atmosphere that increased the average global temperature.

Similarly, the use of plastic bags is another challenge to protecting our environment. According to a survey by the Environment Protection Department Pakistan conducted in 2019, 55 billion plastic bags are used per year in Pakistan while the amount of plastic use is increasing by 15 per cent each year. Plastic bags cannot easily be recycled or biodegraded and take thousands of years to degrade. The tiny particles contaminate soil and water bodies and impede the healthy growth of plants and prove fatal to living organisms.

According to the Centre for Biological Diversity, “Fish in the North Pacific ingest 12,000 to 24,000 tons of plastic each year, which can cause intestinal injury and death and transfers plastic up the food chain to bigger fish, marine mammals, and human seafood eaters. Moreover, it chokes drainage systems which fail to prevent urban flooding.”

The waste discharged from hospitals and factories containing hazardous material is not disposed of properly. They are dumped in open sites or in water bodies which not only contaminate water bodies used for drinking and agriculture but are life-threatening. According to the World Bank, South Asia is the world’s second-largest contributor of solid waste – 334 million tons annually.

Another important kind of waste is e-waste. The UN defines e-waste as any discarded product with a battery or plug, and features toxic and hazardous substances such as mercury, that can pose a severe risk to human and environmental health. Another study by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2015, ‘Waste Crimes, Waste Risks: Gaps and Challenges in the Waste Sector’, estimated that 60-90 per cent of the world’s electronic waste, worth nearly $19 billion, is illegally traded or dumped each year. The negative impact of e-wastes on health is also devastating. According to the WHO, several adverse health effects are caused by exposure to e-waste like negative birth outcomes like premature birth, changes in lung functions, and respiratory issues.

There are multiple environmental challenges to achieving the target of ‘zero waste’. First, we need to create a balance between the consumption of resources and production patterns to maintain natural equilibrium of natural resources. We need to learn and adopt modern techniques of reuse and recycling to reduce our waste. Implementation of laws and good governance will go a long way in reaching targets of ‘zero waste’.

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