

Towards a climate change strategy

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The floods were an aberrant and chaotic phenomenon but can this happen again given the increasing unpredictability of the climate? How much of what happened can we attribute to climate change?

Last year, the monsoon failed – it arrived very late and there were hardly any rains. This year, we have witnessed unprecedented amounts of water falling from the skies above Pakistan. The Met office had warned the government in a weather advisory that was issued on June 26, that there would be a greater threat of flash floods and river floods in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other parts of the country from heavy rains. Further advisories were issued on the 27, 28 and 29 July when the rains were underway (there is no way of predicting the intensity of the rains weeks ahead). It appears that no one took these warnings seriously and there was no proper early-warning system in place to alert the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Environmentalist Mehjabeen Abidi Habib who was in Hunza during these dates visited the local met office and they told her that in five days time, they had received 2 years worth of rain. “Certain ecosystems like cloud forests can take this amount of rain, but the Hindu Kush and Karakoram mountains have a thin layer of topsoil so that triggered landslides and flash floods”. The torrential rains were the heaviest the country has seen in eighty years, causing our rivers to over flow and wreak massive destruction.

We can certainly attribute some of the damage to the extensive deforestation that has taken place in the country since the 1990s, but according to Saleem Ullah from the One Joint UNDP office in Islamabad and also a trained forester from the Pakistan Forest Institute in Peshawar, “Heavy forest cover would not have prevented the current flooding. Perhaps it would have reduced it by 20% or so, but there was just too much rain. One or two heavy cloud bursts are enough to cause a local flash flood – this time there were as many as a dozen cloud bursts in a row”.

Urgent actions required:

Finalizing and implementing national climate change strategy

Instituting early warning systems; building capacities of relevant institutions

Improving efficiency of water distribution in the irrigation system

Launching afforestation and reforestation programmes across the country

Expanding meteorological monitoring stations in the country

Constructing dikes and seawalls at strategic points on the coast

According to a report compiled by a special Task Force on Climate Change set up by the government in 2009: “The most important climate change potential threats to Pakistan are identified as: increased variability of monsoon, rapid recession of Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalayan glaciers threatening water inflows into Indus River System, increased risks of floods and droughts, increased siltation of major dams, threat to coastal areas including the city of Karachi due to sea level rise...”

The Task Force recommended several adaptation efforts which called for “aggressive afforestation and reforestation programmes” and “sufficient expansion of large reservoir capacity, improving efficiency of water supply and distribution in the irrigation system, development of capacity to deal with disasters like floods, droughts and cyclones and construction of structures like dikes and seawalls at strategic points on the coast”. The report also called for the “expansion of meteorological monitoring stations in various parts of the country... to the level recommended by the World Meteorological Organisation and development of a cohort of professionals in the field of climate change by getting a group of young scientists trained with the help of reputable foreign institutions in fields such as regional climate modeling, watershed modeling, crop growth simulation modeling and forecasting of seasonal and inter annual climatic changes and extreme events”.

The report was finalized in February 2010 and submitted to the government. To date, however, the country does not have a national climate change strategy. We have only handed over a “national communication” report to the office of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Bonn while neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, India and Nepal have all come up with detailed climate change action plans that are now being implemented. Our national strategy should have been ready by now, especially given that the UN Climate Change Conference 2010 is scheduled for this November. The UN Conference will present a good opportunity for us to present our case to the world and draw attention to our vulnerability to climate change, but only if we have done our research based on solid science.

“Unpredictability will increase in the years to come and we better get ready for extreme weather events which will have greater ferocity and intensity” says Ali Sheikh, head of the NGO, Leadership in Environment And Development (LEAD-Pakistan) who served on the Task Force on Climate Change. “We need to be prepared and we have to enhance our resilience. This calls for effective environmental management to be put in place”. Instead of disjointed efforts involving more talk and time wasting, the government needs to act now by taking the recommendations prepared by the Task Force seriously and formulating measures to adapt to climate change. We need to give climate change the priority it deserves – as Afia Salam of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature pointed out, “One day, climate change will snatch the headlines away from all the other problems in the country”. That day has arrived.

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