

THE NEWS Sindh: floods and rural economy - Part III

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November 18, 2022

What needs to be done? One of the main reasons for the flooding due to torrential rains this time around rather – than the river levels rising –was that the national waterways have been encroached, the capacity of drainage system such as LBOD was limited and outlets to traditional drains leading to the sea were not functional, desilting of canals had not taken place and repair and maintenance of bund embankments were neglected.

A World Bank-SIDA study of 2013 had identified projects to be executed for an integrated drainage system. The works worth Rs42 billion have been delayed for the last eight years and should be allocated the requisite resources and expeditiously executed. Dewatering and drainage works have to be given priority and all human-made encroachments and obstructions from the natural pathways of water have to be immediately removed, irrespective of however powerful the beneficiaries of these encroachments may be. All these works and projects should be monitored by third parties to ensure that corruption, leakages and waste are minimized.

Second, it is time we rethink and implement measures that increase the efficiency and promote conservation of our water resources. Being a lower riparian province, Sindh's water problem appears acute and the shortages hit the small farmers most severely as they are deprived of timely and adequate availability of water for their crops. Overflowing of their lands by the influential and politically well-connected landlords in collusion with the officials of the irrigation department at the head by tampering with water modules and direct pumping from the canals have become a common feature of the water conveyance and distribution system of Sindh. The poor farmers at the tail end are the main sufferers due to this diversion. As a consequence, the productivity differential between the large farmers and small farmers has widened mainly because of this inequitable distribution of irrigation water.

In addition, widespread contamination, sea water intrusion below Kotri Barrage, increasing quantities of pesticides and fertilizers used in agriculture, industrial runoff from rapidly growing cities and industries and inadequate sewage treatment have degraded the quality of water. Previous attempts to train and confine the course of river flow by embankment have raised the river bed higher than the land. As a result, the likelihood of embankment breaches has increased as have problems of drainage from flood lands. Water intensive crops such as rice and sugarcane have to be substituted by high-value crops as the yield per drop of water rather than the yield per acre of land ought to be the determining factor for efficient use and conservation of water. The present system of uniform pricing under 'abiana' has to be replaced by volumetric use. Judicious water resources management is the key for Sindh's agriculture economy in the future.

Related to the above point is the need to revamp the institutional arrangements for maintenance and operation of irrigation infrastructure. The chief justice of the Sindh High Court has recently observed that the infrastructure of Sindh had been destroyed in part by bad governance. The dual control and fragmentation of responsibilities of the irrigation system split between the irrigation department and SIDA have not proved effective. SIDA managed Sukkur Barrage's Nara and Ghotki feeder canals command but their drainage was looked after by the irrigation department. SIDA does not intervene in the right bank areas.

An Integrated water Resource Management system that takes into account the surface water conveyance, ground water recharge and usage, drainage, flood protection works, barrages, drinking water, industrial water requirements and water conservation should be established. Rain harvesting reservoirs to recharge ground water and dilute the saline water can prevent urban flooding, supply drinking water and take care of drought-like conditions.

The cultivated area in the Tharparkar Division can be increased by building reservoirs, ponds, wells, streams and other techniques of water storage. This integrated system can only function if an autonomous body run by professionals, with minimum interference by government departments, is entrusted with this task.

Water user charges should be assessed on volumetric use basis just as is being done in case of electricity and gas charges, recovered by the Authority and fully appropriated by it for operation, maintenance and development of Irrigation system. The Authority should have legal powers to revise the charges and recover arrears as land revenue with penalties. It can act as a wholesaler that enters into contractual agreements with urban water supply agencies and bulk purchasers for drinking water and industrial uses. This would require induction of finance and commercial experts in the management team of the Authority rather than being a purely engineering driven organization as it is at present.

Third, social indicators such as literacy, enrolment ratios, school dropout rates, vocational and technical skills training, immunization, raising nutritional standards to curb stunting and wasting, maternal and child care services, family planning and spacing, etc have to be improved – particularly for rural women. Lady health workers had played an important role in creating awareness and preventive health. They should be strengthened, trained and given incentive linked remuneration based on results and outcomes. Non-formal schooling for school dropouts using the existing facilities and buildings, particularly for girls, should be provided adequate resources. Micro loans should be given to women-led businesses for them to expand and invest in their enterprises. Cash assistance to female-run households under BISP should be granted at a higher level than at present to the poor families affected by the floods.

Thirty-eight million people in Pakistan were facing moderate to severe food insecurity before the floods. Eighteen per cent of children were malnourished. These numbers must have risen in the aftermath of the floods. Food distribution to these affected groups can be targeted by using the National Socio Economic Registry of the Benazir Income Support Program.

Fourth, most surveys, public opinion polls and media reports point to widespread corruption and misuse of public funds and indifferent attitude of the service providers as the main reason for poor delivery of public services. The rehabilitation of flood affected families requires reallocation of funds from the traditional ADP projects towards restoration of infrastructure, replacement

of seeds for the rabi crops, interest-free loans for purchasing inputs, rebuilding houses and new compact settlements.

Prioritizing drinking water for household use, drainage and sanitation, link/access roads, and district settlement places should be included in the revised ADP for this year. Land issues for resettlements and new residential development, safe areas and high risk areas, provision of land for settlement for the landless would have to be sorted out. Building materials, housing standards, climate refugees and migration to urban areas are some other issues that require attention by the policymakers.

Finally, the powers and resources enjoyed at present by the provincial and national disaster management authorities should be devolved to the districts under the direct control of the local administration. A political, neutral and impartial administration has better chances of delivering to the targeted groups while ensuring equity, accountability and transparency. The NDMA and PDMA should develop guidelines, standards, processes, alert systems, mobilize resources from national and international agencies and monitor the performance of the DDMA and arrange to conduct their audit.

However, implementation must be left to the district authorities as they are best equipped to assess the situation, plan actions, respond quickly, mobilize financial resources from the community, and execute the plans by coordinating diverse efforts by donors, private sector and NGOs and bringing together all government agencies and dividing the different tasks among them in a collaborative manner.

Concluded

The writer is the author of 'Governing the ungovernable'.