

Pakistan: Victims of climate change or bad governance?

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Screen grab from a video of five men stranded by flash floods in upper Kohistan. Four of them perished in the waters | White Star [for the picture, see the original article.

As the five men scrambled on to a big rock in the middle of the suddenly gushing torrents in the Dubair stream near Sanagai village in Lower Kohistan, they wrapped ropes around their bodies, hoping they could use them to be pulled through to safety. But they couldn't move.

Neither could the crowd that had gathered on the banks, seeing their predicament. The local men, two of them drivers who had been trying to get their cars out of the way of the waters' onslaught on a link road running parallel to the stream only a few minutes before, were marooned. All around them were raging waters that had suddenly come down from the mountains and even attempting to get into the furious rapids was fraught with danger.

The five men waited for over three hours to be rescued. But no help was forthcoming, despite multiple calls made by various people to the local administration and provincial authorities. Eventually, to the horror of those assembled, four of the five were [simply washed away](#) by the swelling torrents. The crowd managed to grab only one of the men before he was swallowed by the waters.

See: [Satellite photos show extent of flooding in Pakistan](#)

The tragic mobile videos that went viral on the media later, of the five men waiting helplessly for hours for help that never came, captured perfectly the situation of a huge portion of Pakistan: caught between the wrath of extreme weather events and the incapacity of governance.

The devastation from the recent rains has been of gargantuan proportions. Over 1,000 people have been killed, and hundreds of thousands of livestock and acres of land have been washed away. Infrastructure lies in tatters. The economic costs run into billions of dollars. Who, or what, can Pakistanis blame?

Elsewhere in Pakistan, hotels and other big structures built either in the beds of mountain streams and rivers or too close to their banks seemed to crumble like cardboard boxes to the fury of raging waters, simply swept away. Boulders and large rocks were carried down by flash floods like little pebbles. Dams and headworks were torn apart by the force of the waters, bridges and roads washed away and submerged.

In Sindh, which has been the most affected province by far, the waters have inundated entire districts, flooding homes and schools, displacing millions now left without a roof over their heads, drowning livestock and destroying crops ready for harvest. Train tracks are under water and destitute men, women and children scramble to any dry land they can find, without food or shelter.

Since mid-June, when the rains began — more than 400 percent in Balochistan and more than 500 percent above normal in Sindh in July alone — more than 1,100 people have died, while thousands of others have been injured. It is estimated that more than one million homes have been totally or partially damaged. Hundreds of thousands of livestock has been lost, leaving people hapless and poorer.

The flooding has also affected at least two million acres of crop land. A question mark hangs over the present and future growth capacity of crops such as cotton, dates, wheat, vegetables and rice, which could lead to future issues of food security and further price shocks.

The United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has officially identified 116 districts as being affected by the monsoon-driven floods. Of these, 66 have officially been declared as 'calamity hit'. Of these districts, 31 are in Balochistan, 23 in Sindh, nine in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and three in Punjab. It is visible that parts of Sindh and Balochistan, which happen to be some of the least developed areas in Pakistan, have been the most vulnerable to the disastrous floods.

While the government, various local NGOs and now countries such as Turkey, UAE, the UK, Canada and the United States among others have scrambled to help with monetary funds, tents, medical kits, groceries and cooked meals to the victims in different parts of the country, Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal estimates that Pakistan would need US\$10 billion for repairs and the reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure and that such reconstruction could take up to five years.

A large part of the development infrastructure developed since the 1960s has been washed away or has become dysfunctional. All this has happened mostly in tehsils and talukas that have already fallen behind on development indicators. It will take years, perhaps decades, to undo some of the economic and social losses.

The entire country — from one end to the other — is going through an unprecedented series of climate-induced disasters. If climate change is a threat multiplier, poor governance is also a threat

multiplier. Or not of any less consequence. Their combination is deadly: both hit the poor and marginalised the first and hardest. Their combination can — and it has in these floods — resulted in human tragedy, environmental calamity and development catastrophe.

The floods of 2022 are not just riverine floods, as was the case in the 2010 superfloods, the last great floods to hit the country. This time, what we have witnessed are five meteorological disasters, all happening simultaneously and coinciding in various regions of the country. These include: unprecedented torrential rains in central Sindh and Balochistan; flash floods in southern Punjab and lower Sindh, emanating from Balochistan's Koh-e-Suleiman mountain range; urban flooding, mostly in Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur and other urban centres; glacial outbursts in the upper Indus basin, resulting in downstream flooding; and cloud outbursts upstream of Nowshera at the Kabul river, a tributary of the Indus.

This has never happened before, not at least since 1918, when meteorological data began to be recorded. While these abnormalities have caused havoc by themselves, the one saving grace is that riverine floods have not occurred for the most part. Mangla and Tarbela dams are still being filled, not providing any reason to lower the spillways. With the rains subsiding, the hope is that the Indus will not record high floods like it has in yesteryears.

CLIMATE CHANGE COMES HOME

Basically, Pakistan is experiencing the first serious disruption in the functioning of the monsoon weather system. This is also the first time that Pakistan has been hit by non-riverine floods of this magnitude, probably indicating a change of pattern in the monsoon. Typically, the riverine floods that have had in the past, are relatively easier to predict and prepare for, but torrential rains, glacial melt, flash floods and cloud outbursts are not.

Normally, as the monsoon currents start from the Bay of Bengal, they enter the Indus Valley from Kashmir, which serves as the gateway to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and down to northern Punjab. The downpours during the journey of the clouds and currents meet the needs of human settlements, standing crops, and also replenishes the rivers and their tributaries. By the time they reach Sindh and Balochistan, the monsoon currents are weakened and they seldom give heavy downpours. But this time all changed.

The monsoon changed its centuries-old passage: instead of following the traditional route, it entered Sukkur, Khairpur and the neighbouring districts of central Sindh, short of Karachi, directly from Rajasthan and Gujarat in India. Also, instead of the typical one or two spells, meteorologists assert that this year there were five to six spells of roughly the same strength and duration, with no or very brief respites. Many climatologists and climate modellers have long been predicting that climate change could change the patterns of the monsoon. That seems to have finally come true this time.

Despite their best efforts, the federal and provincial governments are simply overwhelmed by the scale of the devastation. As when the brutal massacre at the Army Public School in 2014 spurred the creation of a new anti-terrorism narrative, perhaps the unfortunate current flood tragedy now offers a historic opportunity to the country's powerbrokers to lay the foundation of climate-smart development.

POVERTY AND CLIMATE VULNERABILITY

Pakistan is regarded as one of the least prepared countries for climate disasters. Some indices have even ranked Pakistan as one of the most vulnerable countries. Unfortunately, the country's two biggest challenges are intertwined — increasing poverty and increasing climate vulnerability.

Almost half of Pakistan's population lives close to the poverty line, on less than three or four dollars a day. Their absolute numbers are increasing as global disparities increase, commodity prices go up, and the country's economic growth rate fails to keep pace with the growing population.

Meanwhile, climate threats and risks are also increasing globally at an accelerated rate, as seen in the increasing frequency of floods, fires, droughts, heatwaves and tropical storms in many Asian and African countries, but also in developed economies such as Australia, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the US.

We have also seen in countless instances that climate vulnerability and poverty reinforce each other. The more people we have living in poverty, the more they will be vulnerable to climate disasters. These two aspects often coincide and intersect. It is also fair to say that not all poor are climate vulnerable nor are all rich climate secure. Yet, climate disasters do not spare anyone, be it elite housing on ocean fronts or informal squatter settlements on the Malir river in Karachi.

Tropical storms and floods, heatwaves and droughts have made this point forcefully and repeatedly in Pakistan and in other geographies. As we have witnessed since the superfloods of 2010, Pakistan cannot win the climate battle without winning the poverty and inequity battles. Each climate disaster adds to the cost of development, making the battle harder and harder. After all, climate security rests on social justice and recent floods have accentuated this point yet again more than anything else.

It is well known that the foundations of good governance rest on inclusion and fairness — on the system's ability to reach out to the poor and the marginalised, minorities and the weak living in less developed regions or in fragile and degraded ecosystems. As even-handedness is compromised, interest groups capture the instruments of power. Good governance institutions are expected to provide equal access and opportunities. But the elite capture in the country weakens the state and its institutions and obstructs access to justice and resources that are otherwise central for climate resilience.

Climate vulnerability is fundamentally a local issue and local government institutions are the most important building block for climate resilience. But in Pakistan, despite high and repeated losses, we are still missing this third tier of government.

GOVERNANCE AND THE CLIMATE CHALLENGE

As a developing country, Pakistan is struggling for sustainable development, to be inclusive and to serve everyone, not just certain interest groups. Sadly, there is a widespread feeling that the country has become hostage to interest groups, and that has exposed vast sections of society to climate vulnerability, risks and extreme weather events.

The floods, droughts, heatwaves, forest fires, torrential rains and tropical storms, all often follow each other and weaken the resilience and coping capacity of communities. The absence of local governance institutions and decision-making mechanisms in the country has steadily eroded the intrinsic capacity of communities to withstand climate shocks and repeated extreme weather events. This was an important lesson of the 2010 floods. Yet we continue to avoid finalising the enactment of local government laws and having governments at all tiers of society.

Climate vulnerability is fundamentally a local issue and local government institutions are the most important building block for climate resilience. But in Pakistan, despite high and repeated losses, we are still missing this third tier of government. Successive governments have been reluctant to finalise the legislations required for local governments, let alone enact laws and conduct elections, allowing the formation of local governments and resourcing them with budgets, offices and operational powers.

It seems to have become a zero-sum game, as if the powers devolved to local governments will weaken the provincial or federal governments. This thinking is embedded deeply in the political culture, and each mainstream political party has a worse track record than the others.

Finally, the absence of local government institutions has made policy-making, resource allocation and disaster preparedness a top-down affair. There is a huge institutional vacuum at the local levels — in districts, tehsils and union councils. Each time there is a disaster, the prime minister or the chief ministers have to go personally to supervise relief services, as the local leadership is neither nurtured nor encouraged. So much so, that even the role of local traders' associations, bar associations, civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is considered suspect and curtailed.

The local administration hardly has the capacity to distribute relief goods or offer emergency services. No wonder: since local governments have not taken roots in the political culture of the country, first the environment and, now, climate disasters remain unaddressed. Local environment has become victim to what is known as the 'tragedy of the commons', whereby all common areas, such as parks, playgrounds, graveyards, nullahs, greenbelts, footpaths and parking lots are encroached, communal lands and forests depleted, riverbeds sand-mined, and lakes and wetlands eutrophicated.

There are hardly any standard operating procedures, or SOPs, to manage floods and other climate-related extreme events. Civilian institutions, particularly institutions charged to deliver municipal and environmental services have collapsed — be they related to sewerage or drinking water, rain or floodwater drains, or the supply of emergency goods and services.

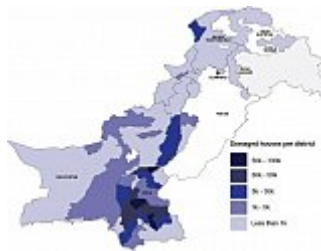
There is a direct correlation between the absence of functioning local governments and the disappearance or price-hikes of essential commodities during floods and other disasters. The scale of devastation cannot be reduced unless local government institutions are developed, built and strengthened, trusted and resourced.

It is not just a coincidence that more than 15 years have passed since the National Disaster

Management Authority (NDMA) was established in 2007, but, thus far, the district-level Disaster Management Authorities, or DDMA, have not been notified and established. Their notification will probably not solve any problem immediately, but at least we could have begun a process to establish local disaster management institutions and the cataloguing of local vulnerabilities and the services needed.

Likewise, there are no local emergency services such as 1122 that we have in some of Punjab's larger cities. Moving forward, a local government system can be in place and functional before the next monsoon if the government decides. It just has to be prioritised.

CAN IT GET WORSE?



Number of damaged homes: Source: The OCHA Situation Report released on 26 Aug 2022

Climate change has emerged as Pakistan's foremost existential threat. It is now at the heart of our national security paradigm. As we have seen, floods are triggered by climatic changes and they cannot be brushed aside simply as a one-off event.

The loss of human lives aside, they have washed away our precious infrastructure — bridges, roads, hydropower plants, check-dams, irrigation schemes and other community infrastructure. They have also severely dented food security and our economy in general.

As noted, the 2022 floods are unusual and a fundamental departure from our typical riverine floods. Moving forward, there are three possible scenarios:

The Optimistic Scenario: This may well be a freak event year, and we may not have similarly serious non-riverine floods for several years or decades. We were not anticipating these floods but, in future, we will be better prepared. We will, therefore, have better management in the future.

The Pessimistic Scenario: Such floods will become more frequent but we will not draw any practical lessons — as we did not from the 2010 superfloods. We will live with the changes in the monsoon pattern as a New Normal, but continue with Business As Usual (BAU) practices.

The Worst-case Scenario: These non-riverine floods will occur more regularly but they will also be accompanied by high riverine floods in the Indus and its tributaries. This will make the floods deadlier and costlier, because there will not be any fundamental changes in our approaches and preparedness.

There is no scientific way to project a 'more likely' scenario. However, based on this year's flood, it is fair to say that despite their shortcomings, efforts to prevent high death tolls were fairly successful and, with some improvements, we can substantially reduce the loss of human lives.

This will require, at a minimum, effective utilisation of early warning systems and better

coordination between agencies. It will be hard to draw this message home because it will require crossing several institutional, policy and technological barriers.

Pakistan has successfully used the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) for cash disbursement to affectees in several emergency situations such as Covid-19 and floods. This has become a handy tool to initiate politically popular cash disbursements almost immediately, even if it distracts BISP from its main mandate or may have capacity challenges. Policy-makers are likely to use this tested vehicle for any similar needs in the future.

NDMA has estimated that about a million houses were destroyed and damaged and a similar number of livestock was also lost. There are no estimates at present for the loss of standing crops. Except for cash grants, at present there is no credible mechanism that the federal or provincial governments can use to mitigate these risks, nor to any risk to government infrastructure in any of the three scenarios presented above, unless Pakistan decides to upgrade its responses.

CHANGING THE APPROACH

The devastation does provide an opportunity, however, to upgrade our approaches and standard practices. These losses are very high and require investments in climate resilient infrastructure. It is time for the federal and provincial governments to decide that new special-purpose institutions need to be created for risk transfer and insurance.

The mechanisms can be designed to be introduced for five key losses: i) human lives, starting with the life of the breadwinner; ii) shelter/housing; iii) livestock; iv) standing crops; and v) mini and micro-enterprises. The practice of crude cash disbursement needs to make way for risk transfer and insurance institutions.

It is clear that it will take at least four weeks for the water to recede and for displaced climate refugees to return. During this period, the clear national priority should be the provision of emergency supplies — tents, food, water, medicines and other essential items.

Protecting such a large number of people from malaria, dengue and other vector-borne diseases will also be a serious challenge. As would the resumption of schooling, since hundreds of schools have been damaged and destroyed. Pakistan needs to declare an international education emergency to ensure that no boy or girl is left out of schools. Climate disasters test the resilience of societies.

In the longer term, for Pakistan to brace for climate-induced disasters, there are four takeaways from the recent devastation, which can help strengthen national resilience.

First, protect waters' right of way. Nothing that obstructs water's flow should be allowed, be it hotels, settlements, factories, electricity grids, or human settlements including schools, hospitals and government offices. Pakistan should invest in reclaiming and strengthening the banks and shoulders of rivers. Ambiguities from laws can be removed and compliance regimes strengthened. Water flows with gravity, and respecting the gravity principle will save economic costs and human suffering.

Second, revisit and revise construction standards, specifications and materials. Present specifications have failed and it has added not only to the annual maintenance costs but also costs of repairs and reconstructions. This is particularly important for water-related infrastructure in the monsoon and non-monsoon areas, and in high altitude mountains.

Third, graduate from cash disbursements to risk transfer and insurance schemes, particularly for the rural population and informal settlements and katchi abadis in urban areas. This can be a targeted subsidy to ensure the lives and infrastructure of poor farmers and their assets. A country with extremely tight fiscal space cannot afford cash disbursements by cutting development projects and portfolios.

Fourth, and most importantly, since climate vulnerability is fundamentally a local issue, it cannot be addressed successfully without functioning local governments and local governance institutions. Capacity and resource-constraint issues are surmountable. If a decision is made, this can be made functional before the next monsoon, even if it will take some time to show sustainable results.

In fact, actions on all these four points can be initiated now, as part of reconstruction and resettlement. An important lesson from the failure of build-back-better policy that was announced after the earthquake in 2005 is simple: urgent matters should not distract from the important. If not initiated now, within weeks, chances are we will miss the opportunity. Pakistan needs resilient development now more than ever before. This tragedy has a built in opportunity for us to act.

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P.S.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1708344/victims-of-climate-change-or-bad-governance>
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