

Pakistan floods show need for system change

Friday 23 September 2022, by [ZAHOOR Bilal](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2022).

Pakistan is suffering the worst floods in history as a result of climate breakdown. We must change how we relate to nature to prevent further calamities.

The scenes of water torrents running through the fields, mountains, highways and streets in most parts of Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the southern part of Punjab have been circulating on social media in the past few weeks, drawing attention to the collapse being experienced by Pakistan.

There have been scenes of barrages of water toppling trees like a giant scythe and grounding hotels and houses like an earthquake. There have also been scenes of floods devastating thousands of hectares of agricultural land across the four provinces.

Even more horrifying have been the scenes of toddlers and young people struggling to resist the powerful streams with their weak, malnourished bodies.

Monsoon

So far, the floods have killed 1,481 people, destroyed 218,000 houses, perished 800,000 livestock, damaged over two million acres of crops and orchards, hit 116 districts and affected over 35 million people across the country, with Balochistan and Sindh being two of the most affected provinces.

The situation reports published by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) have been an everyday unfolding of the increasing depth and breadth of the calamity.

It has now reached a point where the scale of damage (if it can ever be quantified fully) leaves far behind the aggregate damage of some of the most spectacular climate-induced disasters in the ongoing century.

The situation is not entirely new to Pakistan as the country experienced a similarly horrifying set of events in 2010 when unprecedented monsoon rains in the northwest region caused flash floods sweeping both mountainous and plain lands.

The difference, however, lies in that the ongoing monsoon season saw an even more extreme weather situation: rainfall this year is "2.87 times higher than the national 30-year average, with some provinces receiving more than five times as much rainfall as their 30-year average," notes the NDMA report of 26 August 2022.

Strategies

Sherry Rehman, the climate change minister, compares this year's monsoon rainfall with that of the August average, revealing that Sindh and Balochistan received 784 percent and 500 percent more rainfall respectively.

Since extreme weather conditions are not new to countries in the Global South, there's a range of pre-emptive and managerial measures that can be put in place to decrease the severity of consequences. There is, however, little that countries like Pakistan can do to deter rain-induced flooding.

“While it is absolutely crucial to mobilise effective flood management strategies to mitigate the intensity of the crisis, such proposals are a distraction, on the one hand, and a trap, on the other.”

This is not to exempt the local agents from responsibility: from the old drainage and sewerage infrastructure to reckless urban planning to the real-estatisation of land to the military-led deforestation to the complete absence of flood-water storage infrastructure, there's a long list of missing interventions.

Clearly, Pakistan has been indifferent to employing flood management strategies that have been effective for, for instance, its neighbouring China.

While it is absolutely crucial to mobilise effective flood management strategies to mitigate the intensity of the crisis, such proposals are a distraction, on the one hand, and a trap, on the other.

Dialectic

They're crucial because they have to be employed anyway: even if the planet develops a strong resistance to the ecological crisis by virtue of sustained pro-nature policies, the degree of irreversibility of damage that the biosphere has undergone over the past few decades makes adaptation inevitable.

That is, radical transformation of the system has to be accompanied by effective climate management policies. They, however, are a distraction and a trap because they're completely inadequate to avert the flooding crisis on their own.

Distraction in that they divert the focus from the most foundational drivers of the crisis. Trap in that they completely block the possibility of an alternative imagination.

Let's briefly compare the flood management strategies with a similar distraction called 'technologies for averting climate change'. The proponents of technological messianism argue that only technological development can rescue humans from the climate crisis.

There's no question about the prowess of new technologies. However, if technologically-buttressed mitigation measures are perceived as instruments to help go back to making nature available for exploitation again, we are immediately confronted with a dangerous dialectic involving the complicity of science, on one hand, and the unscientific fallacy of infinite growth and consumerism, on the other.

Speculative

Take the example of carbon-removal technology, which we are told can be extremely helpful in overcoming some of the mess caused by infinite growth models. How exactly will this work?

The question again lies in whether we're seeking the business-as-usual and expecting the carbon-capture technology to meet that end or we're making radical transformations in the economic systems and using these technologies as an aid to the process.

Just like the carbon-removal technology does not answer the question of over-production and hyper-consumerism driving up carbon emissions in the first place, effective flood management strategies are inadequate to address the crisis of rain-induced floods.

Rather, the rain-induced floods and a variety of other manifestations of the ecological crisis, unlike many previous crises - including the Great Depression of the 1930s and the financial crisis of the late 2000s - intrinsically challenge the managerial capacities of the economic and political order.

This is not to say that the previous crises did not lay bare the suicidal contradictions of the system: they not only forced the linear progression of growth to take a pause but also exposed the fragility of multi-billion-dollar speculative structures.

Managerial

The capacity of the economic system to continue to manage the crisis could have been exhausted long ago, given the severity and unending continuity of jolts and shocks, but the system has been absorbent enough to continue to survive, albeit in a wounded form.

In its managerial pursuit, it has even gone to the point of instrumentalising two diametrically opposed measures: austerity (the 2008 financial crisis) and generosity (the Covid-19 crisis).

These tactics, however, may not work in the aftermath of the ecological crisis as the problem fundamentally questions the managerial notion.

This is the only crisis in recent history that demands an altogether “new normativity” as philosopher Miguel de Beistegui argues: the crisis can no longer be dealt with within the coordinates of the existing normativity; it demands a total overhaul, a total transformation of the prevalent framework.

If the nature of the ecological crisis is such that it challenges the managerial capacities of the system in its entirety, what can we expect of countries like Pakistan in terms of their crisis management abilities?

Breathe

These countries are profound examples of geographies that are at the receiving end of some of the most disastrous consequences of climate change, despite having contributed negligibly to the jeopardy of the biosphere.

In their modest aspiration of survival on the planet, millions in Pakistan are bearing the burden of crimes they haven't even been party to.

The outpouring of solidarity and donations from states, organisations and individuals from around the world is priceless, but countries like Pakistan cannot be left to the generosity of the global North.

Pakistan is one of the foremost examples of geographies where the conspicuousness of climate-induced damage is fast reaching - or, in a certain sense, has already reached - the fullest possible conspicuousness.

While the monsoon season drowns more than one-third of the country, winters in Punjab's urban centres, particularly Lahore, mark a sustained overcast of smog for three months every year, a bizarre combination of fog and toxic smoke making it impossible to breathe without causing some kind of damage to the respiratory system.

Damaged

The country also regularly experiences fatal heat waves with certain cities in Sindh and Balochistan appearing at the top of the hottest cities in the world every year.

The situation is no less alarming in much of northern Pakistan where many of the glacial lakes - over 3,000 in total - can experience an outburst any time the rising temperature is followed by increased rainfall, a sequence that has unfolded itself several times during the ongoing century causing large-scale devastation across the mountainous region.

While Pakistan continues to be one of the most vulnerable geographies, its neighbouring countries are equally susceptible.

The rain-induced floods, the heat waves and the smog are not unknown to India. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are equally, and at a certain level even more, vulnerable because of their coastal situation.

Countries in greater Asia, Africa and Latin America are not far behind either. Clearly, the South is not just at the risk of being enormously damaged but has already been damaged to an irreversible degree.

Calculus

The situation reminds me of Martin Heidegger's "Being," a concept that has been interpreted in different ways but is one that's increasingly linked to that which makes the beings interpretable to humans.

In Heidegger's own words, Being may have a remarkably unique relationship to beings in each epoch and space. That is, the essence of Being is not static, but one that may experience transformation from time to time.

From the role of ordering the orderable to that of revealing the revealable to that of granting the grantable, Being has been transcendental in character, paving way for major transformations throughout history.

What is important to note here is that while Being might be transcendental to humankind in the Heideggerian sense, for the vast majority of the non-Western world, the experience of being on the planet has been one of being subjected to how Being revealed itself to Western humankind.

Billions in the global South, by and large, have been at the mercy of how Western humankind stood within the beings of the world and looked at them as objects out there to be brought into the value calculus and commodified to increase Western power. This has been the case since Plato, but even more so since René Descartes.

Capitalocene

Although Heidegger uses the word 'man' in a broad sense, in line with his sophisticated understanding of alluding the destruction of nature to modern Western calculative thinking, it is important to liberate man of the onus of ecological devastation and identify the specific actors and systems seeing nature as a gigantic assembly of disposable raw materials. 'Man,' therefore, needs to be replaced with some particularity of humankind.

And 'Anthropocene,' denoting the current geological age of human-caused damage to the environment, needs to give way to a 'Cene' truly reflecting the particular character of the epoch

causing the damage.

This is precisely because, as anthropologist Peter Rudiak-Gould argues, “it is not ‘humans’ who are disturbing the planet: it is particular humans (Westerners, consumers, fossil fuel elites, etc.), under particular historical (modern), political (neoliberal), and economic (capitalist) circumstances.”

The replacements of Anthropocene that come to the fore as a result of this understanding include the Capitalocene, the Econocene and the Consumocene. Heidegger, however, would perhaps be more intrigued by the Westocene or the Technocene.

Indigenous

The apocalyptic manifestations of climate change urge us to go beyond cosmetic measures, half-hearted political reformism and ill-thought-out environmentalism.

Keeping the urgency of the situation in the global South in view, internationalist efforts seeking climate reparations and full cancellation of debt cannot be deprived of crystallisation any further.

While this would help the global South to cope with the crisis, the crisis itself demands much deeper intervention: a radical shift in our approach to beings, nature and everything that comprises the planet - and beyond.

Ecofeminists in the South have already sought to respect nature as home. There’s an emerging symbiosis taking place between the consciousness of the workings of Capital and creative political action.

The Indigenous communities in Latin America, Asia and Africa have also been offering non-Western epistemologies fully conducive to the longevity of the planet. We need to look beyond the geographies, systems and thoughts that brought us to where we today are.

Bilal Zahoor is the editorial director of Folio Books, a Lahore-based independent publishing house, and a member of Haqooq-e-Khalq Party, a grassroots anti-capitalist political project. He recently finished an MA in political philosophy at UPF, Barcelona. He is also the editor of *Rethinking Pakistan: A 21st Century Perspective* from Anthem Press, 2020.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

The Ecologist

<https://theecologist.org/2022/sep/20/pakistan-floods-show-need-system-change>