

Mitigating the impact of climate change

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Prime Minister Imran Khan, while inaugurating the tree plantation campaign in Mianwali, announced restoration of the Kundian forest through massive plantation during the next four years under the 10 billion tsunami project. Reportedly, out of 19,271 acres of land on which the forest was raised before Partition, 5222 acres have been turned into barren land over the years due to the felling of trees by the people and inaction by the successive governments which demonstrated criminal negligence in this regard. The initiative to revive the forest deserves unqualified appreciation as forest and trees are the best weapon to mitigate the impact of climate change.

Climate change is the biggest challenge facing humanity in the modern era. Pakistan is seventh in the list of ten countries which have been badly affected by climate change. Memories of the devastating flash floods of 2010 still haunt those who suffered due to that cataclysmic phenomenon. Environment scientist believe that if greenhouse gas emissions are not reduced or controlled, global temperatures might register a rise between 1.1 to 6.5°C by the end of the 21st century with all the accompanying cataclysmic consequences for the entire humanity. The major contributors to global warming are the USA, China, Russia, the UK, Germany, Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea.

It was therefore incumbent upon the countries responsible for emission of heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere leading to global warming and consequent climate change, not only to address this issue seriously but also help the developing nations in coping with the consequences of global warming. It was in the backdrop of this realization that the countries of the world signed a treaty known as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 committing themselves to work collectively to limit average global temperature increases and the resultant climate change and to cope with whatever impacts were inevitable. Realizing the inadequacy of the emission reduction provision in the convention, another agreement known as the Kyoto Protocol, which legally bound the developed countries to observe emission reduction targets, was concluded in 1997.

The third protocol was signed in Paris in December 2015 which was signed by 195 countries. But it is regrettable that the bigger nations responsible for global warming have not shown the required commitment in fulfilling their obligations and some even have preferred to pull out of the internationally negotiated agreements. The USA has renounced both the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, and some other countries including Australia, the USA, Japan, New Zealand, Belarus, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Norway, Switzerland and Russia have also remained reluctant to commit to the targets set in the protocols.

The developing countries have not been given any binding targets, but they are still under the obligation to reduce their emissions. The proposed action to be taken by the developed and developing countries under the treaty include support for renewable energy, improving energy efficiency and reducing deforestation. Some of the actions proposed at the international moots can be undertaken by the respective governments by changing the energy production mix and also putting in place policies to prevent deforestation but it is an issue which requires the involvement of the entire society. That necessitates efforts to create awareness about the seriousness of the issue among the masses, motivating them to refrain from cutting trees and joining the national effort to plant trees wherever it was feasible to do so.

Pakistan is the fifth country in the world to have created a separate Ministry of Climate Change and also carried out legislation for the establishment of a Climate Change Council and a Climate Change Authority. It has formulated new Forest and Wildlife Policies besides setting up a Global Change Impact Study Centre, the research arm of the Ministry. But in spite of the creation of the necessary infrastructure, no real commitment came forth.

However it is encouraging to note that the PTI government, realizing the imperative of mitigating the impact of climate change, has made an unprecedented commitment in the form of the Clean and Green Pakistan Movement (CGPM) which aims at creating an enabling environment that underpins a healthy atmosphere. It has surely raised the bar with regard to saving Pakistan from the adverse impact of climate change and turning it into a vibrant and developed entity on the global map. The Clean and Green Pakistan Movement builds on five pillars with a focus on behavioral change and institutional strengthening. These pillars include Plantation; Solid Waste Management; Liquid Waste and Hygiene; Total Sanitation and Safe Water.

Since its launching, a significant number of initiatives have been taken at both the federal and provincial levels through the engagement of government, civil society and private institutions. The banning of single-use polythene bags, initially in Islamabad to be followed throughout the country, is a very imaginative step in regards to ensuring a clean environment.

The national roadmap sets strategic priorities ranging from reforms required for an enabling environment to effective implementation approaches with appropriate monitoring and reporting mechanisms. The CGPM rightly lays emphasis on collaboration and institutional strengthening by sharing the human and other resources. It is envisaged as a people-led initiative, therefore all of its strategic actions are people-centered.

However, the planting of ten billion trees known as the 'Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme' is the flagship initiative of the Clean and Green Pakistan Movement. The magnitude and scope of this initiative is undoubtedly unprecedented, which reflects the real concern and commitment of the government in dealing with the issues related to climate change and a clean environment. It envisages transition towards an environmentally resilient Pakistan by mainstreaming notions of adaptation and mitigation through ecologically targeted initiatives covering increasing the area under forests and biodiversity conservation.

The remedy to mitigate the impact of climate change undoubtedly lies in planting more and more trees. Unfortunately the area under forests in Pakistan is only five percent of the total land mass whereas according to global standards it should be more than 20 percent. There is therefore an imperative need to run a persistent awareness campaign to educate the masses about the impact of climate change and their contribution to the national effort including refraining from cutting trees. Since the subject now relates to the provinces they also need to extend full cooperation to the federal government by taking appropriate steps in line with the policy framework enunciated by it.

The focus of the effort for the successful implementation of the Clean and Green Pakistan Movement is also on creating awareness among the masses about environmental issues and seeking their cooperation. The media has a very vital role in creating awareness, motivating the people to plant trees voluntarily as well as highlighting the significance of other components of the programme. For this purpose all the media outlets including the print media must try to dilate on subjects related to environment and climate change on regular basis. It is a vital national cause requiring collaborative efforts by all the segments of the society.

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