

The complexity of climate change

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It is late October in the autumn of 2014. That time and the scenery are still firmly etched in my memory. The place is Trimmu Barrage in District Jhang in Central Punjab. Here, two great rivers of the Indus River system, Chenab and Jhelum, merge in a spectacularly majestic fashion. There is something surreal about witnessing two bodies of water, both distinct in their colour and outlook, merging under the radiating sun to produce a new unity.

Also, there is a uniquely mystical element to rivers that has fascinated poets, philosophers, and thinkers throughout history. If my recollection serves me right, it was the ancient pre-Socratic Greek Philosopher Heraclitus that famously said that “one cannot step in the same river twice” – an analogy for the constant flux and change that is characteristic of existence.

But given the mass-scale flooding in the country this year, it feels like we are stepping into the same river again and again. In 2014 I was at Trimmu as part of the flood relief and rehabilitation programme which my employer was undertaking at the time. That year too, floods had ravaged major parts of the country as intense monsoon rains caused the river system to overflow. Such floods have become all too common for Pakistan, as within the past decade or so, one major flooding event has struck the country every couple of years.

This year’s rain-induced flooding came after one of the hottest summers ever recorded in the Subcontinent. There is no escaping the fact that extreme weather events are becoming more and more common in our part of the world. As for the reason behind this, the scientific evidence is almost unanimous about how extreme weather-related events are a symptom of the unprecedented climate change induced by human activity, especially since the advent of industrialization in the so-called ‘developed world’ and more recently in the emerging economies of Asia.

It is incontestably true that countries like Pakistan have been disproportionately affected by the ravages of climate change. If carbon dioxide emissions were to be taken as a proxy for human activity directly contributing to climate change, Pakistan’s cumulative share of historic carbon dioxide emissions is a minuscule 0.3 per cent. Yet, the adverse effects of climate change in the shape of floods and other extreme weather related-events in countries like Pakistan are substantial. A point then perhaps could be made that we Pakistanis are paying for the mistakes of the other more advanced industrialized economies. Recently many commentators from the traditional Global South have also called for ‘reparations’ that the industrialized countries should make to countries that have not induced this climate change catastrophe but still are among the countries that are disproportionately affected.

Such demands, cries, and clamors – call them whatever you may – have fallen on deaf ears. Although true in principle, I find such demands for reparations problematic. Even if one was to leave the woefully impractical modalities associated with these reparations for once, the demands are also reflective of a peculiar self-

victimizing psychology that has prevailed in the formerly colonized societies for quite some time now. Armchair commentators and casual observers are quite fond of blaming all their extant maladies on the history of colonization and imperial rule.

It is indeed true that the imperial history of colonization is a story of extractive exploitation and suppression. But by shifting blame for all the current issues to the past of colonization, such commentators are able to abdicate their own responsibilities.

This victim-playing psychology then permeates through hallways, conference rooms, and more recently among Twitter threads, and ends up forming a general mode of denial, victim-playing, and inaction among the citizens of the developing world. I believe that these current calls for climate change-related reparations stem from such an attitude.

The fact is that we all live in a new reality and the manner in which we respond to this unprecedented issue will define our trajectory as a country, and more generally as a species. A valid question to ask here is: if we were to be in the place of the now-industrialized countries in the past, would we have taken a different course of action? The answer to that is rather clear, as the recent industrial excesses of China and India have shown, the emerging economies are somewhat taking the same path.

In the literature on climate change coping strategies, we often hear the buzz words of 'resilience' and 'adaptation'. If we were to focus on the issue of making our population more resilient to climate change, there are countless theories, models, and philosophies. Yet in my years working with victims of climate change, there is only one true strategy that works towards increasing a population's resilience – and that is the increase in their income facilitated by increased economic opportunities. All other strategies are just peripheral band-aids and nothing more.

Having said that, this represents both a dilemma and a public policy challenge for us. The question remains – and one that should keep all policymakers perpetually awake at night – whether it is possible to increase average incomes without causing more harm to the environment.

And if recent examples of India and China are an indication, this is a seemingly insurmountable task, one that will require us to revise how we work, live, produce and consume. Both countries have grown economically and have taken significant parts of their population out of poverty, yet this has come at the cost of increased carbon footprint and environmental degradation.

Now coming to the concept of climate change adaptation, which is a more complex and proactive concept as a whole. Yet at the crux of it is the call for us to radically change the way we go about our lives at both micro and macro levels – something that we shall discuss in detail at some other place and time.

Climate change-induced extreme weather-related events is the new reality of our time. Something that we need to buckle up and get accustomed to. Rather than the typical victim-playing and calling for reparations that will never come, we need to take charge of our own destiny.

A good starting point would be to introspect and innovate and ultimately answer the question as to whether we can increase people's economic well-being without

industrializing in a manner that wreaks havoc on the environment. This would amount to us going against conventional economic theory on stages of growth. It is a mammoth ask, but maybe it is within us.

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