Squandering the potential for true development

The country’s development strategy is almost entirely centred on economic growth with little attention to environmental and social issues. Pakistan has the potential to provide energy for its population, but lacks planning to ensure that those most affected by mega projects are also taken into account. Its water shortage needs to be urgently addressed as eventually the river Indus will dry up. Reliable data on the number of bonded labourers there are in the country is urgently needed so that Government officials can no longer deny the rights of these highly exploited workers while the economy reaps the benefits of their work.

Massive flooding in Pakistan in 2010 devastated an area of around 160,000 km² and affected about 20 million people, most of whom lived and worked in the agricultural sector. They not only lost their homes, but also their livelihoods. It is estimated that more than 2 million hectares of crops were lost during the floods, resulting in fruit and vegetables now having to travel for hours to reach areas that used to have a plentiful amount of fresh goods available. Together with rising petrol prices, this has caused a significant price increase for fresh produce, which has had a devastating effect on the already poor communities of Pakistan.1

The coping mechanisms developed by riverside communities over decades have also been undermined by high population growth and persistent poverty as well as a number of land management factors, including deforestation, water encroachment on land in the river belt, physical infrastructure development and maintenance of river and canal embankments.

Due to inadequate infrastructure plans and policies, the monsoon season in 2011 also caused devastation throughout the country, leaving much of the Sindh region under water.

**Emergency response: success and failures**

About 2 million flood-affected families have received Government provided ‘Watan cards,’ each guaranteeing access to PKR.100,000 (approx. USD 1,170). A major flaw in the programme was the decision to allocate cards to male family heads via the system of Computerized National Identity Cards (CNIC), thereby automatically excluding orphans and female-headed families, along with hundreds of thousands of men and women who had migrated to affected areas before the floods and were ineligible because their CNICs were from other districts. Levels of fraud were high; those registered in more than one flood project brought complaints of poor seed quality and lack of access.

The distribution of aid to people affected by the floods was flawed and corrupt, leaving millions without access to basic rights such as healthcare, education, shelter, food and dignity. The situation is aggravated by the existence of bonded labourers; those working in the agricultural sector found themselves not only homeless, but with the land they lived and worked on now under water, their ability to repay their already endless debt became increasingly unlikely.

Civil society organizations issued a Citizen’s Charter stating that the country’s “social, economic, commerce, foreign, and national security policies all are extremely exclusionary in nature and need to be redeveloped incorporating a pro-people agenda of development and progress.”2

**Indus delta issues**

Tibetan glaciers are retreating at an alarmingly high rate; in the short term, this will cause lakes to expand and bring floods and mudflows; in the long run, once the glaciers vanish, water supplies in Pakistan will be in peril.3

In 1984, the World Bank initiated the Left Bank Outfall Drain (LBOD) programme, which included the creation of a 300km outfall drain from eastern Sindh into the sea. Initially, agriculture improved along the north of the drain and many farmers who had previously left to seek employment in urban areas returned.

direction, implement a system for the de-silting of rivers, and stop the misuse of canals which is ruini-
ing wetland areas.

Families who have lived and worked on the banks of the Indus for generations now struggle to
catch enough fish to survive. It is estimated that fish-
ing has declined by 70-80% in some villages and
many farmers have switched production from ele-
tricity to sunflowers, which require less water and yield
about the same profit, but means there is less food
available.6 Lack of water in the rivers is also posing a
serious threat to the Indus dolphins, who are now in
danger of extinction.

Coal: potential threats and opportunities
The district of Tharparkar in the Sindh province is
rich in natural resources including vast coal mines
(among the world’s 5 largest coal reserve) and is
home to about 1.5 million people. A proposed project
for Underground Coal Gasification (UCG) in the dis-
trict has the potential to generate 5,000 mw of elec-
tricity for at least 80 years.

The majority of Tharparkar’s residents are
members of indigenous minority groups. These
groups are doubly disadvantaged in society
as they are not only Hindus but also Dalits, also
called Outcastes. They are asset-less people who
rely on rain-fed agriculture and livestock rearing
who simply wish for their livelihoods and traditions
to be respected. Part of their concern comes from
a dramatic rise in Thar’s population, leading to an
increase in poverty levels and scarcity of resources,
while there are plans to outsource labour for the
UCG project instead of hiring local residents.

The Government has so far created no solid
proposals for the resettlement of Thar’s residents or
taken their wellbeing into account. Because of this,
in 2010 the World Bank pulled out of the project,
representing a major blow to the country’s sustain-
able development.

Bonded labour
Despite numerous legal provisions designed to re-
duce bonded labour, this practice continues, par-
ticularly in areas where there are brick kilns, carpet
industries, fishing, mining, stone/brick crushing,
shoe-making, power looms, refuse sorting and agri-

culture. They are thus found in all provinces, but are
highly prevalent in Sindh and Punjab. There is a seri-
ous lack of reliable data concerning their numbers,
causing the problem to remain unaddressed.7 The
ILO reported 20 million bonded labourers in Paki-
stan in 1993, and only 1.7 million by 2009. However
NGOs claimed there are around 1.3 million engaged
in bonded labour in Sindh province alone.8

Due to the lack of economic opportunities and
high levels of illiteracy, bonded labour is often vol-
untary.6 Bonded labourers are left with no escape;
the majority of them do not own a national identity
card, thus having no right to vote and no access to
social services. Feudal landlords, who often take
pride in having bonded labourers, especially if they
are children, resist initiatives for change as they
benefit significantly from the bonded labour sys-

Long term solutions
The Government needs to make a comprehensive
plan for the protection of the local fishing and farm-
ing communities, as well as the conservation of im-
portant environmental areas such as the wetlands.
The plan should include the revival of agriculture and
provision of improved fishing equipment to those
affected by river mismanagement, the promotion of
livestock and dairy development, income generation
activities, the provision of safe drinking water, and a
long term plan for the revival of education and health
facilities in the area.9

All contaminated water released into the Ara-
bian Sea should be treated and routinely checked to
preserve marine life. A plan is needed to ensure that
sea water does not enter the wetlands and a com-
prehensive water recycling / rain harvesting system
should be in operation to deal with the water short-
age problem. A number of smaller dams on the Indus
may prove to be more effective than the large canals
in operation at present.

As Pakistan is frequently affected by natural
disasters, it is crucial that an effective system of
Disaster Risk Reduction and Risk Mapping is in
place, involving and educating those who are most
likely to be affected by major crises, to ensure that
the extent of devastation and destruction is as lit-
tle as possible. Disaster Management Authorities
in each province should step up their efforts and
engage local universities in conducting research on
climate change.

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5 G. M. Kundu and B. Shah, Bonded Labour and Constrained
Role of Pakistan Government in its Eradication,
Department of Public Administration, Gomal University, Dera Ismail
6 See: <www.tbi.com.pk/the-menace-of-bonded-labour-in-
pakistan-agricultural-sector>.
7 District Umerkot Sindh, Rural Support Programmes
8 See: <www.sparc.pk.org>.
9 See: <www.ifiwatchnet.org/?q=en/node/6>.