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Large Dams & Irrigation Management in Indus Region

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990s, more than 80 million people in South Asia have become unemployed and as a consequence, millions of people have been reduced to absolute poverty due to crises of governance and agriculture. Today we are faced with the challenge of adapting our interaction with our environment to create a sustainable society. The people of the sub-continent believe that the best defense against destructive influences is to track both their activities and their effects on natural resources. But we the South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan) people have not learnt how to live without consuming the very resource base that sustains us and that will sustain future generations. It is an established fact that South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular remained a land divided between the hopes of the rich and the despair of the poor in which the richest one-fifth earned almost 40 percent of the region's income and the poorest one-fifth makes do with less than ten percent.

Dealing with environmental and ecological threats, shortage and misuse of water and issues like poverty, corruption and governance, today begins the struggle of survival for 115 million poverty-ridden destitutes, and tomorrow threatens the future of 395 million illiterate adults with nuclear arms, climatic changes, land degradation, scarcity of water and mismanagement of natural resources. In the case of Pakistan, which has one of the lowest literacy rates and lowest indicators of gender development in the world, widespread poverty prevails because of most powerful feudal-industrial interests, absence of conceptual environmental knowledge, undemocratic governments and illiteracy. Internationally more emphasis and more concentration have been paid to sustainability, right to say, forest protection, ozone depletion, waste management, environmental justice and natural resource management recently but Pakistan lags behind the developed world and Far East Asia in terms of environmental awareness, community rights, NRM and conservation of biodiversity.

Economic growth and progress towards poverty alleviation in the Indus Basin are now critically threatened by widespread loss of productive farmland due to mismanagement and degradation of water and soil resources. Due to mismanagement and water shortage at canal tail ends competition for water between different classes and clans have increased. This has led to catastrophic impacts on rural livelihood and entire rural communities are being forced to abandon their lands and to work as agricultural wage laborers or to migrate to overcrowded cities in search of employment. These effects have been observed during experiences with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in Hyderabad, Thatta, Badin & Dadu district of Sindh Pakistan. These Peasant Organizations and Farmer Networks are supported by few NGOs, Political Parties and Government departments which are trying to strengthen their capacities to organize farmers and to take collective action for participatory irrigation management.

There is a lack of integrated natural resources management programs, but the rural communities are striving to develop sustainable soil and water management systems to attain a sustainable livelihood. Their main objective is to ensure a more efficient, equitable and transparent distribution of canal irrigation water by strengthening the involvement of the poorest farmers in irrigation management. Several farmers' organizations have been formed through the institutional and strategic support of existing CBOs in major distributaries having different ecological and management issues, thus ensuring the sustainability of newly formed Farmers Organizations (FOs). This is also an attempt to address the issue of participation of people in mega-projects like the World Bank National Drainage Program and Kalabagh Dam.

The present-day Sindh province was the center of the ancient Indus Valley/Mohen-jodaro Civilization (2300 BC-1750 BC). It was named after Indus, the great Trans-Himalayan river of South Asia and one of the world's longest rivers, with a length of 2,900 km. The Indus (also called Mehran and Sindhu) rises in southwestern Tibet at an elevation of about 18,000 feet (5,500 m) and flows in a northwesterly direction along the slopes of the Himalayas. Recently the Government of Pakistan has announced its decision to construct the Kalabagh hydropower dam on Indus. According to the reports of international experts, World Commission on Dams (WCD) and International Rivers Network (IRN), over the past 50 years some 30 to 60 million people worldwide have been displaced by large dams and tens of millions more living downstream have been impoverished due to falling productivity of their farmland and fisheries after dam construction. Many dams, such as Sardar Sarovar/Maheshwar Dam on the Narmada River in India, Arun in Nepal, Kaeng Sua Ten in Thailand, and Bakun in Malaysia, are being opposed by environmentalists. Pakistan is the signatory of the Declaration of Rio which states that "In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it."

This paper will discuss the future role of political activists, CBOs and FOs in participatory irrigation management, their role in the rural development of the area and their role in policy advocacy for water sectors in the Indus basin. It will also discuss the proposed construction of Kalabagh Dam and institutional development strategies of FOs with a historical perspective. It will discuss the impacts of organizing farmers on the social context and relationship of the people and the lesson learnt for development practitioners.