

7th Karachi International Water Conference

Water, People, Health – Coping with Floods

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Remarks

By

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate.

Afia, Simi, and everyone present here — I missed many of the sessions and could not attend as much as I wanted to. Unfortunately, I couldn't spare the time.

I listened to what Rafay said about the Living Charter and also to the comments from the Vice Chancellor from South Punjab. The question is, why do we all feel the need for such a charter today? There must be a background to it. I believe Aafiya might be the only person in this hall who has actually travelled from the North all the way to the sea by boat along the Indus River. Am I right, Aafiya? I don't think anyone else here has made that journey and witnessed everything along the river the way she has.

The need for this charter, as Rafay explained in detail and with a historical perspective, arises from the long debate over development during the colonial era — especially development done in the name of water and agriculture. The question remains: was that development truly beneficial for us, or did it also bring harm? Was it motivated by goodwill, or were there other underlying interests?

But even before the colonial period, did we not have irrigation networks? Did we not practice agriculture? In Sindh — and in what is now Pakistan — we irrigated our lands through inundation canals. Sadly, our younger generations don't even know what inundation canals were.

When the Indus River and its tributaries flowed downstream past Mithankot, hundreds of inundation canals branched naturally through Sindh, without any man-made intervention, bringing water to our lands. These canals not only irrigated the plains but also helped drain excess water during floods, preventing waterlogging.

Historical records from 1920 show that Sindh irrigated around 4 million acres of land — today, that number is about 5.5 million acres. Even then, we cultivated rice on 1.5 to 1.6 million acres — roughly the same as today, though now we use hybrid seeds.

The inundation canals served a dual purpose: irrigation and natural drainage. Floodwaters would pass through them and reach the sea, maintaining our delta system. Today, however, 92% of our delta has shrunk. Back then, the delta sustained itself naturally because those canals carried river water all the way to the sea.

Do you know which region of Indo-Pak was once the most fertile? It wasn't Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, or even upper or central Sindh — it was the delta region. That was the richest, most productive part of the land, home to the best crops. Historical records indicate that there were over 40 small and large ports in the delta area. There used to be 17 creeks — today, only two remain. The rest have vanished.

And why did this happen? Because we built barrages and blocked those natural canals. We replaced the old, self-sustaining system with a controlled, mechanized one. We said, "We'll give you water through this system," and left only 14 canals in Sindh.

In 1923, when Sukkur Barrage was built, people were told they'd now get water through seven canals from there. Hundreds of natural canals were closed off — about a thousand kilometers of embankments (dykes) were constructed, cutting off the old water channels. Later, when we realized that water no longer reached areas like Kotri in Jamshoro, we decided to build another barrage there. The same logic followed for Guddu — water wasn't reaching the canals, so we built another barrage.

In essence, we built two massive walls — two barrages — across a river that once naturally flowed into the sea through hundreds of channels. We decided, arrogantly, that the river would now flow only where we allow it. We assumed control over nature and climate.

Then came the FP Bund (Flood Protection Bund) — another wall, four to five hundred kilometers long, to block the water flowing from Balochistan's rivers — Khuzdar, Sibi, and Mula — which once joined the Indus through Manchar Lake and Hamal Lake. That water used to recharge the entire system, but we blocked it too.

Initially, these measures seemed to work. But remember, this all began when, in the late 1800s, barrages were first built upstream in what was then united Punjab (now India). As those projects diverted water, the natural flow to Sindh decreased. Our inundation canals began drying up. The "solution" offered was: "Let's also build barrages in Sindh."

The result? The entire ecosystem collapsed. Our forests vanished, our drainage networks were destroyed, and humans took full control over water distribution. Even the sea was rationed — we decided how much water it would receive. And the environmental imbalance we are facing in Pakistan today is not the result of one day — it's the accumulation of these man-made interventions over a century.

We often say Pakistan's contribution to global carbon emissions is small — and that's true. But despite that, we've failed to learn lessons from our own environmental history. After

independence, for the first time in human history, we voluntarily gave away three of our rivers under the Indus Waters Treaty.

At that time, those three rivers — Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas — carried around 33 million acre-feet of water, while India's actual usage was only about 8 MAF. Yet we gave them full rights over all 33 MAF, allowing India to divert that water to other basins — something unprecedented in human history.

Our land and our sea were designed to thrive on six rivers, but we handed over three. The consequences have been devastating.

Today, 90% of our water is consumed by agriculture. We are overcommitted — our average available water is about 115-116 MAF, but we have allocations totaling 125 MAF.

Under the 1991 Water Accord between the provinces and the federal government, Pakistan agreed to distribute 115 MAF among the provinces and reserve 10 MAF for the sea, totaling 125 MAF. Sindh's share is about 48 MAF, Punjab's 54, Balochistan's 3.87, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's around 5. But that total water is no longer available today.

For 90% of the year, we rely on run-of-the-river flows, and only 10% of the time do we have enough water for storage. The Indus Basin is therefore overcommitted and overregulated. We have interfered too much with our natural systems — and that's exactly why we now need a Living Charter. I deeply appreciate this important initiative by Hisaar Foundation.

Thank you very much.