

Pakistan's National Water Policy

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Pakistan's first ever National Water Policy was approved by the Council of Common Interest last week. Very few issues in the country are as important or as contentious as water scarcity and that was witnessed in the lead up to the approval of the policy as officials in Islamabad and in provincial capitals clamored to mollify any last minute objections to the draft. It is indeed a tremendous achievement in itself that we were able to come to a consensus on the document.

Unfortunately, that is one of only a few positives to come out of a document that was literally decades in the making.

Presumably, the policy was developed after an engagement with the relevant stakeholders. Yet, even as the policy was being approved, researchers and

analysts who keenly follow developments in the water sector in Pakistan were unaware of its contents. Social media networks lit up as policy wonks searched for the newly approved document.

For a policy that aims to serve as the people's document with ownership that cuts across political, social and geographical boundaries, this was a poor start. Having the document available online for review prior to its promulgation could have resulted in highly participatory and productive process. Yet, for what could only be political expediency, it was not to be. A guarded document may indeed see the light of day but in terms of broad acceptance and ownership, it is a self-defeating exercise.

Coming to the water policy itself, the document aims to please everyone with what amounts to be a smorgasbord of recommendations. It means that the policy is rudderless and lacks direction. It takes on a plethora of issues pertaining to urban water management, agriculture, hydropower, groundwater, water quality, industrial water uses and hazards to name a few. And while all of these areas do comprise some of the most important concerns within and across the water sector, it is difficult to see the document as the harbinger of an integrated vision where the varied set of recommendations and policy measures speak to one another.

Moreover, there is a perceptible lack of connection to the human dimensions which are truly at the heart of what makes water such an integral part of our landscape, be they plains, mountains, the delta, wetlands, river basins or deserts.

The National Water Policy, even with all its deficiencies, should help us start the discussion on what kind of future we want to our future generations to have when it comes to water

In some instances the measures proposed in the water policy seem to be working at cross-purposes. For example, the policy calls for large dams while at the same time arguing for environmental flows; the former, of course,

serves to impede the latter. Or the fact that the policy calls for using renewable solar energy for groundwater pumping so as to reduce energy costs, while at the same time realizing the groundwater is being overexploited in the country.

Unfortunately, this calls into question the credibility of the document and again highlights a major deficiency in terms of not having wide-ranging stakeholder consultations prior to its promulgation. It is ironic that the document has a separate section on stakeholder engagement.

The water policy also proposes changes in terms of institutional governance structures by calling for a National Water Council to be set up under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister. Yet, recent history tells us that such councils rarely meet.

The now-defunct Pakistan Environmental Protection Council rarely met in the 2000s. The National Disaster Management Commission which is supposed to meet regularly has hardly been convened for the past many years. While the National Water Council may have better luck in this regard. Provincial Water Authorities are also being set up.

However, it is difficult to imagine their smooth functioning as they are sure to cross paths with other entities which have historically been responsible for managing various aspects related to water in the country. These include the Provincial Irrigation Department, Environmental Protection Departments and the revamped Water and Power Development Authority.

This isn't the first policy to cater to our concerns about water. Prior to this, we have had the National Environmental Policy, National Drinking Water Policy, National Sanitation Policy and the Climate Change Policy. Add to this the plethora of plans, strategies and frameworks that we have accumulated over the years and one wonders if there was a need for yet another policy, especially one that struggles to provide a vision for sustainable water reforms.

Water has always been on the agenda in this region. Its importance to the people who for millennia have called the Indus Basin and its environs home is immeasurable. Yet, we continue to treat it like a commodity instead of the public good that it is. In doing so, we have become the self-styled masters of this important resource as opposed to its stewards.

If there was ever a time to change course, it is now. The National Water Policy, even with all its deficiencies, should help us start the discussions as to what kind of a water future we want to leave our future generations, one that creates haves and have-nots or one that is equitable and just.

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