

**Water symposium: take it to parliament**

“Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored”, said Aldous Huxley. That seemed to be the motivation of the two-day symposium on water held in the federal capital last week. The symposium appeared to be a veiled attempt at addressing the general criticism surrounding the dam fund initiative; that is, that Diamer on its own may not be the cure all. Thank goodness; even if a symposium is what was needed to bring us all to the same page!

That page, it turns out, is the “Islamabad declaration”, a 20-point agenda/summary of everything that ails the water economy, and more! The declaration identifies a host of policy challenges from supply augmentation; efficient utilization; implementation of Indus Water Treaty; improvement and extension of irrigation network; conservation; flood risk management; consumption accounting and pricing; capacity building of water management authorities such as WAPDA; among others. The declaration ends with a call for implementation of agricultural income tax, the reverse-Macbeth of Pakistan’s public finance; one that everyone speaks of but no one acts upon.

Nobody disagrees with the broad contours of policy questions identified in the declaration. Yet, the challenges identified are not much different from ones already noted comprehensively in the National Water Policy. While the latter was devised by executive as a guiding framework for itself, the former in-trusts that the executive will deliver.

However, both documents fall short in that no coherent action plan for what needs to be done is hinted upon. Of course, preparing an action plan for the executive to address challenges facing the water economy is not part of judicial branch’s job description anyway. But neither is holding a symposium.

The purpose is not to appear ingrate. The specter of water scarcity is real and credit is due for bringing it into limelight. However, recommendations made in a symposium are of little consequence because they are non-binding (no matter who convened the conference).

Which begs the question as to what has been achieved in terms of tangible outcomes? The water policy has been in place for more than six months, with little action in terms of even forming the regulatory bodies such as groundwater authority that were prescribed in the document.

Some experts have criticized the premise of a national water policy altogether, insisting that as a provincial subject, the matter is beyond federal ambit. In that context, the federal government can achieve few if any of the objectives listed in either of the two documents (apart from securing financing for large scale infrastructure projects).

Nevertheless, that the Supreme Court has put its foot down on the issue is a blessing in disguise. The country now has two very similar frameworks to look up to as guiding principles, but the inaction is not purely a problem of capacity. The problem is lack of political ownership.

The matter needs to be taken up in the parliament for consensus building. As a national representative body, an ownership of the issue by the legislature will ensure that current and future governments are held accountable for inaction on the policy. The guiding principles of National Water Policy and Islamabad Declaration could be passed into a law, along the lines of Fiscal Responsibility Act, if needed.

Moreover, major political parties in the parliament also hold power at provincial levels. If consensus is achieved in the parliament, provincial governments will have no choice but to toe the party line adopted at national level.

The judiciary has done its bit. It's now for the legislators to take charge of what they were elected for!