

### **Water storage**

Pakistan's water problems have been at the forefront of the national agenda recently, with both the prime minister and chief justice of the Supreme Court bringing public attention to their initiative to raise funds for construction of new dams. We were given some more evidence of how dire the crisis is when the Wapda chairman said that Pakistan's existing dams have lost one-fourth of their storage capacity. This is not a new problem. Increased sedimentation in dams has been gradually reducing the ability of dams to store water and this is expected to become worse in the coming years. At present, dams have the capacity only to hold about 30 days of water. The Wapda chairman wants this to be increased to 120 days. To do so, however, we cannot focus only on constructing new dams. As the chairman said, we need to shift the entire way we think about water. He believes Pakistan has to improve the way hydel electricity is generated, and the circular debt has to be brought under control. The water crisis is going to become an existential threat to the country as we begin to feel the ravages of global climate change; current thinking is simply not bold enough to stave off this looming disaster.

There are steps the government could take to start Pakistan down the road to water sustainability. It should empower the National Water Council and implement a water policy that encourages conservation and more efficient use of water. The largest user of water is the agricultural sector and current policy allocates water based on size of land holdings rather than need. This needs to be changed immediately. Existing dams need to be better maintained so that their capacity does not shrink so rapidly. Pakistan's biggest problem, however, is also the one that is most difficult to solve. The country is reliant on the Indus Waters Treaty to ensure we get a fair share of the water from the tributaries of River Indus. India, though, has been changing the facts on the ground by rapidly constructing new dams. This has allowed it to divert more water for its own use. Renegotiating the treaty or convincing international courts and arbiters to restore Pakistan's share is crucial for a country that does not receive sufficient rainfall. Until such time as the Indian government is ready for negotiations and an equitable solution, Pakistan will just have to use the water it has as wisely as possible.

Editorial