
A PLEA FOR HIGH PRIORITY FOR FORESTRY SECTOR IN PAKISTAN

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The forestry sector is most neglected sector the world over and the situation in Pakistan is not different. In spite of the fact that the forests cover about one third of total land area on earth, provide numerous benefits to man and contribute to ecological and environmental stability and sustainable development, the efforts for forestry development and extension have been meagre, widely dispersed and erratic over past many decades. The current worldwide international forest conservation assistance amounts to only US \$ 1.35 billion. The allocation of financial resources to forestry sector by individual governments and international agencies is also low. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations is responsible for forest conservation and development all over the world especially in the developing countries. It spends only about 4% of its budget on forestry which is less than half of 9% of its budget in the fifties. Nearer home, forestry being provincial subject, the provincial governments generally allocate 1 to 1.5% of their annual development funds to this sector which is very small. Similarly, the share of forestry sector in all five year plans has usually been half percent and only half of which was actually released during plans' period for developmental purposes. Presently, forests provide Rs.1550 millions as revenue to provincial governments which is much more than total expenditure on forestry development in the country during Seventh Plan period.

Agricultural and industrial development started attracting the attention of planners in the sixties. In seventies and early eighties, energy conservation caught their attention due to energy crisis and resultant high cost of fossil fuels. This

crisis however, compelled some development planners at national and international levels, to find out the possibility of extended use of biofuels including wood in place of fossil fuels in the developed countries. Some efforts were also directed towards establishment of energy plantations to reduce the need for fossil fuels and improve the lot of rural poor in third world countries. In the latter case, the efforts made little impact on existing energy situation due to a number of reasons. The financial inputs were rather small and that too scattered over large tracts of land. The requisite technical experience in developing woodfuel resources in rural areas on the farmers' lands was also lacking on the part of foresters to counteract mounting social and economic pressures on forests especially those which were due to tremendous increase in population. The situation has not changed much over the years.

The above situation has contributed to the deterioration of forests all over the world in general and in Pakistan in particular. Deforestation is going on world-wide at the rate of nearly 17 million ha. per annum. Existing forests are under tremendous users' pressure for wood, grazing and other forest products. The forestry situation in Pakistan is no exception to it. We have only 4.8% of the area under forests and less than half of it is productive. The annual demand for fuel wood by the local communities on the hilly forests is more than 4 times their yearly growth potential and the grazing pressure in them is more than 6 times their capacity. As a result soil erosion is rampant. Whole mountain sides are sliding down causing land slides and disrupting means of communication such as roads, bridges, etc. During summer

months, the major rivers look like mud streams, silting up dams, reducing power generation, choking water channels and causing floods. The paucity of local forest resources has resulted in high timber and fuelwood prices in the markets and people are increasingly using wood substitutes. The general environment has also deteriorated and there are only few places left for recreation for the general public.

It is now necessary to give a high priority to forestry development in Pakistan. The general public, especially farmers' community has become aware of economic and environmental benefits of tree plantations campaigns of provincial forest departments, which are held twice a year during spring and monsoon seasons. International assistance is also forthcoming due to importance of forests highlighted at recently held Earth Summit in Brazil. A major shift in policy and enhanced allocation of funds are needed which can only be done by the politicians and planners respectively. Future strategy of forest development in the country would consist of afforestation in the hilly areas to protect river catchments to reduce soil erosion and land slides, improve environment and provide jobs to poor people living there. Secondly, social and farm forestry programmes for encouraging farmers to grow trees on their farmlands for increased wood production will have to be launched in the plains all over the country. Some sort of subsidy in the form of free tree seedlings should be provided to the farmers through these programmes. The people living in the hilly areas need large quantities of fuelwood for cooking and heating, for which they depend upon nearby forests causing their destruction. This has to be stopped to conserve mountain forests for ecological and environmental reasons and for sustainable development of agriculture in the plains. They have to be provided with substitute fuels at subsidized rates.

Considering the present level of funding for forestry development in Pakistan and its insignificant effect in ameliorating the situation, future level of investment in the sector will have to be very high. The Forestry Sector Master Plan being prepared by the Government of Pakistan with the assistance of Asian Development Bank, UNDP and other donor agencies, proposes an investment of Rs.38 billion in this sector during next 25 years till year 1918. Similar action plan is proposed in the National Conservation Strategy also prepared by Government of Pakistan. This amount appears to be rather large, but consequences of not investing such an amount can be serious. Future development of agriculture and power sectors as well as social and economic development of people living in hilly regions and farmers in the plains depends upon it.