

Exclusive Interview

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Dr. Abid Saiyum Suleri
Executive Director, Sustainable
Development Policy Institute (SDPI)

ICMA: Please tell us about SDPI — its objectives, role, and functions, particularly in terms of sustainable development.

Dr. Abid Suleri: SDPI is the premier independent policy think tank in Pakistan. It was founded in 1992 to catalyze the transition to sustainable development, defined as the enhancement of peace, social justice, and well-being within and across generations. We closely work with (but not for) the government and non-governmental stakeholders to provide them research-based policy advice on issues pertaining to sustainable development. We conduct primary and secondary research, provide our input in high-level policy-making forums, conduct third-party monitoring and evaluation of different projects, conduct trainings and bridge the research-policy-practice gap through vibrant policy outreach.

ICMA: South Asia has experienced devastating climate extremes. How can the region work together to build resilience to these climate-related disaster threats?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Climate-related disasters know no territorial boundaries. Heat waves, melting Himalayan

glaciers, rains, smog, drought, floods affect the region indiscriminately. We in South Asia require close collaboration, information and research sharing, and collective action to cope against these calamities. It is important to learn from each other what worked, what did not work, and why when it comes to adopting climate smart agriculture, building climate smart cities, securing livelihoods, providing social protection, disaster preparedness, disaster mitigation, and coping with weather extremes.

ICMA: What is the nexus between climate change and economic development?

Dr. Abid Suleri: The relationship between climate change and economic development is complex and multifaceted. While climate change can pose significant challenges to economic development, addressing climate change can also create opportunities for economic growth and development. It is essential to recognize these interconnections and take an integrated approach to sustainable development that balances economic, social, and environmental considerations.

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ICMA: Pakistan is bearing the brunt of the climate crisis despite its small carbon footprint and less than one percent share in the world's planet-warming gases. Do you believe Pakistan is paying the price for Western countries' emissions?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Climate scientists have solid data-based evidence now that the excessive production of carbon emissions by the Global North (the US, EU, and Japan are responsible for 46 percent of global fossil fuel burning from 1992 to 2022) caused severe climate impacts in the Global South. Carbon emissions by rich countries are warming the planet. This global warming results in extreme climate events like the one Pakistan experienced this year. Exploring the scientific reasons for the super floods in Pakistan, the World Weather Attribution Organization (WWAO) found that the '5-day maximum rainfall' over Sindh and Balochistan is now about 75 percent more intense than it would have been had the climate not warmed by 1.2 Celsius.

ICMA: Should countries with low carbon footprints start invoicing the West for weather devastation in their countries?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Unfortunately, there is no mechanism (yet) either in the international dispute settlement arena or in the multilateral negotiations processes on climate change where an aggrieved victim of global warming like Pakistan can present its case against the world's largest polluters and sue for damages. However, the lack of such a mechanism does not and should not absolve rich countries of their historical responsibilities, who have made certain commitments (mostly unmet) to mobilizing funds for financing climate change mitigation and adaptation (called green climate funds).

ICMA: How can Pakistan reduce its vulnerability to extreme weather events, considering that it is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Reducing vulnerability to extreme weather events requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the root causes of vulnerability and builds resilience. Based on our shortcomings in handling previous disasters, we need to improve our disaster preparedness and management strategies. We need to develop and implement climate-resilient infrastructure, promote climate-smart agriculture, implement early warning systems, enhance disaster preparedness and response, increase public awareness and education, strengthen social safety nets, and last but not least, bring our house in order through improved governance.

ICMA: How has climate change negatively impacted our country's economy, health, and people's livelihoods?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Climate change has caused significant economic losses in Pakistan, with extreme weather events such as floods and droughts affecting agriculture, infrastructure, and livelihoods. Climate change has also negatively impacted public health in Pakistan, with extreme weather events leading to an increase in the incidence of waterborne diseases, heatstroke, and respiratory illnesses. In rural areas where agriculture is a major source of income, Extreme weather events such as floods and droughts have led to crop failures, livestock losses, and reduced income for farmers. This has led to increased poverty and food insecurity, particularly among vulnerable populations such as women and children.

ICMA: What is SDPI's assessment of the economic losses caused by recent flooding, particularly in the agriculture and livestock sectors?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Current floods have heavily damaged our cotton crop, livestock, and perishable crops. Besides standing crops, it also affected the stored wheat in Sindh province. Consequently, we would have to import cotton for our textile sector, causing an additional burden to our meagre foreign exchange reserves.

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ICMA: Do you believe Pakistan has enough resources and infrastructure to deal with natural calamities such as flooding?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Resource scarcity is always a challenge for Pakistan, especially when dealing with natural calamities. However, a bigger challenge is spending the available resources in an efficient manner. Multiple organisations are dealing with natural calamities with an overlapping mandate, and lack of value for money for most of our spending on this count remains a challenge.

ICMA: One cannot prevent a natural calamity from occurring, but the devastating impact can be contained. What are your views, especially from the perspective of organizations responsible for disaster management?

Dr. Abid Suleri: Natural calamities cannot be avoided. However, by implementing the right set of policies and practices, one can always avoid turning those calamities into human disasters. I feel that our weakest link in containing losses from natural calamities is district disaster management authorities (DDMAs), the organizations responsible for providing the first line of defense against disasters, which are extremely weak both in terms of capacities and financial resources.

ICMA: Please apprise us about the institutional arrangements in Pakistan for mobilizing climate finance and green financing?

Dr. Abid Suleri: The Climate Change Ministry in Pakistan has put in place several institutional arrangements to

mobilize climate finance and promote green financing. The main vehicles to access these funds are the National Climate Change Policy, the nationally determined contributions (NDCs), the National Disaster Risk Management Fund, engagement with the Green Climate Fund, and the private sector. However, more needs to be done to strengthen these arrangements and mobilize the resources needed to address the country's climate-related challenges.

ICMA: What mitigation strategies would you recommend to tackle climate risks?

Dr. Abid Suleri: This will require a combination of mitigation and adaptation strategies that address the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of climate change. Some of the key measures that can be taken include investing in renewable energy, improving water management practices, promoting sustainable agriculture, and building climate resilience in vulnerable communities. Furthermore, international cooperation and support will be critical in mobilizing the resources needed to address Pakistan's climate-related challenges. Developed countries have a responsibility to provide financial and technical support to developing countries to help them transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient future. This can include support for climate-related projects, as well as capacity-building and technology transfer.

ICMA: What role may academia and professional organizations like ICMA play in supporting the national effort to mitigate climate risks?

Dr. Abid Suleri: We require a whole-of-government, whole-of-policy, and whole-of-society approach to mitigate and adapt to climate risks. Academia and professional organisations like ICMA can support Pakistan's efforts to mitigate climate risks by providing education, training, research, and advocacy. Professional organisations like ICMA can play a key role by providing guidance and support to their members on integrating climate risks into their work. For example, ICMA can develop guidance and tools for its worthy members to assess and manage climate risks in financial reporting and decision-making processes. They can also advocate for policies and regulations that encourage companies to disclose their climate risks and take action to reduce their carbon footprint.

The Editorial Board thanks Dr. Abid Qaiyum Suleri, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) for sparing from his precious time to give exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.