



Do you support the building of the Kalabagh Dam (KBD) Why?

Dams are built to meet storage and power generation needs for economic development of the country. The decisions are based on complex technical and economic considerations and not the support of individuals. In a federation, all the federating units must agree on such a major project. Consensus does not exist in support of the KBD project, which has a planned live storage capacity of 6.1 Million Acres Feet (MAF) and electricity generation of 3,600 MW.

Why has the controversy surrounding the Kalabagh Dam not been resolved in the last 50 years?

It is a matter of technical as well as political understanding and agreement. The controversy has been created by vested narrow interests without considering national interest. All four provinces must reach a common understanding on its technical aspects, after which political consensus can follow. In order to bring various segments of society on one page, due consideration must be given to management measures, ecological balance in the Indus Delta and hydel profit allocations under an institutional arrangement based on constitutional guarantees.

In all such matters, we need to follow a long-drawn process with patience. Nation-building projects require looking beyond our tenures in office. Unfortunately, we have yet to develop this approach in our national psyche and this is true for the KBD project too.

‘THE CONTROVERSY HAS BEEN CREATED BY VESTED AND NARROW INTERESTS.’

Nisar Memon, a former federal minister and a known authority on water affairs, talks to SouthAsia in this exclusive interview.

Many experts oppose the idea of constructing the Kalabagh Dam due to its economic and technical non-viability. What are your comments?

Technical and economic viabilities of projects must be taken up by professionals and specialists with all seriousness and in depth, without fear and favour. All previous work on the subject should be taken as the base if we are to arrive at agreements for our future. The technical findings must be communicated in non-technical language to gain understanding and consensus. All discourse, reporting and writing requires a thorough understanding of the subject before anyone venturing to write on it with objectivity and responsibility.

What are the apprehensions of Sindh and KPK towards the construction of the Dam?

Sindh has expressed several reservations but the main one is the release of water from the KBD reservoir to Punjab while KPK's key concern has been the flooding of Nowshera. There is lack of clear understanding, appreciation and agreement on the design and administrative aspects. There is a trust deficit among the provinces on KBD. Storage dams are made to cater to the needs of all riparians which must be understood, spelt out and agreed amongst all the stakeholders under the constitutional framework of IRSA and the Council of Common Interests (CC&I).

Do their suspicions hold any truth?

We must not add to the already muddled situation but, instead, identify the design, engineering, administrative, constitutional, economic and environmental facts relating to KBD and its value to national security.

Could the Dam be a lifeline for Pakistan which is among the most water-stressed countries in the world?

The Pakistan Vision 2025 document recognizes the challenge of around 30 days' storage capacity and our ranking as 76th in 107 countries on the global food security index. Our per capita water availability is estimated at 1,066 cubic meters which puts us in the list of water-stressed countries. But the worrying factor is that by 2025, our per capita water availability is estimated to decrease to 858 cubic meters which puts us on the water scarcity list. As such, we need to build dams, increase ground water capacity and manage population increase.

Do you agree with the view that instead of building big dams, we should go for small dams?

We need large as well as small dams. This has been discussed in various forums all these years as well as in the Parliamentary Committee on Water Resources (PCWR) during 2003-04. I was part of the PCWR and its unanimous recommendation was to go for both small and large dams. The recommendation to build dams was adopted by all four – the then Chief Ministers and Federal Water & Power Minister in the Parliament House and later adopted by the Senate. The details can be seen in the PCWR Report at

Understanding the design considerations and engineering factors, this issue can be addressed. Your magazine may like to engage in bringing all aspects under discourse, including the impact of climate change, glacier melt, floods, pricing and the water-energy-food nexus.

How can we create inter-provincial harmony on building the Dam, keeping in view that three out of four provinces have categorically rejected the project?

Dialogue, dialogue, nothing but

Pakistan needs dams for not only water storage but for power generation too. We should focus single-mindedly on exploiting our untapped hydel energy.

<http://nisaramemon.pk/pcwrdetail/>

Don't you think that the Dam, if built, will create salinity and water logging that might affect the surrounding land?

Dams are built to cater to rural and urban population as well as agricultural and industrial needs. This is a matter of detailed understanding of technical aspects of dams. The Indus River, being a lifeline of Pakistan, currently has Tarbela Dam which was built under the 1960 Indus Basin Treaty while its existing live storage has been reduced to 6.849 MAF due to sedimentation. The original estimated life of Tarbela was 50 years but due to plans to build structures upstream Tarbela, the useful span of life of the Tarbela Dam is expected to go up to 2060, before it becomes run of the river.


The country is working on a plan termed as Indus Cascade, whereby storage structures upstream Tarbela are being built. This will increase the life span of Tarbela by stopping the sediment coming down to Tarbela and, on the other hand, structures will be built to generate the much-needed cheaper hydel clean energy. The key dam upstream Tarbela, in the medium term, is Dasu with an estimated electricity generation capacity of 4,300 MW while in the long term, the Diamer-Basha project will generate 4,500 MW electricity and provide storage capacity of 6.4 MAF.

It is said that the rivers in Sindh will go dry if the Kalabagh Dam is built. Do you agree?

dialogue amongst the stakeholders.

Pakistan has not built a large dam for many years. Do you agree with this policy?

Pakistan needs dams for not only water storage but for power generation too. We should focus single-mindedly on exploiting our untapped hydel energy to cater to low-cost, clean energy. We have increased power generation capacity at Tarbela Dam by adding Tunnel 4 and 5 which has about 2,470 MW generation capacity. The height of the Mangla Dam on River Jhelum has been raised by 30 feet to increase its storage capacity by 2.88 Million Acre-feet (MAF). Neelum Jhelum is the latest addition to our list of large dams.

I am glad, PCWR recommended the Diamer-Basha Dam with live storage of 6.4 MAF and power generation of 4,500 MW. This is now gaining momentum, although valuable time has been lost since 2005 when consensus was reached amongst stakeholders. It's heartening to know it is now a project linked with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor under the global Chinese initiative of 'One Belt One Road.' 

Nisar A. Memon, former Minister of Kashmir & Northern Areas, State & Frontier Regions and Information, former Senator and Chair of Standing Committee of Defence & Defence Production. He is currently focused on water environment and is Chairman of Water Environment Forum, Pakistan.