PRESS RELEASE

Oil gas exploration companies spreading pollution, causing health hazards to population: Speakers

KARACHI, March 21: Participants of a webinar on the plight of local communities located near oil and gas exploration fields in Sindh asked the provincial government to protect local people from pollution emitting from gas fields and spend funds provided by exploration companies on the welfare of locals.

The webinar to launch a research study "Natural Gas Infrastructure and Local Communities in Sindh: A Case of Three Settlements in Sanghar District" organized by The Knowledge Forum underlined the need for the mobilization of local communities for the protection of their rights.

The main research of the study Ms. Zeenat Hisam pointed out that despite the fact there is a legal framework and policy for exploration companies, the local communities are not benefitted from the funds coming for development.

According to the Model Production Sharing Agreement, the companies, in consultation with the provincial government, have to undertake social welfare programmes covering health, education, drinking water, and roads, among others. The funds allocated for these projects should be no less than US$ 30,000 per annum. However, she said there is no social development in the area.

According to her exploration, drilling, extraction and processing of natural gas harm habitat and the communities living in the surrounding areas. Air pollution causes respiratory, cardiovascular and other diseases. People who live near oil and gas-producing areas experience a higher incidence of poor pregnancy outcomes (birth defects, preterm birth, and stillbirth), cancer, respiratory and cardiovascular problems, and asthma exacerbation.

There have been documented cases of groundwater being contaminated with fracking fluids and gases near gas sites, she pointed out.

She said there is no basic health unit (BHU) within the settlements. The communities access healthcare services from the basic health unit which is located about 4 to 5 km away from the village.

Due to the lack of adequate disclosure of information clauses in the relevant laws, the companies and provincial departments do not share the information which would help the communities and the civil society to monitor the spending of the social welfare funds and revenues under other heads.

She emphasized mobilising local communities for advocacy and pressure-building on the companies to take measures to limit the impacts on biodiversity; minimise water consumption and discharges; reduce damaging air emissions and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to address the risk of climate change through improved energy efficiency in operations.

Speaking on the occasion another researcher Ishak Soomro said it is a common slogan that after the exploration of oil and gas government claims that the fate of the area would be changed. There is no change in the lives of people despite the passage of decades after exploration.

Local people are not provided employment. For many years, Sindh is not receiving royalty money from the federal government. He said Sindh is producing over 55% of gas in Pakistan, but the federal government has held back the royalty share of the provinces.

Moreover, he said to exploration policy, companies are paying production bonus money to districts. Millions of rupees are paid by the companies but common people are not benefitted.

Abdul Majeed Mangrio of the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), Sanghar said the communities have no voice and only political elites have control over funds.

He said local people have been demanding jobs in exploration companies but they are often ignored. Many protest demonstrations are held in the Sanghar district against pollution created by these companies but the government has not taken any notice.

The other speakers demanded the Sindh government review the existing legislation, rules and regulations governing social welfare and environmental management in oil and gas production. They underlined to increase lobby with legislators for requisite amendments in the rules and policies.

They also emphasized advocating for adequate disclosure of information from the companies on all aspects, including financial aspects, of oil and gas production and CSR policies.

Ms. Zeenia Shaukat, Director of The Knowledge Forum said the local communities need to be supported and mobilized to get their problems solved.

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