



SAWAS

South Asian Water Studies



WATER GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN SOUTH ASIA

The water crisis emerging in South Asia is not the result of natural factors but has been caused by improper water resource management, and by pollution of both surface water and groundwater and the shortcomings in the working of the institutions which are meant to address these problems.

The intermittent natural factors such as drought and flood compound and exacerbate human failures. Urbanisation, agricultural intensification and climate change, are all contributing to greater competition to consume water resources. There is a variety of ways in which the current patterns of urbanisation and development impact access to water. In the absence of adequate institutional cover, the preemption of water sources for urban purposes places them out of the reach of rural population, thus adversely affecting rural quality of life and well-being.

The absence of a property rights structure for water leads to a situation where water access is insecure; furthermore, since rights to water are tied to rights to land, it follows that land acquisition also diminishes the access of water to a significant section of the population in the region. Thus the crisis of availability assumes that there is not enough water to meet the current and growing requirement and that water will become a limiting factor for economic and other activities.

However, without questioning current uses and method of distribution, and seeking answers for the question related to who makes the decision for whom, this crisis can not be averted. There are multifarious aspects of scarcity that require deeper assessment of these notions. Something is always scarce with respect to an implicit understanding of sufficiency (Jairath and Ballabh 2008). For example, for a poor woman, water scarcity reflects the constraint of her basic livelihood and absolute shortage of drinking water. In contrast, for a large land owner, water scarcity may mean shortage of irrigation water for cultivating water intensive crops like rice or sugarcane. Thus, augmentation of water supply need not necessarily solve water scarcity problem in such a situation where scarcity is created due to unequal access of the resources. The challenges of water governance assume importance from these perspectives.

Over the next two-three decades, in order to bridge the gap between existing institutions and the changing requirements of water governance, it is important that we recognise the fact that the more water may not be available and therefore, our focus should be diverted from capture and augmentation of water related services to the redistribution of water and creating institutional arrangement for sharing equally, and building a humane and just society. The current political economy of water reform in its entire manifestations advocating for big dams, interlinking of rivers and integrated water resources management or public and private participation within a neo-liberal paradigm may not resolve or even mitigate water crisis.

While it is not difficult to discern reasons for such a discourse, this even if successful will not lead to equitable sharing of water resources, the poor and marginalised will continue to be by passed.

The fact that water scarcity is eminent, we need to [i] increase productivity of water and [ii] deepen the democracy within the water sector. The question then therefore, is to break the institutional impasse created by the current political economy of the state and the dominant coalition through mobilisation of people, building leadership capacity within the water bureaucracy and re-energising the civil society organisations to meet the challenges of the water sector.

In this issue of SAWAS, we take a microscopic view of the above discussed issues in specific geographical contexts. Sarah Nowreen, M. Shah Alam Khan and Hamidul Huq examine the development of an IWRM framework in a small scale project in Bangladesh, through a study. The paper points out gaps in the existing framework practiced in the project.

In the paper, "Equity and Social Justice in Water Resource Governance: the Case of Bangladesh", A. K. M. Jahir Uddin Chowdhury and Golam Rasul use Bangladesh as a case study, to examine to what extent the concept of social equity has been integrated into water resource management.

In an analysis that elaborates on how we can save the vulnerable Ganges River, Nitin Kaushal and Madan Lal illustrates measures for sustainability of water resources being adopted by various governmental agencies.

In addition to these, the perspective paper by N. C. Narayanan and Sunil Thrikawala, questions the water scarcity mitigating impact of current aid strategy adopted by international donors under private – public partnerships. The answer to some these questions need not be final but a healthy reform in water sector requires open and transparent debate.

SAWAS will strive and continue to provide such a forum for debate without any prejudice and biases and invites scholars and practitioners to participate and contribute opinion ideas and scholarly work for larger audience.

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