[**In troubled waters**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1625167/in-troubled-waters)

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PAKISTAN is in troubled waters. It has abundant water resources compared to its neighbours. Yet, it has become one of the most water-insecure countries in the region. The country, however, still has no plans to manage its water insecurity that is growing with population, urbanisation and climate change. Water scarcity need not entail water insecurity. An important key to enhance water security lies in ensuring equitable benefit sharing (EBS) among water stakeholders. This can help Pakistan i) pursue sustainable agriculture with less water, ii) improve interprovincial water distribution, and iii) strengthen the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) that is otherwise based on the division of rivers, instead of sharing rivers, waters and ecosystems.

Agriculture: If you want to solve Pakistan’s water problems, focus on agriculture. Agriculture consumes almost 95 per cent of Pakistan’s total water, while its 224 million people, including 73m urban residents and every commercial and industrial water user — all put together — barely consume 5pc of the total available water. This consumption level is within the annual freshwater variability range, if not the margin of error of river flows, or the total holding capacity of Tarbela Dam.

Pakistan’s agriculture is very thirsty. No amount of direct and indirect subsidies have helped quench this thirst — it doesn’t wish to pay any taxes on water use or agricultural income. While 85m (44 pc) of the people await access to clean drinking water, planners in Islamabad keep envisioning expensive ways of subsidising irrigation water to mostly rich farmers at nominal costs. As pointed out in a recent World Bank report, only four crops (rice, wheat, sugarcane and cotton) consume 80pc water but contribute a pittance to GDP — 5pc. This poor management costs about 4pc of GDP, or around $12 billion a year. It is a damning story of elite capture.

In return, the agriculture sector offers one of the poorest ‘crop per drop’ ratios. Comparison shows that the new Istanbul airport that has cost less than the Diamer-Basha dam, for example, will provide 225, 000 skilled jobs serving 40m passengers daily on 1,250 domestic and international flights. The return on investment on agricultural infrastructure is seldom presented in cost-benefit terms.

We can operationalise some IWT clauses progressively for equitable benefit sharing.

Interprovincial flows: Poor agricultural practices and policies have reduced the country’s abundant natural resource to a position of acute insecurity, in addition to land degradation, polluting water bodies and depleting groundwater resources. This has created several dilemmas for policymakers, including the difficult-to-manage milieu of interprovincial water conflicts threatening the robust functioning of the 1991 Apportionment Accord.

During the last 80 years, water flow to the lower Indus Basin has declined by over 80pc, resulting in a permanent crisis in agriculture and steadily increasing seawater intrusion. Sindh cries for more equitable water sharing. The demands from mainstream political parties like the PPP now include the permanent closure of the Chashma-Jhelum link canal, abandoning the construction of the Taunsa-Panjnad link canal, and revisiting Irsa’s mandate to curtail the irrigation authority’s role. The annual filling and release of waters from Mangla Dam has become politicised and needs an agreement on transparent mechanisms. Mismanagement in Mangla, it is claimed, has created severe water shortage downstream from the Sukkur and Kotri barrages. The Council of Common Interests is an institution of EBS. Its role should not be eclipsed any further.

The internal power game has begun to cast its shadow on external dynamics. In fact, we may not always recognise it, but external dynamics are subservient to internal dynamics.

Indus Water Treaty: India and Pakistan are locked in an adversarial relationship. They habitually take positions that are zero sum, focusing on the win-lose rather than win-win proposition. Both sides often end up defending their positions, rather than their interests. Not surprisingly, the issues get politicised and the negotiating space shrinks further. For comparison, the design of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam over the Nile was revised several times, sometimes on the suggestion of Egypt, the lower riparian. In fact, Ethiopia negotiated filling of the dam to be phased over several years to avoid any downstream scarcity. India and Pakistan can interpret and operationalise some IWT clauses progressively for EBS from such international experiences.

Transboundary waters by nature require cooperation. The Turkish-Armenian case offers a pertinent example whereby a dam was jointly constructed on the Arpaçay/Akhuryan River. The two co-riparians do not even have diplomatic relations but share transboundary waters equitably through a permanent water commission and its working groups. It works successfully because they have firewalled the technical work of the commission from political highs and lows. The IWT commissioners have not attempted, or even envisioned, this autonomy.

Instead, the frequency and utility of bilateral meetings has diminished. This stalemate suits the upper riparian country as the unfinished business of Kishanganga and several other hydropower projects lingers. Given the need for cooperation, Pakistan needs to develop a narrative based on EBS. IWT is a dynamic treaty and it recommends robust dispute resolution mechanisms that are used fully, or consistently. It is time for India and Pakistan to create some new space, with the help of the EU, World Bank and others for following three joint working groups, that include civil society, with the following objectives:

i) to change mindsets by creating space for scientific exchanges and data-sharing, technical studies, GIS and satellite imagery that are often available in open access sources.

ii) to develop new narratives on such issues as climate change, environment, trans-border flooding, and sedimentation to identify new areas of collaboration for EBS.

iii) to jointly work on a new ecosystem of agreements to enrich IWT functioning by jointly developing a transboundary water framework/agreement, possibly based on the EU Water Statement, Bonn Guidelines, and the UN Water Course Convention.

These will be ambitious undertakings and decadal processes but will help create a water-secure society. We need to recognise that the basins and the rivers have the right to a healthy life. For Pakistan to protect its interests as the lower riparian, we must develop a narrative that everyone’s sovereignty is subservient to healthy global ecosystems.

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*Published in Dawn, May 23rd, 2021*