**The biggest problem**

BY H U M A Y U S U F 2020-11-30

THE first step is always the same: admitting you have a problem. Once the denial is overcome, the problem solving can begin.

But how can you admit you have a problem when you still don`t have the right words to talk about it? Pakistan`s big arguably, biggest problem is water scarcity. The country faces acute water scarcity by 2025, and will be the most water-stressed country in South Asia within two decades. Almost 30 million Pakistanis have no access to clean water.

But you may not know this because we have yet to articulate a compelling narrative about the water crisis.

One would think that the best way to spur discourse on water scarcity would be to focus on basic human rights: the right to access clean water, food and maintain hygiene. The UN recently reiterated that water shortages are affecting three billion people globally, and that billions face hunger. But in increasingly polarised, populist polities, such appeals fall on deaf ears.

Another approach could be to emphasise that Pakistan`s water crisis is in fact a failure in water management, an example of our governments` and bureaucracy`s inability to deliver basic services. Studies argue that Pakistan`s water scarcity can be addressed through data gathering, improved efficiency, reduced losses and improved sowing.

More and better-coordinated government initiatives and subsidies, such as the drip irrigation scheme in Punjab, are needed.

The 2018 National Water Policy needs a revamp, and aggressive implementation.

But the water management argument is best made by experts and has not caught the public imagination. For example, researcher Uzair Sattar rightly pointed out that the public commission report into the cartelisation and corruption of the sugar industry released earlier this year covered various angles subsidies, political influence, tax evasion but barely touched on the crucial link between sugar and water. Sugar is among the most water-intensive crops; the obsession with being a top-five sugar producer is driving the water crisis.

The national debate on malnourishment which affects one-third of Pakistani children also fails to make the link with water scarcity. Malnourishment is highest in Pakistan`s irrigated districts, according to academic Daanish Mustafa, where agriculturalists prioritise growing cash crops for export over domestic food security.

Water is also required for raw materials such as cotton that drive lucrative, exportoriented sectors like textiles. Run out of water, and the dream of becoming an economic powerhouse evaporates too. But we have yet to frame the issue this way. Instead,THE first step is always the same: admitting you have a problem. Once the denial is overcome, the problem solving can begin.

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Alternatively, water scarcity is portrayed as a trigger for cross-border conflict, as if the former were somehow less devastating than the latter. The water-equals-war drum beats particularly loudly when it comes to the Indus, which flows across Pakistan, India and China, three nuclear-armed nations poised for conflict along various fault lines.

Let`s assume the only way to keep an issue such as water scarcity in the headlines and on politicians` agendas is by securitising it; the gradual ravage of land and populations is not made for the 24/7 news cycle or the short-termism that five-year electoral cycles engender. Even then, Pakistan`s security apparatus is not taking a holistic enough approach by tackling water scarcityas a national security priority.

Recent developments such as the launch of the National Intelligence Coordination Committee suggests that threats are still narrowly conceived in the form of hostile nations, non-stateactors or terrorism, espionage, and domestic dissent or insurgency. Mentions of water as a security challenge are closely tied to concerns of Indian aggression (recently fuelled by Indian threats to violate the Indus Waters Treaty). In this paradigm, water flow is a mere precursor to conventional or nuclear warfare.

If Pakistan is to rally around the need to address water scarcity, it needs a new narrative. Water needs to be reframed, most importantly, as a citizen`s basic right, but also as a political priority, central to our prosperity. We need more water experts on talk shows, public-awareness campaigns, and a major focus on water conservation in our school and university curriculums.

The Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum is campaigning for the Indus River to be granted personhood, and associated rights. Many see the idea as too radical to manifest. But it indicates the desperation of those most affected by water scarcity. It might be just the new narrative we need to talk about our most pressing problem. The writer is a freelance joumalist.

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