**Water woes**

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David Brower shared a poignant reflection on our relationship with the earth: "We don’t inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." In an era where climate change wreaks havoc across the Global South, with Pakistan the eighth most severely impacted nation, confronting water insecurity should be a clarion call, particularly in the face of the quantum of conflicts the country faces in this domain.

Water security is a critical challenge that intertwines with the very essence of its national security and societal well-being. Deeply rooted in the survival and prosperity of the nation, it demands transformative solutions and acute attention due to its direct impact on agriculture, urbanization, and geopolitical stability. The journey towards effective water stewardship in Pakistan is not merely about conservation; it's about navigating through a complex web of conflicts towards a sustainable future.

The agricultural sector, which forms the backbone of Pakistan’s economy, is predominantly dependent on the waters of the Indus Basin. This reliance underscores the critical nature of water availability, not just for irrigation and food production, but as a linchpin of economic vitality and rural livelihoods. The scarcity of this vital resource, therefore, does not merely pose a challenge to agricultural productivity; it directly threatens the economic foundation of a country already facing food insecurity (Pakistan imports roughly $8 billion in food annually).

The implications of water scarcity extend beyond agriculture, catalysing a chain reaction of socio-economic challenges. As water resources dwindle, rural communities, heavily reliant on agriculture for their sustenance, face unprecedented hardships. This adversity drives internal migrations, with populations moving in large numbers from parched rural areas to urban centres in search of better living conditions and opportunities. Such migrations strain urban infrastructures, leading to overcrowding, inadequate housing, and increased demand on already limited urban water supplies.

The resultant urban congestion can exacerbate social tensions and unrest, as competition for resources intensifies in densely populated areas. The ever-dwindling water table in Lahore (population: 12 million) and water scarcity and tanker mafia in Karachi (population: 24 million) are prime examples.

Pakistan's struggle with water security manifests across three distinct levels: local, interprovincial, and transnational. At the local level, communities often find themselves embroiled in disputes over access to and distribution of water resources. Interprovincial tensions, particularly between Punjab and Sindh, revolve around allegations of unequal water distribution from the Indus River.

The transnational dimension introduces complex challenges, recently exemplified by Pakistan's inability to negotiate a water-sharing agreement with Afghanistan. The non-recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul complicates these efforts, spotlighting the intricate dynamics of regional water diplomacy; to say nothing of the rising tensions with India over the Indus Waters Treaty.

Despite the prevailing focus on conflict, there is a critical gap in exploring avenues for cooperation and understanding potential future flashpoints. Cooperation is essential at all levels for sustainable water management. Grassroots initiatives can significantly contribute to water conservation and conflict resolution, leveraging local knowledge for sustainable practices.

Interprovincial bodies like the Council of Common Interests play a crucial role in mediating disputes and promoting equitable water distribution. The judiciary's involvement in setting legal precedents for water rights further aids in conflict resolution and establishes a framework for long-term governance. However, as is the case in the Kalabagh Dam, the court proceedings have stalled for well over a decade.

At the federal level, prioritizing water security within a national policy is imperative. This includes investing in infrastructure to improve water storage and distribution and engaging diplomatically to resolve transnational water issues. Such efforts underscore the importance of mutual benefits and regional stability.

Pakistan must navigate the dual challenge of managing existing conflicts and anticipating future ones. Climate change, population growth, and urbanization are likely to intensify water scarcity, potentially leading to new conflicts, ones we have yet to imagine and predict. A proactive approach focusing on conflict resolution and prevention is essential.

Investing in research to understand the impact of climate change on water availability, developing sustainable water use strategies, and enhancing diplomatic capacity for water negotiations are critical steps forward. Promoting water conservation across societal levels can foster a culture of sustainability, crucial for securing Pakistan's water future. None of this is new information, but as is almost always the case with Pakistan, it comes down to the pecking order of competing priorities and a lack of enforcement and execution.

Pakistan's journey towards effective water security is fraught with challenges but also offers an opportunity to set a global example in water management. Through a steadfast commitment to collaboration and the adoption of sustainable practices, Pakistan has the potential to reverse the currents of water insecurity, thereby securing a thriving future for its populace.

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