



A REGIONAL APPROACH TO TRANSBOUNDARY WATER ISSUES, PATHWAYS AND CHALLENGES

POST EVENT REPORT

Seminar

A Regional Approach to Transboundary Water Issues, Pathways and Challenges

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SUMMARY OF THE SEMINAR



On April 14, 2022, a Seminar on “A Regional Approach to Transboundary Water Issues, Pathways and Challenges” was jointly organised by The Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) in collaboration with the Hanns Seidel Foundation Pakistan. The discussion was attended by 50 participants including experts from relevant fields, academics, practitioners, and students from around the Country. Details of the panellists is in Annexure A.

The report represents a detailed analysis of the collective views and speeches of the panellists presented during the seminar. The seminar focused on multiple dimensions, i.e., Transboundary Water Issues in South Asia, Water Security Challenges in the Region etc. The speakers highlighted the significance of enhancing transboundary cooperation in water resource management; transboundary water Issues between Pakistan and India; and also focused on water security challenges in Bangladesh. The panellists provided valuable policy recommendations in this regard.

INTRODUCTION

Water security has a direct impact on human security. It is a multidimensional challenge with complex undertones, as water security is both an increasing concern as well as critical for sustainable development of a country. With the ever-increasing demand for water globally, many believe that water insecurity will become a cause of future wars. In fact, the demand for fresh water has already become a major issue for policy makers all around the world.

A large proportion of world population today is facing water insecurity. According to a United Nations report, one sixth of the world population does not have adequate access to safe water and by the year 2025, half of the countries worldwide will face water stress or outright shortages. Climate change, through melting of glaciers, varying rainfall patterns and sudden temperature changes, exacerbates the problem of water insecurity.

The reduced access to fresh water has far reaching consequences like reduced food production, loss of livelihood options, and increased economic and geopolitical tensions, especially in volatile regions like South Asia. Water security problems are particularly severe in the regions where numerous major international river basins lie and are subject to territorial disputes between various countries.

There are many examples where legal agreements on water issues between upper and lower riparian countries have been upheld, even though conflicts have persisted over other issues. The discussion on water security therefore needs to go beyond bilateral negotiations and the international law framework and examine the ways through which states in the region can adapt to the emerging interests and need to manage their water resources.



In this context, this seminar was aimed to explore the issues, challenges and the pathways available to address the water issue in the region. The purpose was to deepen the knowledge and suggest structural systems, policies, and right interventions at national level in order to facilitate the process and address it at all levels. Moreover, it also aimed to streamlining the research themes for a better understanding of the issue in the long run.





MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE SEMINAR

The Seminar brought together a panel of experts, leading academicians from renowned institutions, of the water sector, and scholars, to discuss transboundary water issues in South Asia. The issue was discussed under the two broader sub-themes; transboundary water issues in South Asia and water security challenges in the region. The first session was chaired by Dr. Muhammad Ashraf and the second by Mr. Ali Tauqeer Sheikh. The following findings emanated from the two sessions:

TRANSBOUNDARY WATER ISSUES IN SOUTH ASIA

- In South Asia, the agreements on water issues fall under two kinds of partnerships: cooperative partners and cooperative antagonists. In this regard, India-Pakistan water management partnership falls within the category because the idea is that some agreement is better than no agreement.
- Along the rivers, the projects for water management are structurally heavy and follow engineering approaches with complete disregards to socio-economic consequences. This is also basic violation of the hydrology in development of Indus basin.
- Based on Indus water treaty, three rivers were completely shut down, which is unprecedented anywhere in the world, there had been many rivers which have been diverted and dammed, but no river had been completely shut down.
- The treaty also allowed the two countries to use the emptied riverbeds for dumping of agricultural waste industrial waste and all sorts of pollution, and no limit to pollution was given in the treaty both countries agreed to it.

WATER SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE REGION

- Water security can be taken as capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality of water, so it is both quality and quantity of water which is important for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development.
- Pakistan is not water secure as it is dependent upon rivers and rainfall for its needs, which is not very encouraging knowing the realities that are prevailing in the Indus basin now.
- There is a broadening gap between the water supply and water demand in Pakistan which will be widening in future, as the country has been more focusing on the supply side rather than the demand management of water resources.

- Pakistan is facing time and space shortages with regards to water as it has a very limited storage capacity and is only able to store 10 percent of available water for a period 30 days.
- High population growth is a major issue in most of the South Asia, which has slowed the economic growth along with putting a strain on the available natural resources. For example, Pakistan's population is growing very fast, and its demographic and developmental changes are going to add pressure on existing water resources, and their correlation with the economy of the basin is huge.
- Pakistan has exclusive right to the western rivers but continue to be the lower riparian, so it does not have much control over the development of the western rivers.
- There are new pressures emerging in Pakistan which include economic demands, unsustainable management practices, and mounting environmental pressures which is adding stress on the freshwater resource in the Indus basin.
- The Indus River system is reliant on snow, or the glacier melt for more than 50 to 70 percent of its flow which is a heavy reliance and any variability in amount of snowfall affects the flows in the rivers.
- Water security challenges are different for different parts of Bangladesh as it has droughts, water logging, salinity, intrusion problem, frequent cyclones, floods causing bank erosions, sedimentation, landslides, and flash floods.
- Bangladesh has prior experience of dealing with floods and cyclones, but the frequency and durations of floods is increasing along with flash floods because of climate change, causing it problems to cope as it is not resilient to these calamities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrated management and social environmental economical sustainability should be put in the forefront in the trans-boundary negotiations.
- Pakistan and India need to shift their actions from more rationalistic approach to a relationalist approach. Since rationality singularly focuses on a volumetric allocation of water while relationality expands the definition of water which includes surface water, water quality, preservation of wetlands biodiversity, soil erosion, conjunctive use of ground and surface water essentially through nature-based solutions.
- Revoking the Indus Water Treaty is easy but then renegotiating it on clear terms would be very difficult so whenever there is talk about renegotiating this treaty, both countries need to look at best practices around the world.
- It is time to reframe the spatial identity of the river where water quality and nutrition security becomes important and there is not just talk about food security because of the immense contamination of groundwater there are issues of nutrition security which have emerged.
- Prioritizing water governance which is mutually beneficial to both countries is significant in strengthening water diplomacy. Therefore, instead of exclusivist approach, cooperative measures should be initiated.
- Rivers provide unique link between human, socioeconomic, culture, and ecosystem services to the whole community therefore, instead of weaponizing water, it is necessary to adopt the strategy of water cooperation for the welfare of the people living in this region.
- One of the most important points for moving forward is the data sharing which will help in building trust between the two riparian countries, leading to coordination, cooperation, and agreement and finally benefit sharing between the two countries.
- There is no groundwater treaty between India and Pakistan and as there is limited groundwater management, conjunctive use of surface, and groundwater needs to be assessed.
- There needs to be a shift in mind-sets of Pakistani policymakers from the technocratic and engineering approaches to ecological approaches to enhance water security in the country.
- Under the Indus Water Treaty, new challenges like climate change and underground water issues should also be added.
- Bangladesh is struggling with water security like the other countries of South Asia, and as it cannot isolate itself from the region, there is hope that regional cooperation will make it easier to understand the complexities inside Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

- Water security is a multi-dimensional issue which directly impacts human security along with being significant for sustainable development of a country.
- One-sixth of the world population does not have adequate access to safe water and by year 2025 half of the countries worldwide will face water stress or outright shortages due to climate change through melting of glaciers, varying rainfall patterns and sudden temperature changes.
- The reduced access to fresh water has far-reaching consequences in the form of reduction in food production, loss of livelihood options, and increased economic and geopolitical tensions especially in the in the volatile regions like South Asia.
- Water must be treated as a source and origin of life and if there is no water, no life, so water resources need to be protected.
- Indus river basin has been managed well when it comes to sharing of waters between India and Pakistan and it is important to find more cooperative approaches to protect the shared waters between the two countries.
- History shows that many cities in South Asia have either been abandoned by their people because rivers have changed their course, or the cities have been flooded away.
- In case of Pakistan, many water challenges originate due to the country's dependence on the Indus River system. Pakistan is also one of the most naturally arid countries in the world with around one-fourth of the country's land are cultivated and most of this cultivation is heavily water intensive.
- In the South Asian region, it is imperative to discuss and find pathways for good governance with a regional outlook especially on a shared resource such as water.
- More people means having the need for more water in South Asia which is home to about 25 percent of the total world population making it even more vital to address the population crisis.
- People now are conscious of the fact that water is a scarce resource, and because of the high population density, climate change, urbanization, and poor management this valuable source of life is getting scarce with every passing day and of all the impact is particularly felt in South Asia and Pakistan in particular.

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