

[HOME](#) > [FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK](#) > [OPINIONS](#)

OPINIONS

Need for an Multilateral Approach: Addressing Water Security in South Asia

Udai.S.Mehta & Mamta Nayak, Director & Programme Officer



South Asia, having one fourth of world's population faces significant challenge to quench the thirst of 1.6 billion people with availability of only 18 percent of global water resources (ADB, Asian Water Development Outlook, 2013). Issues such as cross border water distribution, management, utilisation and mega hydro power & irrigation projects affects the upper and lower riparian countries equally. These are gradually taking centre stage and draw attention to the need for regional cooperation among SAARC nations as water scarcity has increased both flood and drought conditions. The situation is likely to worsen owing to climate change.

Agriculture being a livelihood provider for maximum number of the population uses by far 90 percent of overall water available in the region (Price, Chatham House Report, 2014). The management and distribution of water requires inter-sectoral approach comprising comprehensive strategies among nations. The region is already facing unrest situations among nations (India and Pakistan, etc.) on important issues such as land distribution and so on, and this regional dialogue must be explored. This is the perfect time to give a clarion call for nations to develop a multilateral approach for solving water crisis situation in the region. Otherwise the words of Ismail Serageldin Marq de Villiers' Water, 2000 "*the wars of the twenty-first century will be fought over water*", will become a reality.

Water Concerns

India and Pakistan are already agonized due to paucity of availability of clean drinking water. For instance, India is home to world's second highest population and has only 4 percent of global water available for drinking (Bharat, TERI, 2014). According to the Census (2011), 40 percent of India's population lack access to drinking water supply in their premises while more than 50 percent has to move out of their homes to fetch clean drinking water. Similarly, Pakistan is already a water stressed country. According to US Institute of Peace's report, 2013 titled "Understanding Pakistan's Water Security Nexus" while presenting preliminary analysis of Pakistan's water management the report states that its economy, being depended on agriculture, uses maximum proportion of its available water for agriculture purposes. The consumption of water for irrigation, industrialization purpose and hydropower generation has left one third of Pakistan's population with lack of access to safe drinking water.

While in Bangladesh and Nepal water issues are quite different, water scarcity issue remains common during lean season. Being lowest riparian country, Bangladesh is highly susceptible to run-off from upper riparian countries as nearly 80 percent of its territory lies within the flood plains of Ganga – Brahmaputra-Meghna river basin (Frenken, FAO Water Report, 2011). This dependency manifests in contradictory and polarizing challenges of water scarcity and flooding not only caused by monsoon rainfall patterns and variability, but also by water management practices of neighboring countries. This gives rise to contentious disputes over appropriation rights and future use of water. Flooding during monsoon season and arsenic position of water resources are major problems that Nepal is dealing with (ADB, Asian Water Development Outlook, 2013). A survey conducted by the National Sanitation Steering Committee (2011) in 25 districts of Nepal showed rising levels of arsenic up to 89.9 percent in ground water affecting the public health of Nepal.

It seems like water scarcity is one of the common problems that South Asian countries are facing, while the situation is particularly acute in India and Pakistan. Both the countries have high rate of population growth, declining food production, wide-spread poverty and rapidly rising demand of water for agriculture, domestic and industrial purposes. The surface water is reaching to alarming rate in these countries and ground water is already on the fast depleting condition as India is the largest consumer of ground water in the world.

Joining hands to address water security

Despite the imminent water crisis facing many of the South Asian countries, there has been apathy towards working together to reduce the impact of looming crisis. This affects food production, drinking water supply and socio-economic aspects in the life of South Asian populace. While many of the rivers and river basins that feed billions in the region transcend country boundaries but the blame for this indifference lies on the political and bureaucratic governance of such matters in these countries. According to Chatham House report, 2014 titled “Attitudes to Water in South Asia” respondents frequently cited lack of political will among nations as responsible for emerging problems in trans-boundary water relations, and for stalling of cross-border projects.

In addition, the feudalistic approach of policy makers in the region has initiated the possibility of water wars within and between countries as well. The nations have pursued with their respective policy which is almost incongruity with neighboring country, though sharing same river basin for sustenance. Water governance is weak, disconnected within and across the countries in the region. Thus, there is an urgent need to reframe the strategy for igniting interests of government within and across the countries in the South Asian region.

Way Forward

The huge potential of regional cooperation for addressing water security in South Asia can prove to be a win-win situation for the region. This would require addressing a number of issues like sharing major rivers during water scarcity situation, hydropower generation and distribution, flood management, etc. Bilateral talks between co-riparian countries have already been initiated and consequent to that approval of Pancheshwar project between India and Nepal under Mahakali Treaty and Ganga Water treaty are few examples. Absence of dispute resolution mechanism and lack of provision for environment factors are still few of significant factors missing under bilateral talks.

Thus, there is an urgent need of multilateral talks among countries for ensuring water security in South Asia while underscoring the significance of common interest of nations. A common vision on water should be developed and effectively implemented to ensure sustainable development resulting in benefits for the people.