



Principles for Water Governance in a Post-Covid World

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light many aspects of the crises in humanity's relationship with water. The emphasis on washing hands, and practicing personal hygiene brought into sharp relief the severe water scarcity facing millions of India's most underprivileged people in rural and urban areas. The unforeseen and rapidly escalating nature of the crisis demonstrated the need for greater resilience in public health systems. Reliable access to water for drinking and personal hygiene is an indispensable element of this system. At a broader level, the pandemic highlighted the extent to which social and economic life is dependent on and circumscribed by the larger ecological system and the perils of ignoring or abusing this connection. The scarcity of water remains one of the most visible and acute manifestations of the crisis triggered by an anthropocentric worldview.

The crisis of water in the present world relates to both its availability and its quality. Globally, the demand for fresh water will exceed supply by 40 percent. South Asia is particularly hard hit by this scarcity. Lakes, ponds, wetlands, and rivers that were the main sources of freshwater are drying up with rising demand to cater to agriculture, industry, and the needs of fast expanding cities on the one hand, and the blockage and encroachment of catchment areas on the other. Most of these surface water bodies are also heavily polluted with industrial effluents, sewage, plastic, and other refuse. Faced with growing scarcity, millions have turned to the only other source of fresh water to meet their multiplying needs – subterranean aquifers. In India, water from subterranean aquifers is being over-pumped despite most areas of the country having a very low rate of natural recharge. This has resulted in fast depleting water tables with the prospect of cities running out of groundwater in the coming decades becoming a distinct possibility. Further, water from these aquifers in many parts of the country has been found to contain high levels of fluoride, arsenic, mercury, and even uranium and manganese which have serious health implications.

What compounds to the crisis of drying surface water bodies and the over extraction of groundwater is the effects of climate change that threatens to alter rainfall patterns leading to more intense and frequent droughts and floods.

In addressing the challenge of water scarcity in the country, one of the steps suggested has been to shift to agroecological farming that is more environmentally-sound and water-efficient¹. Other suggested interventions include imposing water limits on agriculture and

¹ Among the most significant causes of the depletion of groundwater has been the agricultural policies adopted with the Green Revolution in the 1970s. To address India's food shortages, these policies encouraged Indian farmers to grow large quantities of water-guzzling cereals such as rice and wheat. To incentivize the cultivation of these crops, farmers were provided free or highly subsidized electricity to make it possible for them to draw groundwater to irrigate their farms. With free access to electricity and water, farmers used tube wells to pump ground water throughout the day for their fields.

industry, promoting circular water systems which promote wastewater treatment, rejuvenating depleting surface water bodies by protecting the catchment areas, promoting local rooftop and backyard water harvesting and increasing investment not only in pipelines and reservoirs but also in boosting natural eco-systems such as wetlands, forested watersheds, and floodplains.

Policy interventions in addressing water stress will also have to be sensitive to the way existing social and economic inequalities affect access to water. Those who are most economically deprived in the country - in rural areas or urban informal settlements – are also the worst hit by the scarcity and contamination of water. Further, it is usually women who are worst affected by water scarcity. They are forced to travel long distances or stand for hours in long queues for water. This leaves them with much less time for attending school, childcare, farming, or other income-generating activities. In many parts of the country, the persistence of the caste system implies that people belonging to lower castes are deprived of access to water. This discrimination is often institutionalized through the limited representation of women and those of lower castes in institutions of water governance.

To contribute to enduring change, there is the need for a fundamental reconceptualization of humanity's relationship with water. It will have to be based on a more profound consciousness of the interconnectedness of all life and the oneness of existence. Water is a common resource that is the shared heritage of all humanity. Unlike land, it cannot be divided or partitioned. Yet, most of the existing policies and rules that govern its use ignore its shared nature and treat it as a commodity to be owned, traded, and managed. For example, the rules that relate to groundwater use in India consider the water extracted from a piece of land to be the personal property of the owner of the land. It is this atomistic conception of ownership that has resulted in the present crisis where landowners engage in the competitive drilling of ever deeper tube wells to draw as much water as possible.

A more mature and sustainable conception of the relationship between humankind and the natural world can be found in the principle of stewardship. To be a steward is not to own a resource but rather to be a conscious and conscientious trustee of a heritage that belongs to humanity as a whole across generations. When applied to the context of humanity's relationship with water, this would require a reconceptualization of the governance of water and of the role that individuals, institutions, and communities play in this process. It would require water education that would create knowledge of local water systems that are grounded in particular biophysical settings. There would need to be more community participation in water governance and better institutional structures for collective governance of the commons.

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University is organizing a webinar on the theme 'Principles for Water Governance in a Post-Covid World' to explore the contours of a new paradigm for water governance based on the principles of environmental stewardship, justice and the oneness of existence. The webinar seeks to bring together empirical insights and the learning from promising prototypes, to show the way forward towards a more sustainable water future.