

# Foreword

There has been talk of a water crisis for a number of years. The crisis may be felt at an individual level, such as where people struggle to access sufficient water for their daily needs. This problem of access may be linked to limited water availability in or around the household. It may also be a problem of low water quality leading to the need to identify alternative water sources. The issue may also be an economic one where a price has been put on water and people struggle to be able to meet the economic cost of accessing sufficient safe water.

This crisis of water for domestic uses is understandably at the centre of policy attention. This is the water that is necessary for each of us to live a dignified life and reflects the basic content of the fundamental right to water. At the same time, domestic water only constitutes a small percentage of the overall water use in the country. The crisis is thus not one of absolute scarcity, even if crores of people experience scarcity on a daily basis and physical scarcity is a seasonal reality even in places with abundant rainfall, such as Shillong.

In effect, there are multiple dimensions to the domestic water crisis and domestic water is only one of a multiplicity of crises in the water sector. This can be illustrated with some examples: Firstly, urbanization has led to a rapid increase in urban water demand. This may require water transfers from increasingly distant places and also requires building infrastructure, such as dams and canals. Such infrastructure has direct impacts for the affected people, such as where their land is compulsorily acquired. These dams and canals may be the source of inter-basin transfers that are environmentally problematic. Secondly, the focus on access sidelines the central question of protection. This is not surprising since water law and policy has been centred on allocating use to different users rather than focusing on protection of water sources and watersheds. In policy terms, the environmental fig leaf that has been used is to insist that water scarcity is the prevailing basis for all measures taken in the water sector. Yet, this emphasis on scarcity has been used mostly to push through governance and management reforms, in particular the commodification of water and the introduction of the idea that water has an economic cost in all its uses. This is very different from a comprehensive focus on the protection of watersheds, aquifers, springs, rivers and all water bodies. In effect, one of the central crises that we face is the absence of an effective and comprehensive protection regime.

The crises in the water sector are also directly linked with other sectors. This is, for instance, the case of agriculture where irrigation is only one of many inputs, but an indispensable one. Agriculture is often understood in urban areas as a commercial activity, in line with the fact that urban residents' interactions with food crops are mostly as consumers. Yet, agriculture is not just the basis of the country's food security, it is also the basis of crores of livelihoods. This is just one example of a much broader problem that underlies what is often simplified as 'the' water crisis. Water is not just necessary for each human being's survival in the form of drinking water. It is inseparable from the realization of a number of fundamental rights, including the rights to food, health and sanitation. In addition, numerous livelihoods depend directly or indirectly on water, including fishing and aquaculture.

The broader links between water and other sectors have increasingly often been acknowledged in terms of what policymakers often call the 'nexus'. This is, for instance, illustrated in the case of the link between energy and water, where easier access to electricity is often linked with higher rates of groundwater mining. A more inclusive conversation is thus needed, which brings issues related to water in the broader contexts in which they belong. At the same time, this linking should not focus primarily on economic or policy issues but on the social dimensions of water in the broader context in which they arise.

The crises in the water sector occur from the most local to the global level. This is well reflected in the papers published in this collection that address a variety of issues related to different dimensions of water, from issues of quality and access to the cultural and historical associations of certain people and places with the water, or more specifically rivers. This is also reflected in the range of issues addressed from the city-specific concerns to the transboundary relations with other countries. This indirectly confirms that one of the central ills of the water sector is the lack of effective governance at the local level. Water is pervasive and needs to be addressed at all levels. Yet, the starting point for a resource, which is as important as water must be local governance. This is something that is in principle accepted but hardly effectively implemented. The governance framework needs to be entirely rethought so that it does not just pay lip service to local institutions but effectively gives them the power to protect and allocate use.

Addressing the multiple crises in the water sector requires a new common basis for understanding water. At present, water is often seen very differently depending on the context or the use of water considered: Where water is an input for large-scale economic activities (agricultural or industrial use), it is often seen as a natural resource and an economic good. Where water is the source for sustaining human life through domestic uses, it is often seen as a commons, which should be beyond appropriation and needs to be made available to every person. Where water is considered as one of the primary elements sustaining life on Earth, it can be seen as a common heritage of all humankind, which primarily needs to be protected so that it can sustain the environment on which we depend for our collective survival

and on which the planet depends. These different ways of understanding water do not necessarily coincide and can in fact be incompatible. The problem is that it is often the same water source, which is used for different uses and segmenting it is an artificial construct. A broader understanding of water as a unitary resource is thus a precondition for understanding and addressing the crises that we face.

The need for new solutions is evident and there are signs that the increasing severity of the crises we face is leading to new thinking. This is, for instance, reflected in the idea that rivers have rights of their own. This reverses the starting point for considering water from a mostly anthropogenic understanding with the focus on use, to one that recognises water for itself. Some of the papers in this book similarly reflect a burgeoning of new ideas and the realisation that we collectively need to think innovatively. This is, for instance, reflected in the several papers specifically addressing quality concerns, new ways of considering water source protection and the link with local culture, the need to recognise the central roles of literature and education in our understanding of water, and the need to do much more in terms of recognising the close links between water, forests and biodiversity.

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis seems to add one more crisis to the existing crises that already needed to be addressed. While the pandemic makes things even more difficult in many ways, it may also help us collectively rethink our relationship to water. This will not happen on its own, as the quick rebound in air pollution after the end of lockdowns illustrates. It will require sustained engagement with the policies and the concepts that underlie existing water crises. The situation seems even bleaker than it was at the beginning of 2020 but this is also a time we have to reflect and rethink that will hopefully help us lay the bases of a new relationship with water.

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