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# Poor water governance, forgotten water wars and people dying of open wounds rather than thirst

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January 31st, 2024. In Mexico City angry people protested the lack of potable water after low rainfall had emptied water reservoirs, a situation that is becoming more and more common in this era of climate change and urban growth. On that specific Wednesday afternoon, no one died. If they had, it would not have been of thirst but from injuries like in similar water-concerned protests in Iran, Congo, Honduras, India, Guinea, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

Water-related demonstrations are no longer rare –in 2022 alone, they took place in 23 countries, and in several of them repeatedly. Given that such protests often turn violent, they are nothing less than the ‘water wars’ prophesied in the latter half of the 20th-century, which imagined states engaging in wars over water resources. Even worse, those who are indeed desperate have no trust in the authorities but take the matter into their own hands – so, the wars are here and now.

Some water-driven local clashes are almost traditional in nature, stretching back decades as a part of land claims and ethnic violence, such as between Pokomo farmers and the Orma, semi-nomadic cattle herders in Kenya, but also in Burkina

Faso, Tanzania, and Nigeria. Others are random but increasingly more common, with those involved in water-motivated skirmishes ending up injured or dead (see, for example, India – 2018 Daria, 2019 Kurnool, 2019 Devsar, etc.). This is the new reality of water wars, or, better yet, intrastate water violence, that has surprised those worried about the tricky issue of transboundary waters shared between rival countries, be it India and Pakistan, India and China, or Egypt and Ethiopia.

The problem is visibly complex. It relates to climate patterns (how much water there is), transboundary treaties (how much water a state gets), and water governance (how the water is managed).

## About the author

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While climate patterns are outside of the scope of this text and transboundary treaties are more or less well in place, it is water governance that requires increased attention.

This is especially so in the water-scarce-prone countries of the Global South, which have rather weak governance performance and traditionally have more centralised (hybrid or authoritarian) power. That is where water violence is more likely to occur as 1) the need for economic development additionally stresses water sources, 2) the weak performance of governance leaves much to be desired, which pushes subnational groups to acquire the necessary resources (water) through their own means (use of force), 3) and where non-liberal forms of government lack feedback on water decisions from informed local-level actors that could otherwise prevent water stressing policies. Since states with subnational violence are more prone to full-scale war, they are also at risk of disastrous water infrastructure destruction, as has happened in Palestine or Yemen.

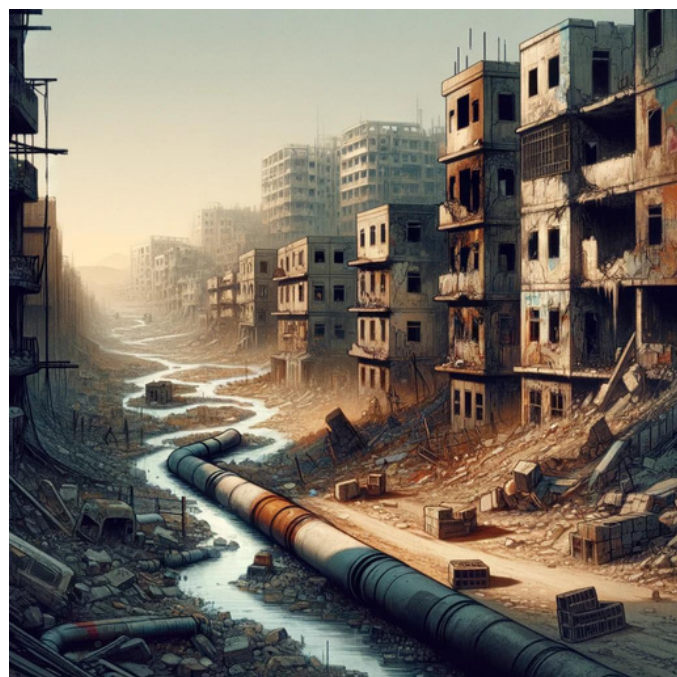


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The policy recommendations that follow are meant as minimal action to limit water-related violence, accompanied, of course, by more complex and thorough recommendations on water governance (see SIWI or SDGs for a broader picture or Gleick, Iceland, and Ayushi, 2020, specifically on conflicts). Despite calling for the engagement of civil society, this is not contradictory to authoritarian regimes; rather, it posits local knowledge as a government's means to deliver international commitments and to limit disturbing internal uprisings which are in line with any leader's objectives.

*"The water crisis is a governance crisis" – the UNDP.*

Despite the general emphasis on climate change, water scarcity is not always the problem. Economic water scarcity is a notion used to describe situations where people lack access to water despite living in areas with physical water present – a problem for everyone between Senegal and Mozambique or, as already mentioned, Mexico City. 'Economic' hints towards the problem of investment and lack of water infrastructure, which is quite often the case, but is not the only problem. Pollution is another example of an obstacle to water use, similar to inefficient water consumption in industry, food production and elsewhere (also virtual water).

Despite the many water-related problems on the ground, the general belief is that it is addressable if well-managed. The problem is the topic is too wide. Social scientists and activists alike have been calling for increased efforts in line with the human right to potable water and sanitation and with the 6th Sustainable Development Goal on water management under Agenda 2030; also, for water to play a role in peacebuilding efforts to mitigate relapse into conflict, as its absence exacerbates all other societal crises (see: threat multiplier);

and for it to also be considered in relation to inequality, gender violence, migration, environmental security, and more. However, although water governance efforts can be extensively complex, detailed, and thus challenging, governments are not required to resolve water scarcity to limit water violence.

### **Water needs land**

First of all, people need space to provide for their own livelihoods. Living in a dry region, fetching water from a well or river is a daily activity for many (although dangerous given the sexual violence women face, which is outside of this brief but should be reiterated nevertheless!). The problem arises when the water source is contested. Resolving clan disputes may not always be successful. Still, attempts exist, like in 2023, Ethiopia, where the local Oromia government initiated a restructuring of the land to end the local conflicts over soil and water, or the restoration initiative in Tana Delta, Kenya, engaging the local alienated communities in land-use decisions. At the same time, Kenyan water conflicts are probably not over due to land grabbing for plantations like ones with biofuel crops, which create additional water stress. (Note: not all biofuel crops are similarly water-intensive; however, sugarcane, equalling one litre of ethanol, consumes about 3,500 l of water.)

### **Water needs voice**

Civil society is incredibly efficient in finding solutions if given the freedom to do so. It is recognised as a necessary vehicle to campaign for and consequently deliver water to all under UN WASH (also SDG6). There are various examples of what Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can do, ranging from tracking pollution to facilitating talks between stakeholders.

Unfortunately, activists are usually the first ones targeted and imprisoned, as was the case of the 2018 protest against the lack of water in Iran, in 2019 in Pakistan, or in 2022 in Angola, or they are even killed as Berta Cáceres was over dam construction in 2016 or Cerros Escalante was, in 2021, in Honduras. The involvement of the local communities, with an additional emphasis on the indigenous population, is not only crucial for water governance but also for conflict prevention, as it provides common ground despite differences.

### **Water needs peace**

War-torn regions are necessarily water-scarce. Water infrastructure is easily damaged, and water is polluted, both accidentally and on purpose. Water might be a convenient weapon at first, but its deployment has consequences – consider Palestine or Yemen. In the latter, conflicts over water among local communities arise, with Saudi air strikes leaving behind destroyed wells and water treatment plants. But wars are lawless, with the international humanitarian law being ill-equipped to tackle its own breaches. Yet, state water violence is visible even outside armed contexts – see the 2002 Bushmen wells destruction in Botswana, the 2002 Guelta and Boujdour wells in Morocco, or the 2023 Kyauktaw water pump in Myanmar. This is self-destructive, given what we know about climate change (and related water scarcity), and the conflict and migration nexus (CCM). Since water-scarce and food-insecure conditions do not allow for life and push people to move, the context of deprivation may result in radicalisation as was found in ISIS recruitment (see King, 2015).

To conclude, the topic of water-scarcity-propelled water violence is complex and can be addressed from various perspectives and directions. However, even minimal efforts will bear fruit if considered. This brief calls on governments of countries in the Global South 1) to be aware of virtual water when investing in economic development-oriented policies (like the choice of biofuel crops); 2) to integrate local indigenous knowledge in water management (which may deliver sustainable policies and limit water stress leading to migration and conflicts); 3) to cooperate with civil society, which is more apt to investigate the situation on the ground and to consider the consequences for all involved; 4) to get involved in land disputes, assisting in land claims and conflict mitigation talks (limiting the chances of irreconcilable conflicts spilling over and thus securing peace in the country, and to also make the topic of water a mutual interest); 5) and to never target water infrastructure, recalling that it is against international humanitarian law and moral principles (in line with the guiding philosophies of religions such as Islam or Christianity) and will only lead to humanitarian crises, forced migration and radicalisation.



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