The Search for Water Wars: Looking beyond the State

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Before you read this, turn your tap on. Turn it off quickly, you don't want to waste it. Did clean water flow from it immediately, just like it did yesterday? Has it always worked that way? You are lucky – over a billion people lack access to what you just enjoyed. Although water may be the simplest, seemingly most abundant element in our lives; only 2.5 percent of the planet's water resources are freshwater, and only 10 percent of that accessible for our use. If we condense this available water into a cube – it would be only 29 miles long, high and deep, and it is shrinking.

Brazil, the world's seventh largest economy has spent the best part of 2015 dealing with the consequences of water scarcity and climate change; California has been in a state of severe drought for the past four years; and Iran and Yemen provide important examples of countries facing scarcity, as per capita water use continues to rise. However, does this danger of drought and water scarcity mean that we will eventually be driven to some *Mad Max*–style conflict over the resource that we cannot survive without? It is this question that has dominated the minds of many academics and commentators in the past 25 years.

With the growing knowledge of the increasingly evident phenomenon of climate change; many scholars have sought to argue that the criticality of water scarcity will result in increased competition and the therefore conflict. This argument has gripped many, with established commentators (such as Foreign Policy) often telling the world that the next war will be fought over the resource that flows so freely from the taps of many of our homes.

This is not fear-mongering rhetoric – the resource's scarcity will create competition, exacerbating pre-existing and creating new tensions. Yet, nor is it entirely correct. Whilst the commentators who warn us of the danger of*water wars* are operating at an international level, the conflicts that they focus on are occurring on an entirely different one. With much of the focus on the relations between states, the discourse of conflicts over water have sadly missed the evidence that proves their arguments: occurring at the sub-national level. Furthermore, these conflicts do not occur over the dreaded Malthusian scarcity that we are told to fear; but are the result of how we use and perceive water, the resource that we depend on for life itself.

A Problem of Cooperation

There are many problems with assertions of water wars – including the deterministic belief that scarcity is unavoidable and the neglect of important political and socioeconomic factors that may dictate water management. However, the primary problem with the *water war* thesis is that such a conflict is still yet to take place. Even in the Middle East – a region regularly seen as at risk of such conflicts – such a problem is yet to arise in international politics. This is not to say that water scarcity is a non-issue in these nations – only recently, the United Nations Development Programme affirmed that water is now more important than oil for the future stability of the region. Nevertheless, predictions of conflict have been incorrect.

In his seminal study, Aaron T. Wolf (1998) comprehensively disproved previous claims of historical evidence of conflict – creating a historic dataset that examined inter-state interactions over water in the 20th century – detecting only seven cases of minor skirmishes in the period, compared to 145 cooperative treaties signed. Rather than resorting to conflict, many nations have instead sought dialogue. These cooperative agreements have also proven surprisingly resilient. For example: the cooperative regime that governs the Indus River Basin has remained active

since 1960, despite regular skirmishes and heightened tensions between the two signatory states: India and Pakistan. A similar resilience is evident in the Mekong and Danube basins. Surely, such a resilience of cooperation in pre-existing hotbeds of political hostility points to a greater likelihood of scarcity-induced cooperation between states, rather than the occurrence of conflict?

The reasons for this are simple – just how much of a zero-sum resource is water? In short, it is not. The financial expense of engineering waterscapes results in the creation of a mutual hostage situation that reduces the incentives generated by the use of force against a nation's riparian neighbours. The economic role and value of water – with the resource possessing a central role in agriculture – further nullifies the potential threat to violence. Water is simply a resource that is too vital to be put at risk by conflict. This argument of shared, strategic interest in cooperation, rather than conflict, has been neatly summed up by an ex-Major-General in the Israeli Defense Forces, Avraham Tamir, who asked: "Why go to war over water? For the price of one week's fighting, you could build five desalination plants. No loss of life, no international pressure, and a reliable supply you don't have to defend in hostile territory."

The Dangers of State-fetishism

However, this does not mean that *water wars* are non-existent outside of our scarcity-induced fears. Violent conflicts over water have happened and are happening – we are just looking in the wrong place. The majority of assertions of water's potential role as a catalyst of both conflict and cooperation are dominated by a state-centric position. This narrowing of analysis neglects everything below the traditional, statist level of analysis, resulting in the treatment of entire countries as homogenous monoliths that act as singular chess pieces. Egypt suddenly acts as a unified entity; India forgets its regional fragmentation and speaks as one; and Laos' decisions are taken in the name of all Laotians.

This neglects important power dynamics that exist within the nations in question. States are not unified entities possessing clear, homogenous and imperative water needs. Egypt has seen repeated episodes of political turmoil in the past five years; India's federal political system results in increasing competition between states over the management of water resources; and Laos' hydropower regime is often found to be at the mercy of elite interests. A focus on the state-system as a level of analysis is misguided and inadequate to understand the occurrence and dynamics of conflicts over water – it veils important power asymmetries, the spatial character of scarcity and the dynamics of water management between competing users at the local and regional level. To understand conflicts over water, we must shift our level of analysis and look at the 'local'.

The impacts of resource scarcity are not first experienced internationally, but at the local level – where livelihoods are put at risk. Whilst data on water availability is often provided on an aggregated, national level, spatial differences of supply occur on a regular basis – driving competition in many regions of the world. It could be suggested that, as the level of analysis drops, the likelihood of violent conflict increases and empirical evidence of this hypothesis can be found in nations as diverse as India, South Africa, and Turkey. The history of water-related conflict is dominated by conflicts on a local level, with the resource engaging in marriage with pre-existing ethnic, religious and tribal tensions to drive and exacerbate conflict (see the Senegal-Mauritania conflict of 1989). Furthermore, the variables that hold many nations from engaging in conflict over the resource are not present at the micro-level, resulting in many inter-state tensions over transboundary resources illustrated by local conflicts (such as conflicts involving ethnic Somalis living in Ethiopia).

Rather than the traditional warfare that we all know and learn about on various platforms, *water wars* are much more likely to manifest themselves in the form of *water riots* at the local level. It is not necessarily scarcity *per se* that provides an important route to conflict but *access* to the resource that drives such problems. To understand these country-specific problems and priorities, and the role of special interests, in the management of water; we must focus on water not as a geopolitical resource but as what it is: lifeblood whose management is dominated by questions of political economy.

Whose Water? Whose Development?

The Pacific Institute's *Water Conflict Chronology* provides a wealth of examples of such localised, small-scale

conflict over the resource: from the two Mexican farmers who shot and killed one another in an argument over water rights, to the infamous civil violence in Cochabamba, Bolivia surrounding the privatisation of the city's water utility. Significantly, this database has illustrated an increase in reported cases occurring on a sub-national basis – whilst international conflicts remain rooted in rhetoric. Furthermore, this provides additional evidence that questions assertions that scarcity will induce cooperation. It may do on the international level, but not on the level where we conduct our day-to-day lives. Many of these conflicts are not necessarily linked to political factors – at their heart is development, progress and the role that water possesses in such processes. Since 2012, such disputes over development have occurred in states such as Indonesia, Peru and Brazil.

These conflicts are not only rooted in increasing scarcity of the resource, but in its redirection from one user to another. The role of water as lifeblood, coupled with its traditional role as a communal good, has placed its use in agriculture and industry – often at the expense of local communities – at the centre of a number of conflicts.

The occurrence of such conflicts mirrors the increased frequency and magnitude of the appropriation of resources by governments and third parties in recent years. Such processes are, in essence, the appropriation of the rights to use and control these resources as a vehicle to monopolise the benefits that they provide. Water has been redirected from smallholders to large agricultural projects, from towns to the bottling plants of multinational companies and to mining operations – often at the expense of local communities' rights to water. However, whilst it may be simple to grab hydrocarbons and agricultural land; the character of water makes it much harder to secure.

As a flow resource, all actors/activities along a waterscape affect events downstream. Over-withdrawal results in scarcity for others. It is these events, and the perceived/real scarcity that they create, that are transforming how water is managed, how it flows and engenders conflict. Vast numbers have been displaced, local economies have suffered and whole towns abandoned; all to provide benefits that are disproportionately enjoyed by others. The result of this is that the transfer of this water not only represents the fulfilling of the needs of these regions but also the redirection of water away from local communities present in the natural catchment area.

Infrastructure, involving the redesign of a region's hydrology (such as dams and diversionary canals), has historically been targeted by local populations that perceive such schemes as a transfer of their rights to the river and its benefits to third parties. From the California Water Wars of Owen's Valley, California (1907-1913), to the destruction of pipelines in rural Iran in 2013, communities have often resorted to violence when they feel that their rights and grievances have been ignored. These conflicts do not necessarily take the form of loss-of-life – but all demonstrate a degree of state-society conflict over competing uses and perceptions of the resource in question.

All such examples provide evidence of violence that is inexplicably linked to the complex role of water. Yet, we continue to neglect this important realm of water conflict. This is not to say that international conflicts over water will never occur. Yet, the last known conflict to be exclusively driven by the resource occurred around 4,500 years ago.

Yemen, Spain, Peru, Iran, Bolivia, South Africa, India, Botswana, Mexico and even parts of the US have seen vigorous water-related protests. These protestors were not necessarily acting against scarcity, but are criticising the context of water's use and the appropriation of their resources for the development of other industries and regions. We all have the right to development and by transferring water from one use to another, we are sacrificing some for the benefits of others. This reallocation of water regularly leads to a redistribution of the benefits that the resource provides, provoking community action against such schemes. It is here that we find our much-debated *water wars*.

About the author:

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