

WATER CRISIS, SOURCE OF CONFLICT OR CONTRIBUTION TO STABILITY

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The world is facing a global water crisis. This crisis is no longer merely a social problem in the developing world or a threat to the environment. It has become a serious economic and security risk with a global impact, affecting many countries. The water crisis originates from a decreasing amount of freshwater resources, as a result of poor water management, unequal distribution of water and ecological degradation, concurring with an increasing demand for freshwater, due to population growth and economic development. All this is exacerbated by the effects of climate change. As a result, water-related disasters and competition over scarce water resources have increased significantly over the past several years.

If we fail to urgently and adequately address the above, the negative impact of the water crisis will further threaten people's livelihoods and result in increased migration and conflict. In several parts of the world this occurs already. According to UNHCR sources we will see an estimated 200 million climate refugees worldwide in 2025. The World Economic Forum identifies the water crisis as one of the greatest risks to the world economy, with only a nuclear war estimated to have a greater impact.

This illustrates the political relevance and urgency of water as a critical and existential security issue. This is also a direct concern for Europe, as it is surrounded by vulnerable regions affected by a combination of water scarcity and political fragility. In order to turn the tide on the worsening water crisis and to avoid its devastating impact, we need to rethink the way we handle water resources. This requires a true "water transition" as part of the global efforts for climate adaptation. This transition cannot be achieved by a single country, it requires a global effort.

The Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP) commissioned a study on the implications of the water crisis and possible strategies to address the underlying causes and the tensions that arise from it.

¹ This paper is based on a full report in Dutch, written for the Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP): Rolien Sasse, *Watercrisis, oorzaak van conflict of bijdrage aan stabiliteit. Inventarisatie en agendering*, April 2017.

How can water-related conflicts be prevented?

We cannot increase the amount of water in this world, yet we have the ability to change the way water is used. Many of the world's water issues are caused by human mismanagement, such as the destruction of ecosystems, unsustainable abstractions and unequal distribution of water. At the same time humanity has demonstrated the capability to protect itself against many water problems by increasing the efficiency of water use, introducing circular systems, restoring ecosystems and by managing water resources in a more inclusive and transparent way. In fact, the efficiency of our policies and how they are applied determine to what extent water issues lead to poverty, conflict, migration or disasters. On the other hand, we also know that the urgency of water problems can also lead to increased cooperation, innovative solutions, and spur action. This should be carried out urgently and at a large scale in order to create the water transition the world needs.

Five steps of sustainable water solutions for enhanced global stability

1: Analysis: information for risk-analysis and early warning

It is recommended to develop and implement information tools and further analysis to map risk areas for water crises, increase transparency and provide the information required to intervene timely and adequately in case of a crisis.

Who: think-tanks, universities, private sector and ICT sector

2: Dialogue: water diplomacy, mediation and multi-stakeholder processes

The second step is mediation between conflicting parties by facilitating dialogue, and to support this with transparent, factual, and technical information and advice. With regard to conflicts between states, such a dialogue could be supported by diplomats. Whereas for conflicts between stakeholder groups in a certain basin, the dialogue could be facilitated by technical consultants, legal mediators or civil society organisations (NGOs). When a conflict between countries cannot be prevented, a legal case can be submitted to the International Courts in The Hague, but this is only a measure of last resort. There is an additional role for NGOs as "watchdog" to monitor conflicts, mobilise communities and to put critical issues on the political agenda.

Who: Governmental agencies of Foreign Affairs, consultants, mediators, think-tanks, NGOs and international courts.

3: Practical solutions for sustainable and inclusive water management

Companies and other organisations can cooperate with international partners in finding solutions for specific water problems that cause tensions in specific basins. These solutions could range from the re-use of wastewater to the development of brackish proof crops, from alternative forms of energy to the development of circular cities, from *building with water* to promotion of inclusive water governance, and from innovative ICT systems to ecological restoration. The possibilities are infinite. The knowledge is available and the urgency is greater than ever. These solutions are required to be blue, green, social and locally embedded in order to enhance sustainability and stability.

Who: NGOs, consultants, (technology) companies, think-tanks, water boards, drinking water companies, ICT sector – including non-water related companies, from the food, agriculture and energy sectors.

4. Water stewardship

Companies and investors can take corporate responsibility to generate direct impact and to test new techniques by ensuring that their own production chains, investments and other interventions in water systems do not harm the principals of sustainability and conflict sensitivity, and instead contribute to sustainable and inclusive water management as much as possible. Companies and investors that rely heavily on water resources could even establish a *water stewardship pact* to strengthen their capacity and integrity, and inspire others at the same time.

Who: companies, investors and government, assisted by think-tanks and NGOs.

5. Enhancing the sustainability of humanitarian aid – prevention, response and rehabilitation.

The development and humanitarian sectors face unprecedented challenges, as record numbers of displaced people and host communities need to be provided with drinking water and sanitation services. It is recommended to support this aid at scale, while enhancing the sustainability. Furthermore, a contribution to prevention, early warning, and sustainable and inclusive reconstruction is advised.

Who: Humanitarian organisations, technology companies, consultants, water boards, drinking water companies, Ministries of Defense and development NGOs.

During all of the above five steps, exchange of knowledge and capacity building are vital elements for cross-learning and innovation. At the core of this approach are the need for sustainability and inclusiveness, in order to enhance long term stability.

What is required to implement this?

The Netherlands Water Partnership believes it is feasible to implement the above five steps, as all solutions discussed already exist or are currently being developed. However, an overall vision to bring them together in one framework is absent, along with the required political urgency, priority and will to implement them on a large scale in a truly global effort. This limits the coherence and impact of interventions, and opportunities will be missed. An example is an intervention with a positive impact in one area (e.g. a hydro dam for climate mitigation or flood control for climate resilience), but with a negative impact in another (e.g. harmful to the water system or social cohesion). Strong leadership is required to advocate for political attention for water crises globally and to mobilise the international community to confront these challenges with sustainable and conflict sensitive interventions.

It will be very important to start putting the water crisis on the agenda at international summits and in upcoming discussions around SDG6, the Paris Agreement and the High Level Panel on Water. The above five steps to stability and sustainability can be applied in the development of a roadmap to action. Nations or other actors can commit themselves to this roadmap and invite others to join. In order to realise this, it is necessary to establish a focal point of initiative, coordination and organisation. This could be political leadership, supported by a “water stability hub” that connects parties, initiates action, and shares experience, knowledge and results. The establishment of this hub would require support from the international water sector partners, governments and political actors. Networking organisations, such as the NWP in the Netherlands, would be well positioned to fulfill a key role in raising awareness, advocating the issue, and coordinating and connecting the actors from the water sector at national and international levels.

To conclude, the threat of a global water crisis is real, imminent and immense. Solutions are beyond the scope and capacity of any single organisation or country. However, countries or actors with expertise in the area or water, peace and justice can forge international coalitions to pave the way for a truly global “water transition”.