Conflict Factsheet

Kalabagh Dam Conflict in Pakistan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of conflict</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
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<td>Sub</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Locality</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Asia</td>
<td>–ongoing</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Water</td>
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Transboundary water management

Conflict Summary

For over three decades, plans to construct the Kalabagh dam on the Indus River in western Punjab have been the source of recurring disputes. Proponents present it as a way to address water and energy demands; opponents, however, argue that the dam would affect downstream water access and livelihoods. While several treaties and authorities have been in place to oversee the distribution of water between provinces, resolution to the ongoing dispute remains uncertain as the Kalabagh dam awaits final assessment from the federal government.
Context Factors

- Water-stressed Area
- Water
Conflict History

Plans to build the Kalabagh dam on the Indus River have been the source of tensions between regional provinces in Pakistan for more than thirty years. In downstream Sindh province, politicians have described the dam as a “water theft” by the province of Punjab, where the dam is planned to be built (Dawn, 2018; Niazi, 2018). Furthermore, construction of water infrastructure in Punjab has been a source of recurring protests in Sindh (e.g. see Dawn, 2018; Rizvi, 2006).

There is also opposition to the dam’s construction from the upper riparian province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). As the border between Punjab and KP lies directly north of Kalabagh, much of the water catchment is situated in the latter, which means KP risks losing a large area of agricultural land to flooding from the dam’s construction. In absence of detailed benefit sharing plans between regional states, politicians fear that proper compensation will not be paid (Alam, 2019; Mustafa, et al., 2017).

Following mass protests and strong opposition from Sindh, the project was suspended in 2008. However, planning re-opened in 2012 and the project currently awaits assessment from the Ministry of Water Resources (Kiani, 2019). Concerns over the potential negative impacts of the dam have led to renewed protests in Sindh (Dawn, 2018).

The proponents’ arguments

Punjab officials as well as the national government often present the dam as a way to benefit the national economy as a whole – even though it was first proposed as a measure to address water and energy supply gaps in Punjab. The dam has been defended as a necessary means of supplying water for agriculture in the context of Pakistan’s shrinking reserves (Rizvi, 2006; Tribune News Desk, 2018).

In addition, the Kalabagh dam, and more broadly hydropower, is seen by proponents as a climate-friendly method to provide Pakistan with renewable energy. The Pakistani government argues that the extension of hydropower is central to its intended nationally determined contribution (INDC) to climate change mitigation as set out in the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2016).

Disputes surrounding the dam

Being located downstream, Sindh claims that the Kalabagh Dam would strip them of their rights to water and decimate downstream water access and quality for farmers and urban centres. On the upstream side, objections from KP stem from the fear of losing rich farmlands to submergence and possible saltwater intrusion into groundwater (Mustafa et al., 2017).

Even within Punjab, construction is also opposed due to its likely impact on communities on the planned construction site. Punjabi citizens of the Mianwali district near the planned dam argue that the benefits of the dam will be unevenly distributed (Niazi, 2010).

Taking climate change into consideration

The dam has been presented more recently as a strategy to adapt to climate change while increasing economic growth and meeting energy demand through hydropower generation. However, the potential benefits of the dam could be undermined by the effects of climate change on the Indus basin which include, among others, the retreat of the Himalayan Glaciers that is expected to reduce long-term water availability (Jayaram, 2016), and flood risks brought about by increasingly erratic rainfall patterns during the monsoon seasons (Stolbova et al., 2016).
Consequently, these impacts could multiply the effects of climate change on various regions, which add to the likelihood of conflict. For example, irregular monsoons are likely to aggravate tensions around issues of water distribution, the timing of flow management and reduction in water availability along the Indus basin (Diamond, 2014).

Resolution Efforts

Authorities involved in the conflict resolution
Water conflicts in the Indus basin, particularly between the provinces of Sindh and Punjab, are a recurring phenomenon. To mitigate conflict surrounding the distribution of water from the Indus basin, the Indus River System Authority (IRSA) was established in 1992 to judge and regulate the distribution of water resources between provincial states. This authority monitors usage compliance of Indus waters, as set out in the Water Apportionment Accord (WAA) of the previous year (Eurasia Review, 2013; see also Conflict in the Indus River basin).

The IRSA investigated provincial concerns over the Kalabagh dam in 2007 and asserted its feasibility. Due to opposition, the decision was referred to the constitutional body, the Council of Common Interests (CCI). The CCI ruled in favour of the federal government's plans for the dam. The topic was then referred to parliament. Finally, as a result of heated politicisation, the Federal Minister for Water and Power postponed construction until 2008 (Eurasia Review, 2013). The Lahore High Court declared the government legally obliged to build the dam in compliance with the ruling of the CCI in 2008 and plans were subsequently re-released. After protests in Sindh, the project was dropped but reopened again four years later in 2012.

Weaknesses of resolution efforts
The idea of the Kalabagh dam as a project to address water scarcity (i.e. increasing water storage) has not been successfully disseminated to alleviate fears of unequal allocations of water, benefits and risks that could potentially arise from the project. Sindhi politicians have argued that the central government did not take the water needs of Sindh into account when the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) was signed in 1960 (see Conflict in the Indus River basin), or in subsequent water infrastructure projects. Their claim is that it left the downstream region in a state of structural water scarcity rather than the whole nation facing absolute water scarcity.

The Pakistani government has as of yet not provided an assessment of how the Kalabagh dam will impact Sindh's social and ecological systems. As the IWT may need to be renegotiated, this could provide an opportunity to better align subnational concerns. However, if diplomacy between India and Pakistan breaks down, it is likely that Sindh will become more vulnerable to the upstream developments of both Punjab and India (see Conflict in the Indus River basin).
### Intensities & Influences

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### Resolution Success

**Reduction in geographical scope**

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.

**Increased capacity to address grievance in the future**

There is no increased capacity to address grievances in the future.
## Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

### Mediation & arbitration
The Indus River System Authority (IRSA) was established in order to mitigate the conflict surrounding the distribution of water from The Indus Basin. The IRSA brought the case to the constitutional Council of Common Interest (CCI), which was later referred to the Lahore High Court, both of which ruled in favour of the dam.

### Treaty/agreement
The Pakistani provinces signed a National Water Policy and water charter in 2018 with the objective of and providing a more comprehensive response plan of action and policy framework. However, questions remain as to how it would solve ongoing distributional conflicts between provincial regions as it fails to describe a benefit/risk sharing mechanism between states beyond the Water Apportionment Accord (WAA). Current legal arrangements on a national level may bring difficulties as water law is not clearly defined in Pakistan. For lack of there being a national law there are numerous arrangements at the level of the province and local governance. As national policy is often deemed to favour Punjab, conflict may continue if national policies are not in line with these interprovincial arrangements. The development of new integrated legislation could be a point for negotiation between the provinces.

### Improving actionable information
The Pakistani government has as of yet not provided an assessment of how the Kalabagh dam will impact Sindh's social and ecological systems. As the Indus Waters Treaty may need to be renegotiated this could provide an opportunity to better align subnational concerns.

### Improving resource efficiency
The implementation of sustainable water consumption and agricultural practices is crucial to addressing problems of structural scarcity and poor water quality faced by Sindh. There may also be avenues for reforming water practices which uses resources more efficiently.

## Resources and Materials

References with URL

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Further information
https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/kalabagh-dam-pakistan