



Conflict Factsheet

Dispute over Water in the Cauvery Basin in India

Type of conflict
Main

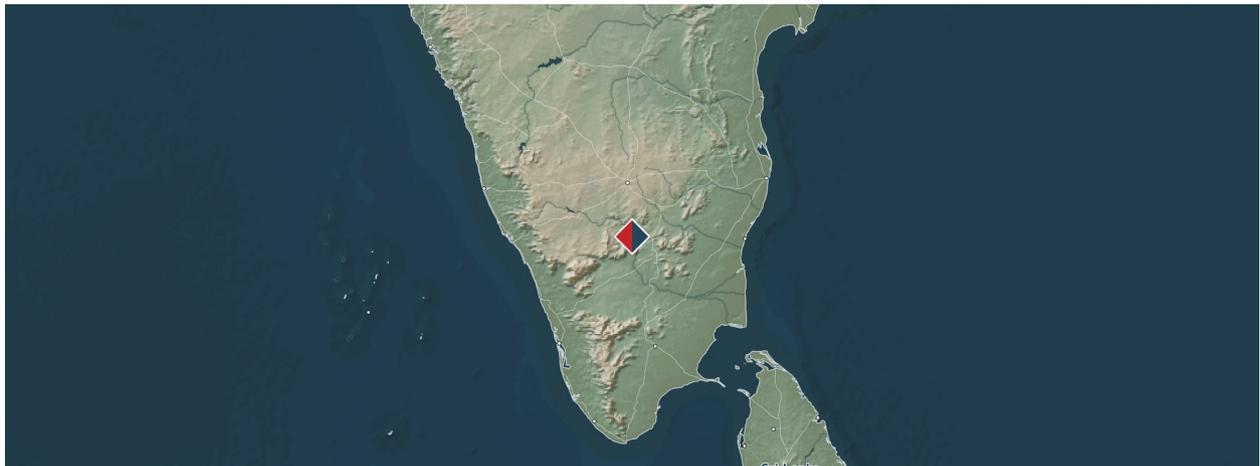
Intensity
2

Conflict Locality
Southern Asia

Time
1974 –ongoing

Countries
India

Resources
Water



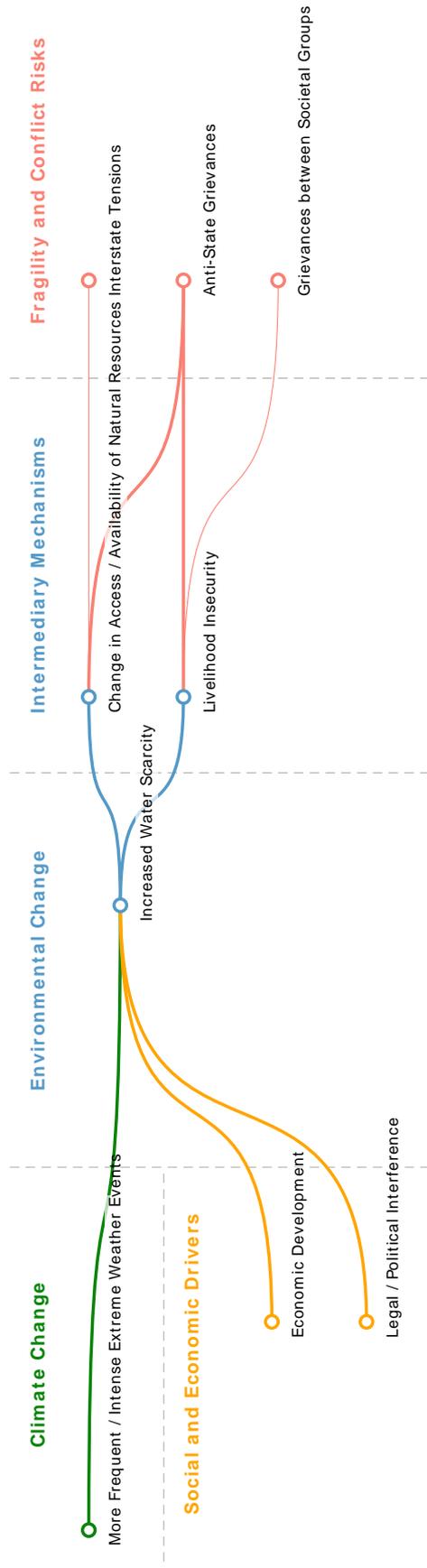
Transboundary
water
management

Conflict Summary

The long-standing conflict over water from the Cauvery River between the Indian states Karnataka and Tamil Nadu has recently resurfaced in the context of drier climate conditions. The implications are not only legal battles, but also violent protests following decisions to alter water distribution between the two states.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Water

Water-stressed Area

Weak Institutions



Conflict History

'Water riots'

The competition for water between the Indian states Karnataka and Tamil Nadu has repeatedly led to violent conflict. Recently, in September 2016, legal decisions on water distribution triggered massive demonstrations in both states. The riots were met with a massive use of force, which resulted in the death of two people from police gunfire. Furthermore, at least 500 people were arrested and more than 150 vehicles damaged - in Karnataka this consisted predominantly of trucks with Tamil Nadu plates ([Panuganti, 2016](#); [Janakarajan, 2016](#)). These events reflect not only a deep discontent with the authorities' decisions on water distribution, but also anger against people from the rival state.

This violence takes place within a broader context of rivalry between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Increasing water consumption in upstream Karnataka means that the regional state is increasingly reluctant to release water to its downstream neighbour; especially in periods of acute water scarcity. Karnataka has thus repeatedly resisted orders by the Supreme Court of India and other institutional bodies to release more water to Tamil Nadu, often leading to violent clashes between the people of the two states ([The Economist, 2016](#); [Ferdin et al., 2010](#); [PILDAT, 2011](#); [Janakarajan, 2016](#)).

Water use in the Cauvery Basin

With its length of roughly 802 km, the Cauvery River is one of the most important rivers in India - its basin covers an area of 87.900 km² ([PILDAT, 2011](#)). The riparian states Karnataka and Tamil Nadu require over 90% of the Cauvery's water, mostly for cultivation of water-intensive crops, such as sugarcane, but also as a source of drinking water. Thus, the livelihoods of millions of people, both upstream and downstream, depend on the availability of the river's water ([Ferdin et al., 2010](#); [Janakarajan, 2016](#)).

While water demand for irrigation in both states has increased drastically during the last century, this development is exacerbated by an increasing water use related to industrialization and urban growth in upstream Karnataka, India's 'Silicon Valley' ([Bohle, 2004](#); [Government of Karnataka, 2002](#); [Molle et al., 2009](#)).

An unresolved dispute over water allocation

The allocation of Cauvery's water has been the cause of an ongoing conflict between the riparian states, which dates back to the end of the 19th century. The conflict resurfaced when a distribution agreement collapsed in 1974, leading to years of bargaining. In 2007, both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu refused to accept the final result of these negotiations, which determined new quantities of water to be allocated to the two states. The Supreme Court dismissed Karnataka's appeal in 2013 – but the state is yet to follow the decree ([Janakarajan, 2016](#)).



Resolution Efforts

Attempts in recent years to resolve the dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have included a mixture of civil and state-level mediation, as well as the creation of special arbitration institutions, reflecting the importance of combining formal and dialogue-oriented approaches in order to achieve a durable solution to the conflict ([Panuganti, 2016](#)).

Institutional solutions

Following petitions from a union of Tamil Nadu farmers to the Supreme Court of India during the 1980's, the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal (CWDT) was established in 1990. The idea was to centralize responsibility in water management issues and, thus, to facilitate the resolution of water-related disputes. In particular, the tribunal aimed to reduce interventions by other institutional bodies (e.g. the Supreme Court), thereby calming the situation. Against this assumption, past decisions of the tribunal failed to bring the desired peace. In 2007, both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu resisted the final award of the tribunal to fix water allocation rates based on average rates of precipitation and approached the Supreme Court, thereby undermining the CWDT's authority ([Janakarajan, 2016](#); [Panuganti, 2016](#); [PILDAT, 2011](#)).

Furthermore, the CWDT has, as yet, been unsuccessful in establishing the Cauvery Management Board (CMB), an institution composed of representatives of all riparian states. The Board is supposed to ensure the compliance and implementation of the water allocation decisions by the Tribunal. The CMB could be an important step towards a solution of the conflict, as members of all parties are supposed to be part of the board, in which decision-making power is planned to be centralized. Moreover, the CMB could rely on a clear legal framework provided by the CWDT ([Janakarajan, 2016](#)).

As the Government of India has not implemented the CMB so far, the Supreme Court directed the Government to do so in September 2016. Currently, no resolution has been reached and the CMB's envisaged implementation remains a disputed issue ([The Hindu, 2016](#)).

Civil society participation

To provide a space for the participation of civil society, the Cauvery Family was established in 2003. As a committee for multi-stakeholder dialogues, it was composed of 12 members from all riparian states and two experts. The group came together 18 times between 2003 and 2012 for mediation and to improve cooperation, but then became inactive. Although the Cauvery Family's had no legal impact on official processes, it arguably played an important role in reducing violence during that period ([Janakarajan, 2016](#); [Meenakshisundaram et al., 2010](#)).

A functioning forum for debate including members of all conflict parties would improve the state-society relationship as well as the relationship between the inhabitants of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu substantially. Therefore, a resumption of the talks could positively influence peace efforts.

Water conservation and technical cooperation

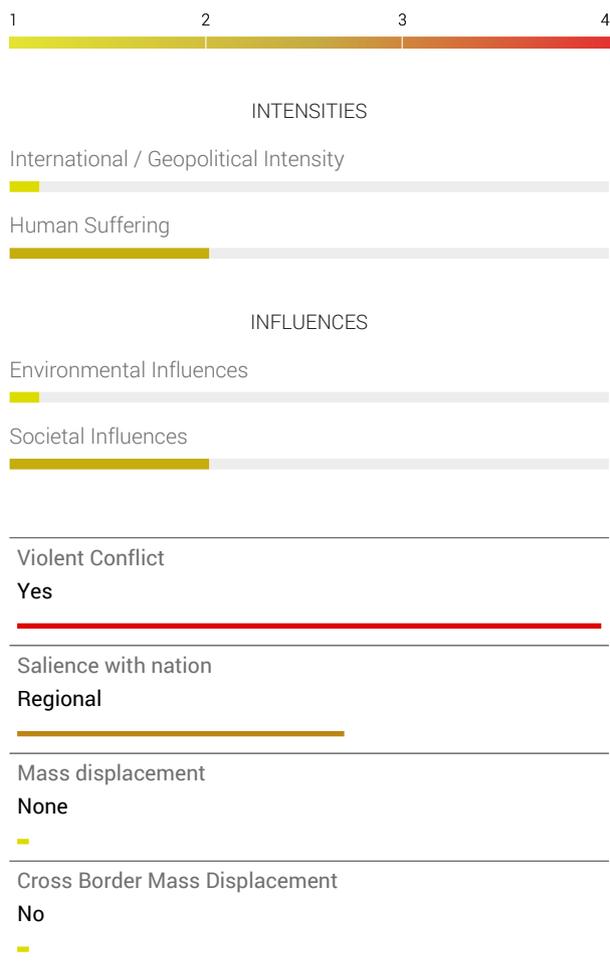
In order to ease environmental pressures and, thereby, also political tensions, measures could be taken to reduce water scarcity in both states. To facilitate the development of water saving strategies, such



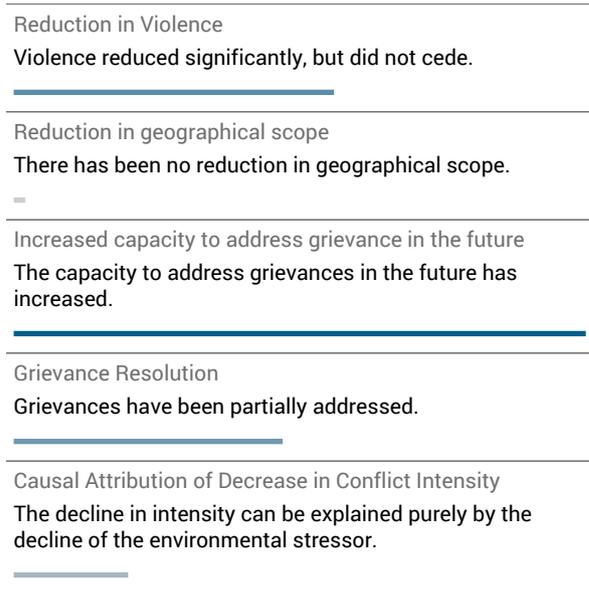
as the modernization of canal networks and better sediment management, knowledge sharing would provide an important basis. Moreover, incentives could be given to shift cultivation to less water-intensive crops. Innovative techniques, such as 'precision farming' have successfully been tested in Tamil Nadu and could be expanded (Panuganti, 2016). Common research to assess climate change impacts and develop adaption strategies could further help minimize the effect of extreme weather events and are thus recommended (Ferdin et al., 2010; Janakarajan, 2016).

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Intensities & Influences



Resolution Success





Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Dialogue	2
<p>The Cauvery Family, a committee for multi-stakeholder dialogues, was established in 2003. Even though the committee had no legal mechanisms, it played an important role in reducing violence before becoming inactive in 2012.</p> <hr/>	
Cooperation	0
<p>The Supreme Court of India directed the Indian government to implement a Cauvery Management Board (CMB) to ensure the compliance and implementation of the water allocation decisions by the CWDT. The CMB could be an important step towards conflict resolution as it would count with the participation of representatives of all riparian states. Currently, the implementation of the CMB remains as disputed issue.</p> <hr/>	
Mediation & arbitration	3
<p>The Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal (CWDT) was established in 1990, with the aim of facilitating the resolution of water-related disputes. However, the tribunal failed to bring the desired peace.</p> <hr/>	
Improving actionable information	0
<p>Knowledge sharing and common research to assess climate change impacts on water availability and develop adaptation strategies could help minimize the effects of extreme weather events.</p> <hr/>	
Improving resource efficiency	0
<p>Water saving strategies could be implemented to ease environmental pressures in both states, such as the modernization of canal networks, better sediment management, a shift to less water-intensive crops, and 'precision farming'.</p> <hr/>	

Resources and Materials

References with URL

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[Government of Karnataka \(2002\). State Water Policy.](#)

[The Hindu \(2016\). PMK urges Centre to form Cauvery Management Board.](#)

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[Panuganti, S. \(2016\). In Drought-Stricken India, Water Tensions Spill Into the Streets. New Security Beat.](#)
[PILDAT \(2011\). The Case of Cauvery River from Peninsular India. Islamabad: PILDAT.](#)

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/interstate-dispute-over-water-cauvery-basin-india>