KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Report of the High Level Dialogue on WATER SECURITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

CONSORTIUM OF SOUTH ASIAN THINK TANKS
COSATT
BRIDGING POLICY RESEARCH IN SOUTH ASIA

EastWest INSTITUTE

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EastWest Institute

EastWest Institute (EWI) is a global network of influential stakeholders committed to and engaged in building trust and preventing conflict around the world.

The EastWest Institute's South Asia program aims to advance knowledge and understanding of the region's underlying issues in order to generate sustained support towards greater intra-regional cooperation. To this end, the program brings together the most prominent and influential voices in South Asia to:

- Establish multi-stakeholder platforms for shared economic, financial and geopolitical interests by bringing together media influencers, thought leaders, and business experts from within the U.S. and South Asia
- Pinpoint emerging shared security threats of overlapping interest and charting paths forward along avenues of cooperation, including joint action on issues stemming from water and food insecurity, and climate change
- Cultivate channels of cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchange as a tool for anticipating and preventing the escalation of conflicts and promoting stronger regional ties
- Reinfuse rationality and keen diplomatic insight into the relationship between the U.S. and South Asian member states, encouraging the reaffirmation of continued partnership on regional and global challenges
- Examine interregional connectivity and China's growing regional presence, including the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and overall opportunities for integration, connectivity and stability

Website: https://www.eastwest.ngo/

Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks

South Asia continues to be the most volatile region in the world, involved in issues relating to Insurgency, Terrorism, Border Disputes and the Environment. These issues are transnational in nature and no country can address it alone. A regional approach therefore is best suited to address such issues.

As part of the effort, annual meetings are planned based on a theme to address topical issues of the region. These meetings comprise of a planning conference of participating think-tank heads, an expanded meeting with authors and experts.

Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) conferences are held three times a year in one of the capitals of South Asia on themes such as connectivity, countering violent extremism and terrorism, Refugees and IDPs in South Asia, etc. Heads of partnering think-tanks or researchers participate and present their views. In addition, there is also a wide participation of mediapersons, business-community, academics and students in COSATT events. Publications are brought out and are circulated widely. Some of the COSATT publications can be downloaded free of cost and available also in kindle. Reports of COSATT conferences are given to 8 governments of South Asia, SAARC Secretariat and other important stakeholders.

This initiative has been generously supported by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Website: http://www.cosatt.org/

Institute of National Security Studies

The Institute of National Security Studies (INSSSL) is the premiere national security think tank of Sri Lanka under the Ministry of Defence, established to understand the security environment and to work with government to craft evidence based policy options and strategies for debate and discussion to ensure national security. The institute will conduct a broad array of national security research for the Ministry of Defence.

Its Vision is "To improve policy and decision making through high quality research and analysis with excellence".

Its Mission is "From high quality research to continuously support ministry of defence in formulating and executing strategic plans and policies for a secure, safe and sovereign country with territorial integrity"

Website: http://www.insssl.lk/

1 Background

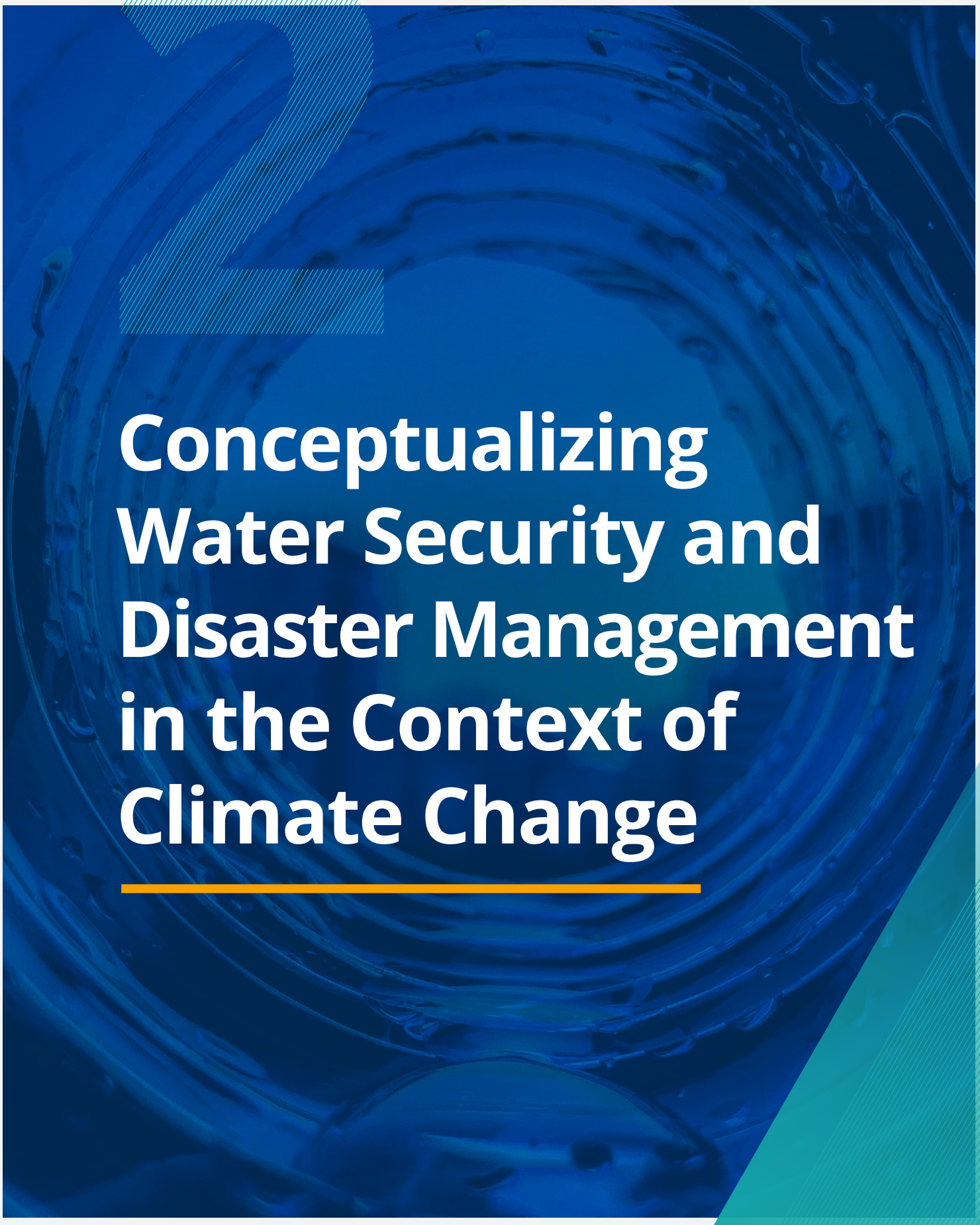
Background

Transboundary water resource politics, or "hydropolitics," is set to become a defining issue of the 21st century across Asia. As growing economic powerhouses soak up every drop of water for agricultural, energy, and industrial purposes, countries are driven to tap into shared water resources—rivers, lakes, and watersheds—that flow across national borders, often between adversarial neighbors. In the absence of cooperative resource management agreements, intensified zero-sum competition over increasingly scarce and strategic water resources will continue to exacerbate tensions between riparian neighbors.

Climate change intensifies existing water security challenges as the frequency, intensity and duration of hydro-meteorological disasters increases. Therefore, it is important to integrate water disaster management into climate mitigation and adaptation policies. The lack of cooperative norms and the prevalence of a zero-sum mindset—with each country unilaterally pursuing its interests in resource use at the expense of neighboring countries—has far-reaching consequences for regional security and prosperity.

With current challenges only set to increase, substantial progress must be made to foster coherent, cooperative dialog between the major players defining the dynamics of Himalayan water security in a climate change model. To this end, consensus-driven, candid, and multilateral dialog is imperative to proactively mitigate the trends of conflict and competition in the region.

The High-Level Dialog was officially commenced with the keynote address of Vice Admiral KKPVH De Silva WWV & Bar, RWP, RSP, VSV, USP, ndu-Commander of the Sri Lankan Navy. Dr. Christian Hübner, Director, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's Regional Project Energy Security and Climate Change Asia-Pacific (KAS-RECAP) elucidated the objectives of the Dialog and the importance of bringing in so many experts from across Asia and the U.S. to brain-storm the crucial issues of water security and disaster management. He also gave a brief on the various activities and studies undertaken by the RECAP-KAS on these subjects.



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Conceptualizing Water Security and Disaster Management in the Context of Climate Change

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The first panel discussed **"Conceptualizing Water Security and Disaster Management in the Context of Climate Change"**. All Panelists agreed that climate change is causing a crisis like never before; that the Paris and Kyoto Accords have largely failed while climate change continues at unprecedented levels. The greatest alarm is the disappearing glaciers, due to rising temperatures.

Most natural disasters are caused by water and climate-related events such as floods, droughts, hurricanes, storm surges, and landslides. As climate change increases the frequency and strength of extreme weather, the number of water-related disasters is expected to rise. These weather and climate events can cause disruptions in health and social services, scarcities of food and water, and an increase in conflict and migration leading to political instability. As we saw from the Tsunami in Sri Lanka and nearby in The Maldives, the more than 5,000 deaths in the Uttarakhand floods and landslides in 2013, the Kerala floods in 2018, heavy flooding and displacement of people in the terai of Nepal in 2008, and recurrent flooding in Bangladesh, South Asians are having to cope with water induced disasters with scant resources, limited trained manpower and out-of-date technology.

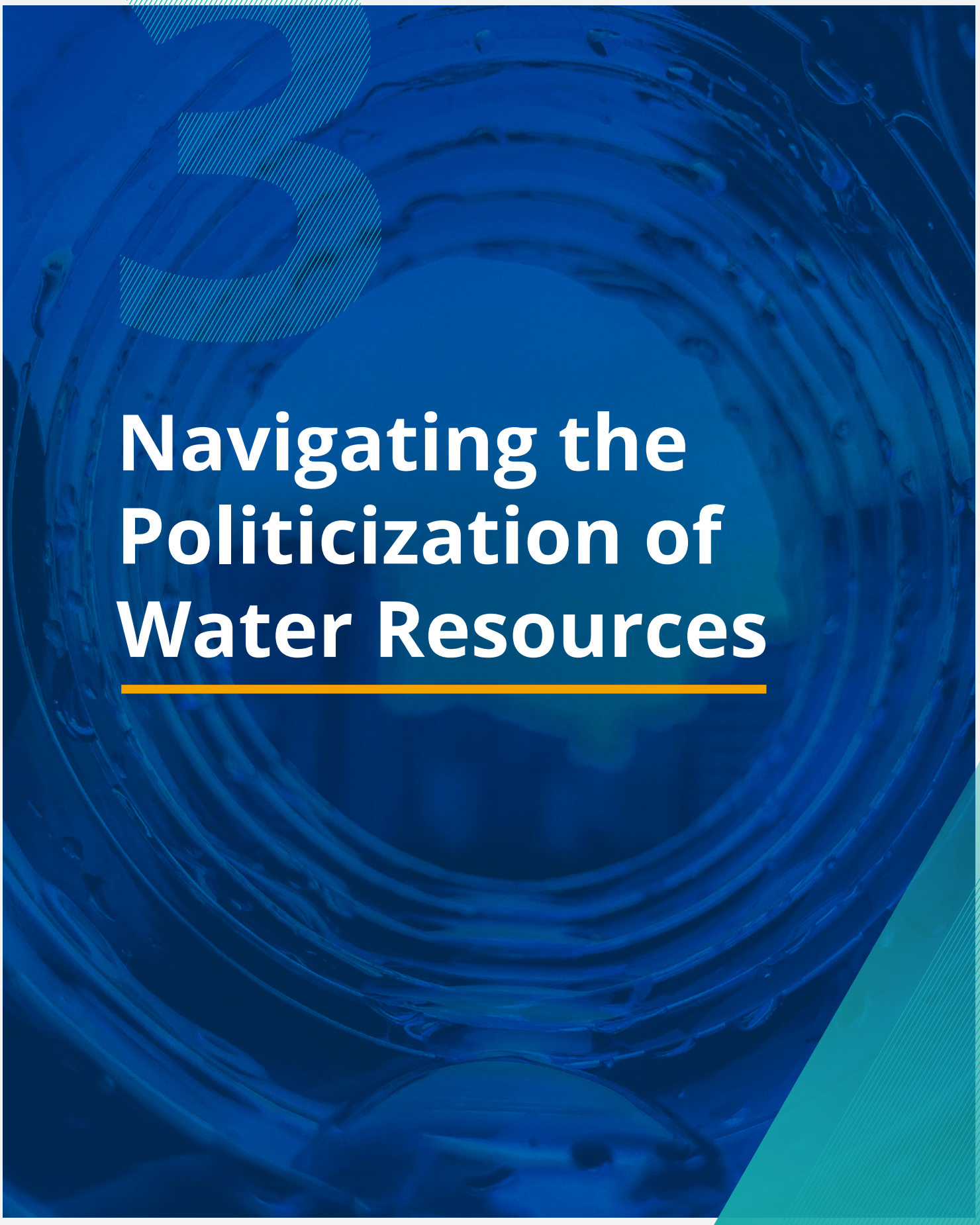
There was also a debate on the importance and relevance of the Indus- Water Treaty. A lot of ideas on the Indus dispute were expressed bringing into context the security discourse within Water Security, which is a narrative that remains complicated, with the dire need to build consensus. Other ideas were expressed regarding the vulnerabilities of the Earth and the urgent need to reverse the impact of climate change, the unpredictable nature of climate change and the challenges of water distribution.

A trend that could be observed during recent years as a part of "politicization of water resources" is related to legalizing the same. Whether between countries and/or between the provinces within countries, legislations have been enacted to deal with water governance. Agreements on water sharing are normally based on political understanding between provinces/ countries; hence, the letter of the agreement is an expression of the larger spirit behind it. Unfortunately, the actors, instead of working on the larger spirit, narrowly interpret the letter and take cases to courts – at national and international levels. Any statements from the courts further become politicized and used to stoke the fire regarding water. The focus should be on the spirit of water sharing and better management of water resources, instead of fighting over the letter of the agreement.

Another trend in recent years, as part of the securitization of water, that has led to the politicization of water resources is the growing literature on "water wars". At the local, provincial, and state levels, discussion of water as a source of war needs to be discouraged.

It was recommended that existing legal arrangements and treaties should be reassessed, at both local and regional levels. With the growth of population and changes in environment posing threats to all human beings, it is necessary to assure that treaties are applicable to today's contexts. Certain gaps were identified as well as the importance of concrete actionable goals to mitigate climate change. It was noted that understanding an individual country's circumstances in combating the challenges brought by climate change is useful. Furthermore, it is necessary to reuse water and effectively manage available resources in order to avoid water wars in the future.

A panelist also cited the on-going crisis of the Coronavirus and how it will impact South Asia in terms of mortality, disease spreading across borders, economic slump and probably also security. This is a live example of why we need to collaborate and coordinate with one another because diseases and weather do not respect national boundaries.



Navigating the Politicization of Water Resources

Navigating the Politicization of Water Resources

The session on **"Navigating the Politicization of Water Resources"** in Panel II laid the basis for critical analysis of water security and disaster management in the Asian context and experience sharing. At the outset, it was noted that water is not the sole problematic issue in Asia and therefore shouldn't always be linked to conflict. Even though it is a global issue, with its strategic location, Asia has captured more attention from the rest of the global players in the system. It is visible that there are many water bodies including rivers and lakes, and India, Nepal, and Bangladesh play a prominent role in water sharing. What should be a cause of worry is whether these rivers and other water bodies will have sufficient water to share, since the demands have grown with the increase of population. The country with second-highest population in the world is India.

The speakers noted that water scarcity is misinterpreted very often, which creates further tension among communities and states. It was highlighted that rivers are not only transboundary, but it is also necessary to look into the benefits accruing from them in terms of inland navigation, revenue generation, and thereby economic progress. Another issue that has remained controversial for quite some time is the securitization of water by non-water actors, including politicians and other organizations with no connection to the grass-root community. Their primary focus is on ownership of rivers rather than using water for the collective good. Many have forgotten that 80-90% of water is being used for irrigation in South Asia and thus the farming community has a voice that should be considered. One fact to always keep in mind is that water is also a livelihood. If ignored, cities will run out of water, creating a trigger for water wars. Issues related to water will have a direct impact on climate change and hence any discourse of climate change, ecology, and the environment should be integrated into resource management. Engineers and lawyers should perceive the need to make more socioeconomic and environmentally sustainable decisions.

The idea of common minimum programs was brought up, which should function both nationally and regionally in order to increase the potential of water. It was designated that water should never be used as a political weapon. Rather it should be a tool of bilateral and multi-lateral diplomacy. A basin approach was proposed as a solution to the politicization of water, which would let the community take the lead instead of assigning the responsibility to political actors.

It was stressed that although political will is pivotal, civil society too has a responsibility to influence policymakers and disseminate information to the public. It is time that regional organizations like BIMSTEC take leadership in environmental security and set an example to SAARC. A panelist emphasized the need for a geographical connotation, where the need to secure water can be re-conceptualized based on geography and thereby proposed the establishment of the 'Himalayan Scientific Council' to empower a more scientifically driven South Asia than a politicized South Asia.

The workshop also deliberated on the significance of China in hydro politics and the urgent need to incorporate China into climate discussions either as an observer or as an active participant. Since most of the rivers originate in China, it is regarded prudent to involve Chinese experts in these discussions. Involvement of youth was also proposed as the future belongs to the youth and they have an enduring role to play. Furthermore, research regarding integrated technologies of disaster management should be endorsed within the region, in order to tackle the lack of data regarding disaster management and importantly on available resources.

Uncovering Economic Vulnerabilities to Water Security

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The third panel on **"Uncovering Economic Vulnerabilities to Water Security"** proposed the concept of 'no water no growth' while highlighting existing threats emanating from water in the region. There seems to be a possibility of a sheer shortage of water in the future due to the fact that water-intensive crops are being cultivated and this still prevails due to the ignorance surrounding the harvesting of these crops. Despite persisting issues, water-intensive goods are being exported in many Asian states, including India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, and a big community's livelihood depends on this. Even though there's less discourse, the leather industry consumes a considerable amount of water. As pointed out, agriculture is being subsidized and in Bangladesh, 90% of irrigation is fully privatized. This has turned into a situation where farmers pay the full cost of irrigation and during the process, has created 1.5 million water vendors.

The economic loss from water scarcity total 260 billion dollars a year and are mainly due to inadequate infrastructure, poor management, inequitable allocation, and lack of access to water resources.

Although water scarcity may be a significant issue for the global south, in an increasingly inter-connected world, economic vulnerabilities to water scarcity are neither localized nor regional in nature. Their impact is wide and pervasive. An example is that the EU has a sizeable amount of dependency on Asian water-based goods (agro-products). These include agro-products from Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. The panelists pointed out that Pakistan's case study is very relevant to the topic of discussion. It's one of the most water-intensive economies in the world as an agrarian economy. Ninety-four percent of water withdrawal in the country are from the agricultural sector with average annual water losses amounting to 4 percent of GDP.

Water issues have become one of the main drivers of climate change and there's even a possibility of civil unrest if the climate crisis deprives people of their basic needs, especially with regard to unemployment and hunger.

Recommendations from the panel included a long-term technique to ensure rainfall on demand and new innovations such as transmitting electricity without a medium, with simply an antenna to receive electricity, which would solve many of the existing challenges related to water security. Although these sound impractical in today's circumstances, they are very much doable if we allocate adequate resources to research. National action plans such as the 100-year action plan of Bangladesh and 5-year action plan in Sri Lanka are being designed by each state. However, the question remains regarding implementation success without support from neighboring countries whilst being devoid of regional mechanisms; hence, these should be reviewed regularly. Since water scarcity poses threats to biodiversity, energy, social tensions, economic degradation, and ultimately political instability and inter-state tensions, the need for radical thinking was proposed. Furthermore, it is necessary to subsidize crops that consume less water as a means of effectively utilizing available resources.

Identifying Stakeholders and Incentivizing Long-term Engagement

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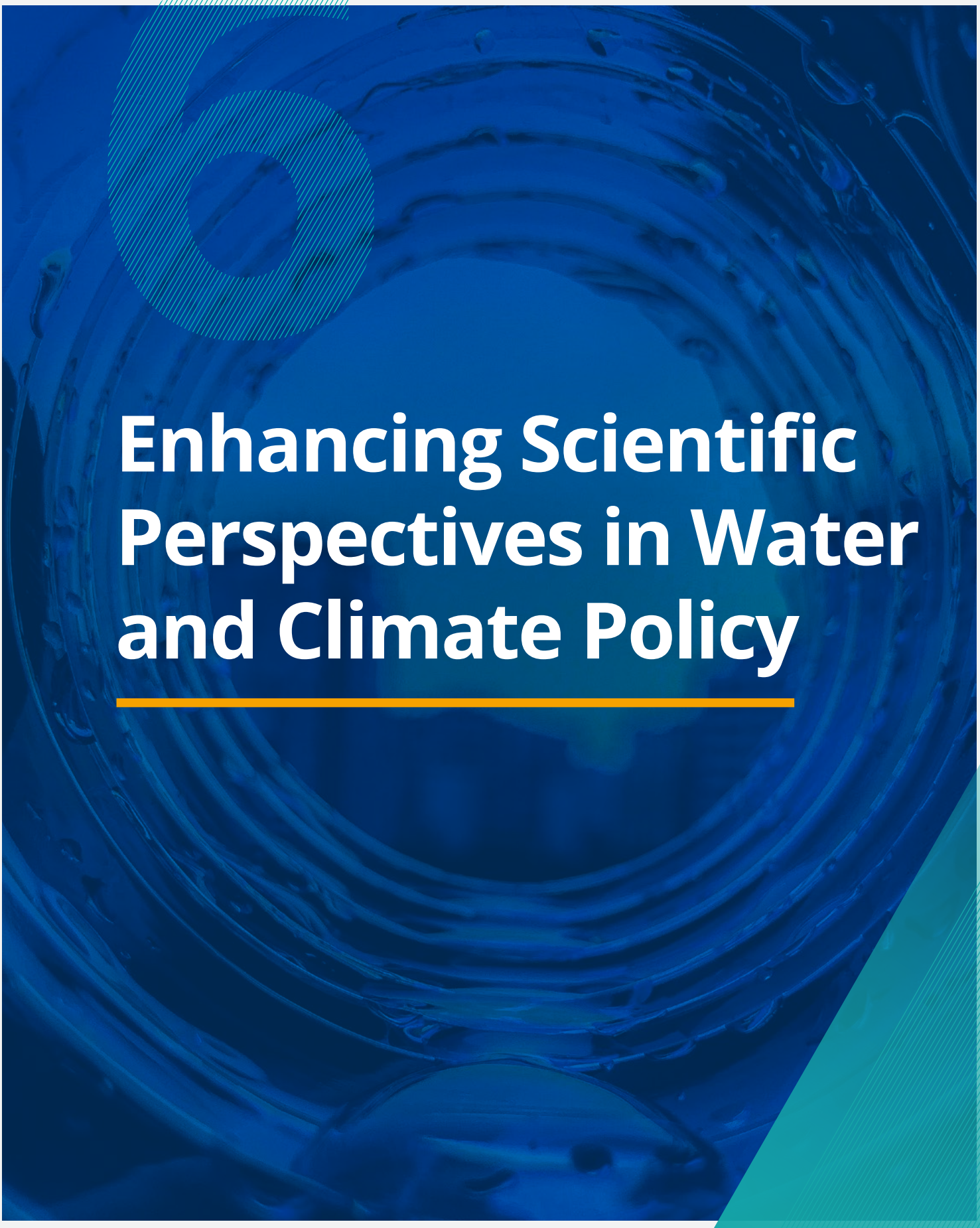
The first panel for day two of the dialog focused on **"Identifying Stakeholders and Incentivizing Long-term Engagement"**. It was highlighted that although 10 countries have their own subnational transboundary water issues in Asia, due to the present climate crisis and its impact on water, energy, and food security in the region, the entire continent is adversely affected. Panelists expressed their views that cooperative endeavors are all stuck between market liberalism and bureaucratic socialism, where numerous players try to fulfill their agendas, at times ignoring the need for sustainable retention. While there seems to be coercive power and persuasive power, activists pay more attention to moral power, but many of them are engaging at a small scale locally with less recognition and incentives by the state. The role of government is essential, yet the rate of success is highly doubtful without involvement of private sector and civil society representatives.

It was pointed out that more than 600 million people today are living under severe water shortages. Eighteen percent of the Indian population is affected by drinking water shortages.

It was applauded when the idea of using the word 'solidarity' instead of 'stakeholders' was brought up in the discussion. The present definition of stakeholders seems inaccurate with more involvement by higher authorities, while ignoring the community-level voices. The community is the real stakeholder in regard to the issue of water security and disaster management.

Furthermore, the panelists proposed that it is ideal to move from a state-centric to more people-centric approach, giving more prominence to the grass-root level, while retaining the involvement of the government. Thus, egalitarian activists, the market and the government can act in solidarity and collaborate for a common minimum goal, which is the best possible option. This might need compromising at times when searching for a common ground. Even though decisions can be taken regionally, solutions should be localized in management. Another point was the incorporation of gender narratives and youth engagement in the process of finding solutions, as the future will belong to the youth and women who are invariably the burden takers, considering daily water needs.



Enhancing Scientific Perspectives in Water and Climate Policy

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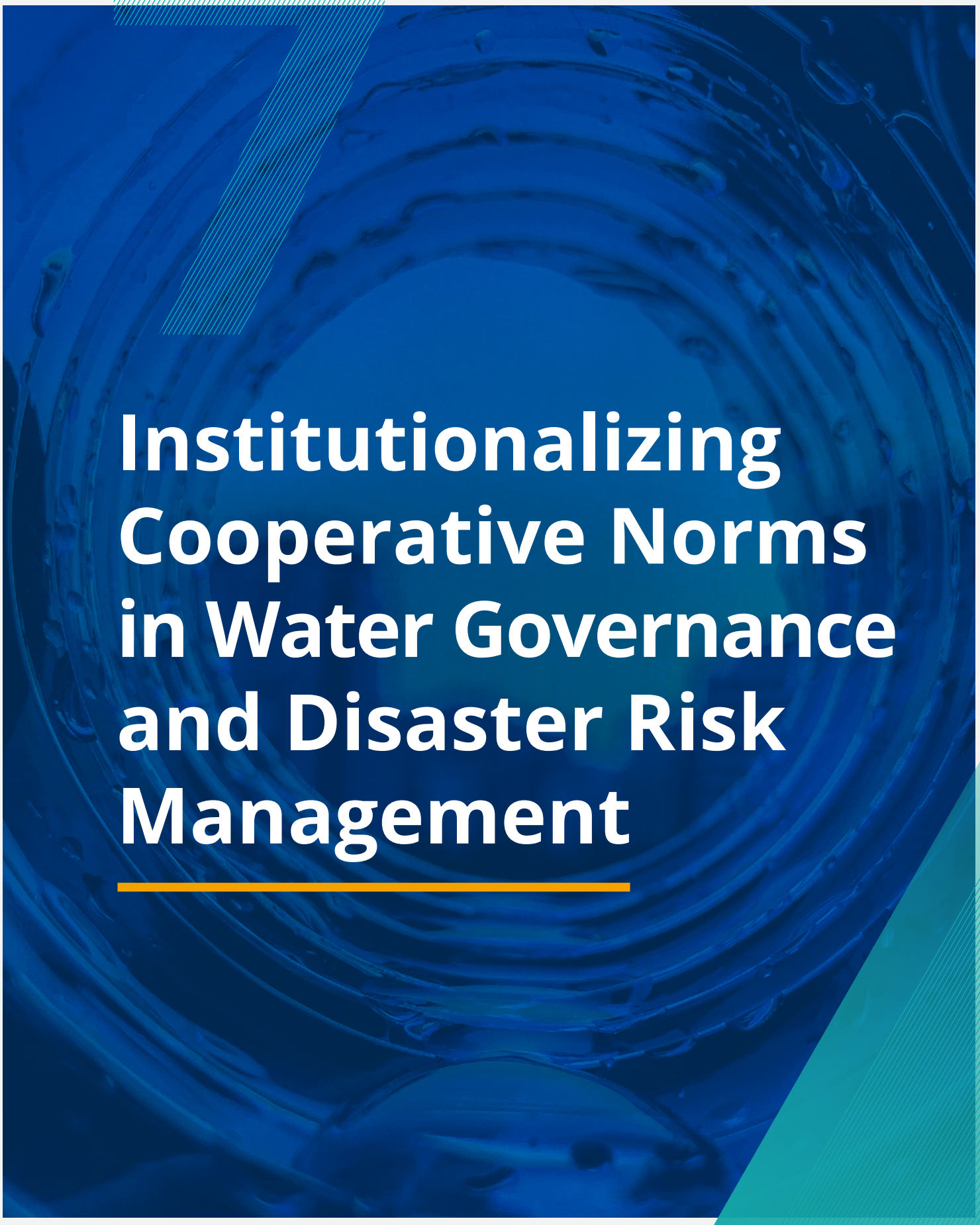
Next, the panel focused on **"Enhancing Scientific Perspectives in Water and Climate Policy"**. Water is one of the most significant products of the ecosystem. It was designated that water by itself is a flow of social elements, segments, and energy, and it entails broader social, cultural, and spiritual systems. The ecosystem services and structure are constructed around each one of these.

The concept of H2OP4 was put forward, which includes pollution, power, profit, and politics along with water and the need to attach policy as H2OP5. An issue remains regarding how to translate science into policy, which seems to be one of the gravest challenges. Knowledge doesn't necessarily address water issues. Most significantly global knowledge doesn't address the difficulties directly faced in South Asia. For instance, the Bay of Bengal is a prominent global delta in terms of climate change. Yet, there's very little understanding of the impact of ocean warming on the whole biological diversity of the Bay of Bengal. There is a lack of openness in the sharing data among Asian states and it was mentioned that openness is a basic need and a fundamental aspect for scientific research and it is time to give a thought to South Asia-based water science. A panelist even stated that data doesn't create science, but it helps the continuity of the growth of science.

Today, water and energy are believed to be strategic commodities in the region and therefore the water debate goes beyond economic or social values, spilling over into the security domain where countries are concerned about securing their energy requirements.

Key recommendations included precise and concrete data on water resources, availability, current threats, predictable future disasters and disaster management, etc. to come up with the technical interventions within the region. From this perspective, natural and social sciences should be thoroughly amalgamated. Another highlight was the significance of safeguarding and developing indigenous technical knowledge. The notion of 'think globally act locally' is to be followed by all the states in the region.



Institutionalizing Cooperative Norms in Water Governance and Disaster Risk Management

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The last panel deliberated on **"Institutionalizing Cooperative Norms in Water Governance and Disaster Risk Management"**. Everyone agreed that along with many international agreements related to water resources, the status quo situation tends to encourage the consolidation of regional competition, where there might be an absence of either legal regimes or collaborative inter-governmental organizations as shared water resources are perceived to be diminishing or under stress. Therefore, policymakers have a tendency to see water less as a shared common good and increasingly as a security-related issue which encourages the desire to monopolise this resource.

The strengths and weaknesses of the Indus water treaty were discussed in this session also and the dispute resolution mechanism was appreciated. However, the lack of provisions on groundwater and divergent interpretations of the treaty have caused noncompliance and mistrust that sometimes lead to tensions between water-sharing states. It was highlighted that there should be no replacement of the current Indus agreement, but actions from the lessons learnt in order to improve the situation in the future and deliberation of the existing issues within an organization can be thought of.

The panel proposed that river basin governance should be properly planned and implemented, which gives all states the room to play their role in planning and decision-making at the macro level, including a long-term river basin vision with an integrated natural resource policy agenda and adequate investments by governments and other entities. This idea was seconded by highlighting the significance of a participatory approach to create awareness and lobby government(s).

It was recommended that KAS RECAP, the EastWest Institute, and the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks could continue with this type of platform in order to continue sharing common information and best practices, while utilizing online smart technology.

Even though governments should be primarily involved, the private sector can be incorporated via CSR projects so as to bridge the existing gaps. Further research into promoting the concept of Sponge Cities within the planned city framework must be encouraged whereby water absorption is facilitated naturally, with further emphasis on open green space with interconnected waterways and other channels and a green roof concept to retain rainwater.

The importance of Foresight Analysis in identifying the threats and challenges to water security and climate change was emphasized. With the aforementioned ground-breaking programs, climate goals can be set using technologies such as Delphi's and scenario building by different institutions striving to conserve water and manage natural disasters.

In conclusion, the High-Level Dialog on 'Water Security and Disaster Management in Asia' led to the identification of clear gaps in policymaking and implementation and recommended practical policies to overcome them. The panelists, who are experts on the subject, highlighted the urgency of the climate crisis and consequently the severe impacts on the core and vulnerable populations and overall security of South Asia. They underscored the need to secure the South Asian water tower. As an immediate response, it was emphasized that with the representation of scholars in the region, a platform for updated data and information and joint research on new hydrology should be created that will study the areas of changing precipitation to understand the impacts of river flows, water availability and water security, upcoming vulnerabilities, and climate change.