Water as a vehicle for peace rather than violence:

The struggle for water democracy

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Historians of the human use of water often point out that the English word 'rival' comes from the Latin noun 'rivalis',[1] meaning "those who use the same stream as a source of water".[2]

Many have taken this as evidence that, since time immemorial, water has always been a source of antagonism; and that those who rely on shared sources of water are forever condemned to a perpetual state of violence or near-violence.

In fact, the reverse is true. As numerous scholars have documented, water has historically been "a catalyst of peace rather than a cause of war".[3] Certainly, shared waterways have been a source of rivalries, disputes, conflicting social and economic interests and tensions. Certainly there have been instances where violence has erupted over access to water.[4] But violence between nations or over water as a scarce resource have been rare.[5]

This is not to deny that water is currently being weaponised by many states. Through the 22 dams it has built as part of its giant Southeastern Anatolia

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[1] See, for example, Enrique Cabrera and Francisco Arregui, "Introduction" in Enrique Cabrera and Francisco Arregui (eds) "Water Engineering and Management through Time – Learning from History", CRC Press, Taylor & Francis, London, 2010, p.6.

[2] Merriam-Webster, "It Takes Two: The History of 'Rival'". https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/it-takes-two-the-history-of-rival

[3] Kadar Asmal, "Water is a catalyst for peace", Water science and technology: a journal of the International Association on Water Pollution Research, Vol. 43 (4): 23–30, 2001.

[4] In India, for example, conflict over access to water has resulted in violence and death along the Cauvery River, whilst in California, farmers in the 1920s the pipeline carrying water to Los Angeles. A database of water-related conflicts and transboundary water agreements is kept by the Department of Geological Sciences, University of Oregon. It can be accessed at https://tfddmgmt.github.io/tfdd/index.html.

See also: Gary Kirst, "The Water War that Polarized 1920s California", LitHub, 17 May 2018, https://lithub.com/the-water-war-that-polarized-1920s-california/ | BBC, Why water war has broken out in India's Silicon Valley, 13 September 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-37346570.

[5] Aaron Wolf, "Shared Waters: Conflict and Cooperation". Annual Review of Environment and Resources 32 (1): 241–269, 2007. https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.energy.32.041006.101434. See also: David Katz, "Hydro-Political Hyperbole: Examining Incentives for Overemphasizing the Risks of Water Wars", Global Environmental Politics 11:1, February 2011,

https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00041

Project,[6] Turkey now has the means to deny water to its downstream neighbours, Syria and Iraq;[7] and, as many of you will have experienced directly, it has recently exercised that power by ruthlesslycutting off water cut off flows of the Euphrates and other rivers to exert pressure on the Kurdish regions of Rojava and the Northern Iraq.[8] [9] ISIS, too, used water as a weapon, threatening to flood or deprive areas of water.[10]

But when policy makers such as former United Nations Secretary-General Boutrous Boutrous Ghali claim that such water terrorism or past and future "water wars" are rooted in "water not politics",[11] they are wrong, wrong, wrong.

Where conflict (violent or otherwise) has erupted, it is very rarely because of an *absolute* scarcity of water.[12] Instead, conflict results from *politically-*

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[6] The GAP project currently consists of a network of 22 dams, power plants and irrigation investments covering 1.8 million hectares. A reported 1738 other dams are reportedly planned. See: Ministry of Industry and Technology, What's GAP?, http://www.gap.gov.tr/en/what-s-gap-page-1.html |Kurdish Human Rights Project, The Ilisu Dam Campaign, The Corner House, Downstream Impacts of Turkish Dam Construction on Syria and Iraq: Joint Report of Fact-Finding Mission to Syria and Iraq, 2002, http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/sites/thecornerhouse.org.uk/files/IraqSyri.pdf |Güven Eken, Turkish Dam Boom Threatens Anatolian Rivers, International Rivers, 2012, https://archive.internationalrivers.org/resources/turkish-dam-boom-threatens-anatolian-rivers-7502

[7] Turkey's three major dams on the Euphrates – Keban, Karakaya and Ataturk – have a storage capacity which greatly exceeds the entire annual flow of both the Tigris and Euphrates put together.Should Turkey decide to cut off the downstream flow completely, it would therefore have the means to do so for a considerable period of time. See: Dolatyar, M. and Gray, T.S., *Water Politics in the Middle East: A Context for Conflict or Co-Operation?*, Macmillan Press, London, 2000, p.145.

[8] See: Michael Collins, Water War? Turkey Cuts Water Supply to Syria. Euphrates Shut Down, Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalisation, 7 June 2014, http://www.globalresearch.ca/water-war-turkey-cuts-water-supply-to-syria-euphrates-shut-down/5386054 | Sarah Glynn, Turkey is reportedly depriving hundreds of thousands of people of water, Open Democracy, 14 June 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/turkey-reportedly-depriving-hundreds-thousands-people-water/

[9] For discussions of Turkey's use of GAP water development projects to counter the PKK, see: Jeroen Warner, The struggle over Turkey's Ilısu Dam: domestic and international security linkages, International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics volume 12, pp.231–250 (2012), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/29227763.pdf | Laura Meijer, "The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP): water, counterinsurgency, and conflict", Spring 2018, https://www.sciencespo.fr/kuwait-program/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Laura-Meijer-Southeastern-Anatolia-Project.pdf |

[10] Kashmira Gander, "Isis use water as a weapon in Iraq, by shutting dam on the Euphrates River", *The Independent*, 3 June 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-usewater-as-a-weapon-in-iraq-by-shutting-dam-on-the-euphrates-river-10295763.html

[11] Cited in David Katz, "Hydro-Political Hyperbole: Examining Incentives for Overemphasizing the Risks of Water Wars", *Global Environmental Politics* 11:1, February 2011,

https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00041. Boutrous Boutrous Ghali is quoted as saying: "The next war in the Middle East will be fought over water, not politics."

[12] Absolute scarcity occurs where there are insufficient resources, no matter how equitably they are distributed.

If over one billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, it is not because the water is lacking: there is more than enough water available, even in water-stressed areas, to provide sufficient water for basic household needs (40 litres per capita per day) to all those classified as "unserved" today – and the extra two billion expected by 2025.

To understand why people go short of water – or any other resource – it is necessary to go beyond the statistics that weigh numbers against supply and look at the complex workings of power at the local, regional, national and international levels. The reality is – and has always been under capitalism – that water (like food) flows to those with most bargaining power: industry and bigger farmers first, richer consumers second, and the poor last. In the process, the water supplies that the poor rely on are polluted by industrial effluent, exported in foodstuffs or poured down the drain through wasteful consumption.

generated scarcities[13] rooted in inequalities of power that enable one group to deny others access to water or to degrade the environment at the expense of others.

In effect, water conflicts are always about politics.

Inequalities in power are not God-given: they are directly related to processes of capital accumulation, patriarchy, imperialism, corporate and state expansion at the expense of the commons, and ambitions for regional hegemonic control.[14]

If those in Rojava who rely on the River Khabur do not have water, this is not an Act of God. It is because Turkish-backed militia have cut the supply.

If people cannot drink the water in Basra because it is too saline, this is not an act of God. It is the result of decisions that have been made by specific people with specific political and economic interests that have led to poor drainage, reduced downstream water flows, increased salinisation and increased levels of chemical run off into water ways.

And if people are denied water because they cannot pay for it, this is not an Act of God but a direct outcome of unjust economic policies and privatisation of water supplies.

Whether in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world, water scarcity today is primarily politically-generated water scarcity. To understand why people go short of water – or any other resource – it is therefore necessary to address the complex workings of power that deny access to water at the local, regional, national and international levels.

Conflicts over water will not be addressed simply through improved technologies of water extraction, distribution and use, necessary as these may be, because the issue is not at root amenable to technocratic solutions.

The struggle is not a technological one: it is a struggle against imbalances of political, economic and social power. It is a struggle for democracy. Whose

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[13] Ian Scoones, Rebecca Smalley, Ruth Hall, Dzodzi Tsikata, *Narratives of scarcity: Understanding the 'global resource grab'*, Future Agricultures/Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, February 2014, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a089caed915d622c0003d3/FAC_Working_Paper_076.pdf

[14] For discussion of politically-generated scarcity, see: Lyla Mehta (ed), *The Limits to Scarcity: Contesting the Politics of Allocation*, Earthscan, 2010| Andrew Ross, | Nicholas Hildyard, "'Scarcity' as Political Strategy: Reflections on Three Hanging Children", Corner House, 2005, http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/sites/thecornerhouse.org.uk/files/Scarcity.pdf.

voice counts? Whose environment gets protected and whose gets impacted? Who gets to enjoy the benefits? Whose needs get to be met?

And because it is a struggle over who controls decision-making, collaboration in the use of water requires more than simply creating forums in which water can be negotiated.

Turkey, Syria and Iraq, for example, have been conducting secret, behind-the-scenes water negotiations for decades. The forum for negotiations exists. But the weakened state of Iraq and Syria, particularly in recent years, has left Turkey entirely dominant in the negotiations – to the extent that it can simply ignore the outcomes. Addressing that inequality of negotiating power is essential if an enforceable mutual agreement on the shared use of the Euphrates and Tigris is to be achieved. And that will require social and environmental movements in the region not only to pressure Turkey but to pressure NATO, the European Union, the United States, Russia, the United Nations and other international actors to hold Turkey to account.

Who takes part in the negotiations over shared waters, whether transboundary or within countries, is also of critical importance. The Turkey-Syria-Iraq negotiations have been almost entirely between technical experts who have taken it for granted that large dams and water transfer schemes are part of the solution. Civil society groups have been entirely excluded from the process. Yet the lesson from elsewhere is that multi-stakeholder processes reach very different conclusions on water policy options to those that are restricted to government experts and their corporate allies.[15]

This is hardly surprising: for corporations, water is simply an input, a cost of production and a source of profit. For state bureaucrats, it is tube wells, dams, transfer schemes, pipes, irrigation schemes and the accompanying bureaucratic imperatives of implementation. But for those who depend for their livelihoods directly on the land, water is not simply something to drink or water fields with – it is survival.

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[15] In Nepal, for example, water policy was heavily influenced by "hydrocracies" – institutions whose economic, bureaucratic and political interests are intimately bound up with the large dam industry. Predictably, government policy consisted of building large dams. But following the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, social and environmental justice movements pushed for a multi-stakeholder review of water policy. This led to the energy sector being opened up to small producers: numerous villages introduced their own mini-hydro schemes, some run collectively, some privately. The outcome was to produce almost one-third more electricity than the massive Arun III dam being pushed by the hydrocrats, at close to half the cost. See: Dipak Gyawali and Ajaya Dixit, "The Construction and Destruction of Scarcity in Development: Water and Power Experiences in Nepal", *in* Lyla Mehta (ed.), *The Limits to Scarcity: Contesting the Politics of Allocation*, Earthscan, London, 2011. pp.233-252.

Consider, for example, the rules that emerged from one decades-long, community-led struggle in India to restore the Alwar watershed in Rajasthan, an area whose annual rainfall is even less than that received in Syria.[16] Years of deforestation and tube-well extraction had depleted aquifers in the watershed, causing the River Alwar to dry up in summer months. To combat this, villagers came together to restore hundreds of small village ponds, known as *johads*, that had silted up due to increased deforestation-driven erosion. Each pond was managed by a village council, which enforced its own rules for collaborative water management. At a watershed level, the villagers also formed a "water parliament", whose rules included "not allowing exploiters and polluters into the area, being on guard against privatization forces, conserving the environment, seeking drought-resistant crops, and not growing cash crops".[17]

These are not rules that would emerge from a state- or corporate-driven negotiating process. They are rules that reflect the priorities of the commons – those ways of social and economic organising that recognise (and seek to put into practice) the collective right of all, rather than the few, to survival.

While it has no legal authority, the Alwar parliament has "the moral authority to be able to impose fines on rule-breakers and to resolve resource-use disputes between villages".[18] The result is that, during the 1990s and early 2000s, the Alwar River began to flow again all year-round. Groundwater sources were restored, local wells replenished, and forests bought back to life.[19]

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[16] Rajasthan receives a scant 16 inches of rainfall annually. For Syria, the average is 30 inches a year. See: http://www.ecotippingpoints.com/our-stories/indepth/india-rajasthan-rainwater-harvest-restoration-groundwater-johad.html | https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/syria

[17] Aradhana Parmar, "Path to sustainable development: Water parliament in India" *in* Barbara Rose Johnston (ed) *Water, Cultural Diversity and Global Environmental Change: Emerging Trends, Sustainable Futures?* UNESCO, 2012, p.412, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000215119

[18] Patrick McCully, *India: Rainwater harvesters and forest protectors of the Aravalli hills*, World Rainforest Movement, Bulletin 66, 2003, https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/india-rainwater-harvesters-and-forest-protectors-of-the-aravalli-hills/

[19] For further details, see:
Amanda Suutari and Gerry Marten, "Water Warriors: Rainwater Harvesting to Replenish Underground Water (Rajasthan, India)", http://www.ecotippingpoints.com/our-stories/indepth/india-rajasthan-rainwater-harvest-restoration-groundwater-johad.html |
"Nature and local democracy – how a River Parliament shows what community control can do", Rapidtransition, 13 July 2020, https://www.rapidtransition.org/stories/nature-and-local-democracy-how-a-river-parliament-shows-what-community-control-can-do/ |
Ecotipping point: Rainwater Harvesting (Rajastan India) - video, http://www.ecotippingpoints.com/video/rajasthan/index.html |
Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, "Making Water Management Everybody's Business: Water Harvesting and Rural Development in India", IIED, 1999, https://pubs.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/6339IIED.pdf |
Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain (eds), *Dying wisdom: Rise, fall and potential of India's traditional water harvesting systems*, New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1997. |
Mark Everard, Community-based groundwater and ecosystem restoration in semi-arid north Rajasthan (1): socio-economic progress and lessons for groundwater-dependent areas, undated, https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/OutputFile/802456 |
"Coming Back to Life", *Down to Earth*, 15 March 1999, https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/managing-a-crisis-18980

Many communities in other areas of India have followed the Alwar example: a water parliament has also been established in Finland to manage the Torne River[20] and numerous other communities worldwide have sought to restore watersheds through community-run water harvesting initiatives.[21] The potential is enormous.[22]

But the achievements of the communities in Alwar and elsewhere in restoring and collaboratively managing water sources are not easily replicated. They rely on more than a bundle of technologies, rules and councils. They are more than a set of template institutions that, once in place, somehow guarantee water democracy.

Their success lies in their active, daily promotion of collaboration. Their harvesting is about more than simply obtaining water: it is about building society through an active process of challenging undemocratic, unjust, inequitable and discriminatory practices wherever and whenever they arise.

It is this activism that ultimately engenders the solidarities that make for collaboration. The struggle is not to obtain H_20; nor to put in place new institutional structures; but to build and defend water justice and democracy through active, everyday commoning.

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[20] Lipponen, "Finland's cooperation in managing transboundary waters and the UNECE Principles for Effective Joint Bodies: Value for water diplomacy?" *Journal of Hydrology*, Volume 567, December 2018, Pages 320-331, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S002216941830756X

[21] For examples, see: Barbara Rose Johnston (ed) *Water, Cultural Diversity and Global Environmental Change: Emerging Trends, Sustainable Futures?* UNESCO, 2012, p.412, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000215119

[22] In the Turpan basin in Western China, for example, traditional water harvesting technologies once provided a total water discharge of 700 million cubic metres, enough for watering 24,000 hectares of farmland. See: Valipour, M., Ahmed, A. T., Antoniou, G. P., Sala, R., Parise, M., Salgot, M., Bensi, N. S., & Angelakis, A. N., "Sustainability of underground hydro-technologies: From ancient to modern times and toward the future" Sustainability (Switzerland), 12(21), 1-31, https://repository.tudelft.nl/islandora/object/uuid:27a742fd-443e-4428-822b-f204cf4b2395/datastream/OBJ/download