

**SOUTH ASIAN WATER COMMONS:  
PEOPLE'S VISIONS ON TRANSBOUNDARY RIVER SHARING  
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The South Asia region is characterized by numerous river basins, that do not coincide with national boundaries. Many of these basins are shared between countries of unequal size and power. Sharing waters of transboundary river systems has been a source of ongoing tensions and conflicts in the region for more than half a century, particularly when countries unilaterally build large dams, hydropower projects, and river diversions. Further, China's growing use of the eastern Himalayan waters has emerged as a source of concern.

It is evident that current water technologies adopted by governments such as big dams, diversions and hydro projects have not met their stated objectives but have instead created discord in situations where harmony existed between communities across borders. Further these projects are witness to serious, long-term and widespread negative ecological and livelihood impacts. Climate change has brought further challenges such as glacial melting, flash floods, landslides, droughts, forest fires, intermittent rainfall, increased sea levels and risk of salinity ingress in absence of freshwater flows. Moreover, Governments have not shown any use of basic values like equity, transparency, accountability, sustainability and participation of the people in intra and inter governmental processes.

Given the current challenges that the region faces, we cannot confine water issues to nation states; only a regional approach that brings peoples perspectives to the centre stage can help create accord over rivers.

The crux of the contemporary challenge lies in creatively recovering imaginations about South Asia's rivers as being implicated in complex relationships with regional histories, cultures and ecologies. The idea is to treat rivers as endowments, to be sustained for future generations rather than merely as short term resources to be simply harnessed and degraded in one or two generations.

South Asia's rivers must be seen as sources for nourishing and uniting peoples, not dividing them.

***Observing that***

1. Development of water resources and water projects has primarily followed unilateral and bilateral approaches rather than a democratic, participatory and multilateral approach and has not succeeded in creating a cooperative framework of sharing natural resources such as water resources.
2. The flow of water in rivers is not material flow alone, it's also a flow of life and yet instead of preserving the natural direction and volume of river flows ensuring ecological preservation and sustainability of our common water resources, there is an attempt to rewrite the geography of South Asia through projects like river linking, networking of diverse and unique rivers, big hydropower projects and dams, instead of pursuing local water options, demand-side measures, ensuring sustained existence of rivers and in general following the recommendations of the World Commission on Dams through democratic governance. The threat of mega projects have hugely increased with the recent political developments in the region.
3. There is an absence of bottom up basin-wide multilateral approach.

4. There are no credible - project specific or basin level - impact assessments, mitigation plans or compliance systems in place with free, prior and informed involvement of the basin communities. These impacts are accentuating the climate change impacts and adaptation capacity of the communities.
5. Governments of South Asia are seeking to impose a commercial approach, monetize and financialize the water resources through water centralization and inter-basin transfer, motorized mega pipelines, construction of river intervention structures to alter the direction and volume of river flows to serve various purposes such as hydropower, irrigation, flushing silt deposits, industrial and household use without regard to the long-term effects on river ecology and social consequences for the local and indigenous people who are left out of decision making and whose protests are met with repression and police or military action.
6. There is disregard for rivers' natural drainage system to the detriment of inter- and intra-generational equity.
7. The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Basins covering North Eastern and Eastern India, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, in addition to upstream Tibet, Nepal, and Bangladesh has been dubbed South Asia's "poverty square", with substantially more people below the dollar-per-day poverty line than in all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa combined. Yet, the ongoing inter-state conflicts over water have not necessarily addressed issues that impact ordinary people of South Asia – their access to water and impact on livelihoods even though common resources like rivers account for a significant portion of their income.
8. There is an urgent need to evolve a regional policy and mechanism on water commons that work transparently, with accountability, and with participation of local people and impacted people, (especially the more vulnerable such as dalits, women, minorities, farmers, fisherfolk, boatmen, and peasants) along with ensuring sustainability of the water commons, ecology and biodiversity.

**People's SAARC-India** proposes that there is need for an alternative approach – a *South Asian Water Commons Convention* – that takes into account equity, justice, sustainability and livelihood concerns.

People's SAARC-India and participants of this symposium will take initiative for formation of *national working groups on water commons* in the eight SAARC countries to discuss and propose the concepts, principles and framework on which a *South Asian Water Commons Convention* can be drafted.

The national working groups on water commons will organize a regional meeting in Kathmandu during the People's SAARC Convention in November 2014 to discuss and build consensus on the framework of the *South Asian Water Commons Convention*; form a drafting committee; and constitute a *South Asian Working Group on Water Commons* to take the work forward.

The national and regional working groups will be empowered to facilitate broader consultations and draw into this drafting process more movements and organizations.

The *South Asian Water Commons Convention* will be finalized by the nineteenth SAARC Summit.