WATER CRISIS INTENSIFIES IN PAKISTAN’S TRIBAL AREAS

Dipping groundwater levels and the lack of long-term water planning have compounded struggles for people in Pakistan’s restive Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) plagued by years of militancy.

The future for the four million odd people in the tribal areas is grim unless urgent steps are taken to prevent further groundwater depletion (Image from FATA Reforms).

Trapped in a cycle of conflict and violence, large parts of Pakistan’s restive Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan face an acute water crisis with groundwater levels dipping and little sign of a long term water management plan as the government remains more focused on battling militancy in the region.

Life is tough, say locals in the dry, mountainous region that includes the Bajaur, Khyber and Mohmand agencies. And struggling to meet the water requirements for drinking and irrigation has made it even tougher.

Ask Shah Hussain, a farmer in Mohmand Agency’s Yakkaghund area, with 12 acres of land. “We depend entirely on canal water for irrigation because of irregular rainfall. Water shortage
badly affects the crop,” he said. He can manage just 1,200 kg of wheat from his entire land and says this can be doubled if there was enough water.

For Malik Saeed, a resident of Bajaur Agency, who used to grow maize and wheat in his eight acres, life got so tough that he was forced to move to the capital Islamabad five years ago. The shortage of water meant that yield from the land was steadily decreasing. “I decided to leave for Islamabad and stared working as shoe polisher because farming was not anymore profitable business for me,” he said.

Though the crisis poses a serious challenge to both the economy and the health of communities, it appears to be a non-issue for the government that is preoccupied with curbing insurgency in these militant stronghold areas.

According to Al-Haj Shahji Gul Afridi, a member of Pakistan’s National Assembly from Bajaur agency, decades-long militancy — since the USSR war back in the 1980s — has dragged the area into backwardness. “Almost 50% of the FATA population is deprived of adequate and clean drinking water and the situation of irrigation water is even worse,” he said. The dry mountainous topography and the absence of long-term water management planning have made life extremely difficult.

In December last year, parliamentarians from the tribal areas submitted a $100 million proposal to the governor of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to install a solar based system for 50% of the tube wells to extract groundwater in the entire FATA region. “This proposal will be presented to USAID and other donor agencies for funding,” said Afridi.

Shamsul Qamer Mohmand, a journalist from Mohmand agency, argues a solar based system can’t ease water shortages. In the three tehsils (administrative sub-divisions) of Mohmand, groundwater is 300-550 feet and dipping every year. There are three to four small dam projects and these are insufficient to cater to the growing demands for drinking and irrigation. Terrorism and militancy hamper most development work in the area, he said. In one instance, militants attacked an under-construction dam, killed the labourers and ran off with the machinery.

And in Jamrud tehsil of Khyber agency, the water table has also plummeted by almost 300 feet, said Islam Gul, a local farmer and activist. Overuse of water has caused many existing water supply schemes to stop functioning.

**Ground reality**

Of the total geographic area of 616,309 hectares, crop area in the Bajaur, Khyber and Mohmand agencies is 18% and irrigated area is 36% of this. Like most of Pakistan, agriculture is the
biggest water user in these agencies. Key crops grown include wheat, maize, tomatoes and onions.
The future for the four million odd people in the tribal areas is grim unless urgent steps are taken. According to a September 2014 ADB report on the water situation in the three agencies, the lack of surface water sources has led to increased reliance on groundwater for drinking and irrigation purposes.
The groundwater potential in the project area largely depends on rainfall and the irrigation systems consist mostly of shallow wells, dug wells (open wells with motorised pumping) and tube wells. “Unregulated groundwater abstraction, through unplanned tube wells and dug wells, has considerably lowered the water table while putting groundwater aquifers under extreme stress in most of the watersheds,” it states.
“This trend of groundwater abstraction is unlikely to improve for various reasons, including the ease of construction and proximity of groundwater pumping facilities, reliability and continuity of good-quality water, and increasing human and livestock consumption,” it adds.
According to the study, water recharge in all three agencies exceeds discharge by 50–64% during wet years. However, wet years only occur in the area once every 30 years.
“The looming climate change may significantly affect rainfall patterns and intensities as well as temperature variations, which could seriously impact the water availability in the medium to long term,” it says.
It therefore suggests integrating hydrological forecasting with climate change modelling. “This will not only provide better forecasts but also make policy makers and water users aware of the scarcity of water and its judicious use.”
Raza M. Farrukh, author of the ADB report and a water resource specialist, told the thirdpole.net that groundwater was being over exploited and surface water was available only seasonally. An immediate shift was needed from groundwater to surface water in these three agencies, he said. He suggested the construction of small dams for storage and recharge, ponds, and diversion weirs with community participation.
According to Farrukh, the conventional development model of providing funds to political agents (top administrative officers) and letting them invest through maliks (local elders) had not worked. “The role of political agents as custodians of everything done by the government needs to be reviewed particularly for bringing about positive impact of the investments on the lives of the people and reducing leakages,” the ADB official said.
The FATA Research Centre, an NGO working in the area, has also dwelt on the link between politics on the ground and the water situation. Since 1992, the government’s works and services department has only developed water supply schemes in areas where the resident clan or tribe agrees beforehand to take over operation and maintenance.

An estimated 27% of all schemes currently in operation were constructed after 1992 and have been handed over to local beneficiaries. Where the source is located within the territorial boundaries of one clan or tribe but the water is to be supplied to another, the department requires a formal agreement between the political agent and the clans or tribes concerned before commencing work.

The Centre says that in areas not covered by water supply schemes, women are responsible for fetching water for drinking, cooking and washing while clothes are usually washed at the source. In these areas, women have to travel up to two kilometres away to fetch water.

Both, the Fata Research Centre and authors of the ADB study, agree that what is true of Mohmand, Bajaur and Khyber is also true for the rest of FATA – where the inhospitable terrain, prolonged conflict and the lack of adequate rainfall has led to daily struggles for water to meet the basic needs of drinking, irrigation and sanitation.

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