

Where is the Water Crisis?

Usmaan Farooqui examines the everyday political and power-laden relationships that characterize Karachi's water situation.

Preparing for a research trip to Pakistan, I spent hours reading about one of the most water stressed cities in the world. Karachi, I was shocked to discover, missed its daily water demand by a margin of over fifty percent. Within a few days of arriving I found the situation was far worse than I had anticipated. But, as I spent my days talking to residents of Shireen Jinnah Colony in Karachi's District South, I found that it wasn't a lack of water that was the real problem.

"Everybody pays for water here" muttered Kauser, when I asked him how he accessed water. He refused to make eye contact, choosing, instead, to bang away at a piece of metal in his roadside garage. Kauser became far warmer when I assured him I wasn't a government official. He took me through a narrow alley and introduced me to a few of his neighbors so I could talk to them about their water problems. An old lady told me there was an abundance of municipal water many years ago. Now, with the number of people living in Shireen Jinnah Colony skyrocketing, people payed water vendors. As she spoke I spied a plastic pipe snaking its way from inside her neighbor's house to a Suzuki truck retrofitted with a with a small water tank. These houses have official connections, Kauser told me as we walked away, but they have no water. Later, as we drank tea and ate biscuits in his shop, Kauser wondered aloud whether the high-rise buildings in Shireen Jinnah paid for water tankers or got their supply through municipal lines.

The short time I spent with Kauser did what most national level statistics can never seem to do; it elaborated the everyday political and power-laden relationships that characterize Karachi's water situation. Access to water in Shireen Jinnah is not mediated by an idealized relationship between state and society. Rather, it is achieved by navigating everyday relationships in a context where the state no longer supplies water even though it is legally "responsible" for doing so. It may be useful to say an "informal water economy" has taken over the state's responsibilities in Shireen Jinnah. But the more salient point is that at the level of everyday access, water is a substance that structures relationships between people.

Where state-owned water pipes carry pressurized water to people's homes, as in the nearby high-income neighborhood of Clifton, the substance fashions a relationship between state and society that resembles citizenship. Municipal water creates citizens and representatives by literally connecting them so that residents of Clifton are made visible to the state and the state, in turn, is made accountable to them. But where these pipes run dry (despite their obstructing presence) water fleshes out everyday relationships between class, gender, neighbors, and informal market actors. It is these relationships that need to be navigated almost daily to access water in places like Shireen Jinnah.

Of course, this understanding is hardly reflected when Karachi is discussed on the national or international stage. Instead, commentators rely on precisely the kind of national level statistics that obscure everyday water relations. **It is claimed**, for example, that Karachi produces a demand of over 1,200 million gallons/day (MGD) but only meets 50% in terms of supply. Karachi and Water Sewerage Board officials say several MGD are lost due to an aging **water distribution system and pilferage**, and a per annum population growth rate of 4.5% make things worse. All the while climate change activists are sure to add the river Indus, Karachi's main source of water, **is experiencing uneven flow patterns due to fewer rains**. Water is thus constructed as quantifiable and knowable, an object of modernity that is nevertheless experiencing a crisis of governance, management, and supply. The solution is straightforward – more water. One can see the latest incarnation of this in Karachi's K-IV project, which will reportedly bring an addition 650MGD of water to the city.



These statements come at the expense of understanding everyday water relationships and are affective. When a vast, socially, legally, and culturally intricate water network is shoehorned into a handful of numbers, issues of politics and power take a backseat. This has the effect of masking and naturalizing relationships between urban and “peri-urban” water users, municipal and “market” consumers, and, water citizens and water subjects.

Water shortages around the world certainly suggest a global crisis is in full swing. But considering Shireen Jinnah, perhaps an older and more pressing concern is that water has always been a medium of power.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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