

**INTERNATIONAL MEDIA WORKSHOP
GLOBAL CHALLENGES OF WATER AND PEACE
23-24 September 2019
Kathmandu, Nepal**

**Co-hosted by Strategic Foresight Group and Publicize
With support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation**

An international workshop including an intergenerational dialogue of media leaders was convened by Strategic Foresight Group and Publicize, with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The meeting was held from 23-24 September, 2019 at the Summit Hotel in Kathmandu, Nepal. It was attended by both senior media leaders and young journalists from all continents including North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Middle East and Asia. The objective of the workshop was to sensitize the media on global challenges of water and peace and introduce Blue Peace as well as key recommendations of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace with a view to enable the media to cover water and peace linkages in an effective way.



Some of the participants have been associated with Time Magazine, BBC, The Economist, Forbes, New York Times, Le Monde diplomatique, Politico, France 24, National Geographic, Daily Sabah, Al-Etejah English Channel, The Atlantic, Mongabay, Ooska News among others.



Some of the key observations from the workshop are presented below.

Changing Nature of Media

Newsrooms are shrinking along with the financial resources to cover issues relating to environment and water. A majority of news on water is focussed on stories that create fear such as tsunamis and earthquakes against which people want to safeguard themselves against. Also, after recession, several media houses have shut down their environmental desks. This has created a vacuum in environmental reporting which is gradually being filled in by freelance journalists. Freelance journalists have begun re-shaping the business model on reporting environmental issues. They have overcome the issue fatigue which comes with reporting on climate change issues by endeavouring to have more focussed reporting on specific topics. They are also able to visit places and meet people that would have been more difficult for a journalist reporting on more general issues to do.

Challenges Faced by Freelancers

One major problem which emerged from the discussion on freelance reporting on water issues was that in order to discuss water as a standalone issue, most freelancers have to begin by zooming out and focusing on broader environmental issues and then re-focussing on water-related news. For instance, in the last couple of years, tropical forests and oceans were given considerable more coverage over other issues like freshwater resources like rivers and lakes, because of the huge global movements that have emerged about these issues.

Big challenges also arise in terms of funding, especially for work trips abroad. Also, the issue of using stringers to get local stories from developing countries is problematic. Moreover, sometimes is a threat to the life of fixers, stringers, interpreters and journalists while reporting on water-related projects which have vested interests from narco-groups and non-state actors. Stringers can also be politically pressurised and may face threat to life if their identity is revealed. Hence, freelancers may not always be able to rely completely on the stories they gather from stringers.

There are nationalistic views on water, which are difficult to ignore for freelance journalists. In several developing countries, there is active government interference while reporting on trans-boundary water issues; journalists are told what to ask and what to leave out.

There is also the threat of lawsuits which can be imposed on journalists reporting on environment and water related issues. For instance, when a journalist took pictures of the pollution in Litani River, a lawsuit was filed against him because such pictures supposedly 'threatened' tourism.

As news portals become increasingly web-based, vitriolic online comments on social media becomes another challenge faced by journalists.



Citizen journalism poses its own set of pros and cons for freelancers and the media- it can be of hindrance to regular freelancers who coordinate with stringers to report on issues and at the same time it can be a way to collaborate with staff correspondents of newspapers to report on local news.



Effective Storytelling

The participants unanimously agreed that media can be an important instrument of change. In recent times, with the abundance of new technology and multimedia has helped to narrate stories more effectively. Since water is a global issue, it becomes all the more imperative to tell stories related to water resources more imaginatively and there should be great deal of re-thinking on the story-telling model. The integration of audio, video, text and graphics is what makes a story more holistic and compelling for readers. Additionally, it also becomes imperative that there should be 'accountable' journalism rather than 'access' journalism in order to counter the rising trend of fake news.

With a focus on reporting on local issues relating to water, journalists can help to demonstrate that countries cooperating on water need not necessarily be confrontational. By reporting on stories of cooperation from the ground, media can signify that if there is already a base for cooperation, countries can use this base to further strengthen cooperation at the higher level.

Water will most certainly become the next hot button issue. In the future, the issues of utmost significance will be water quality and water availability. A good way of dealing with these issues can include the 'human element' in order to tell an engaging story. Stories narrated in local languages and dialects coupled with actual visits to the site have a deep impact on the minds of readers. It is also crucial that the journalist is not a lone individual when it comes to reporting; the entire newsroom must be involved including editors, graphic artists and others. It is also important for journalists to have a cross fertilisation of ideas and issues related to water by interacting with hydro-political experts, water engineers, policy makers and scholars.

The best part about reporting on water is that often images can do more than words. It was agreed that a great way to collaborate could be by creating an online portal wherein the participants can post audio, video and other multimedia to support and sustain the exercise undertaken by the workshop. The challenge to engage in imaginative ways to report on water is going to be a critical issue in the near future.



Experiences from Different Regions

The participants contributed their experiences of reporting on water-related issues from different regions of the world which led to an enriching discussion on the subject.

In Nepal, if journalists report on mining and destruction of environment, they are immediately termed as being 'anti-development'.

China's strategic interest in building infrastructure projects in various South-East Asian countries was also discussed which inter alia include building dams on the Indus, a hydro-power station in Bangladesh and a port in Sri Lanka.

Stories related to water in Africa are enmeshed in headlines related to land grabbing and land acquisition. For instance, in Ethiopia many companies acquire land close to Lake Tana and utilise its water for cultivation of flowers which are then shipped to Europe and other countries.

Countries in Latin America have to deal with their own unique set of problems. The water issues are diverse and there is a wide disparity in access to water. Mexico City sinks by 15 cm every year, so there is lots of coverage related with evacuation of people. The future of water issues in the dry corridor of Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala will also have to take into account the issue of migration. The principal economic activity in the trans-boundary Amazon River is mining and this

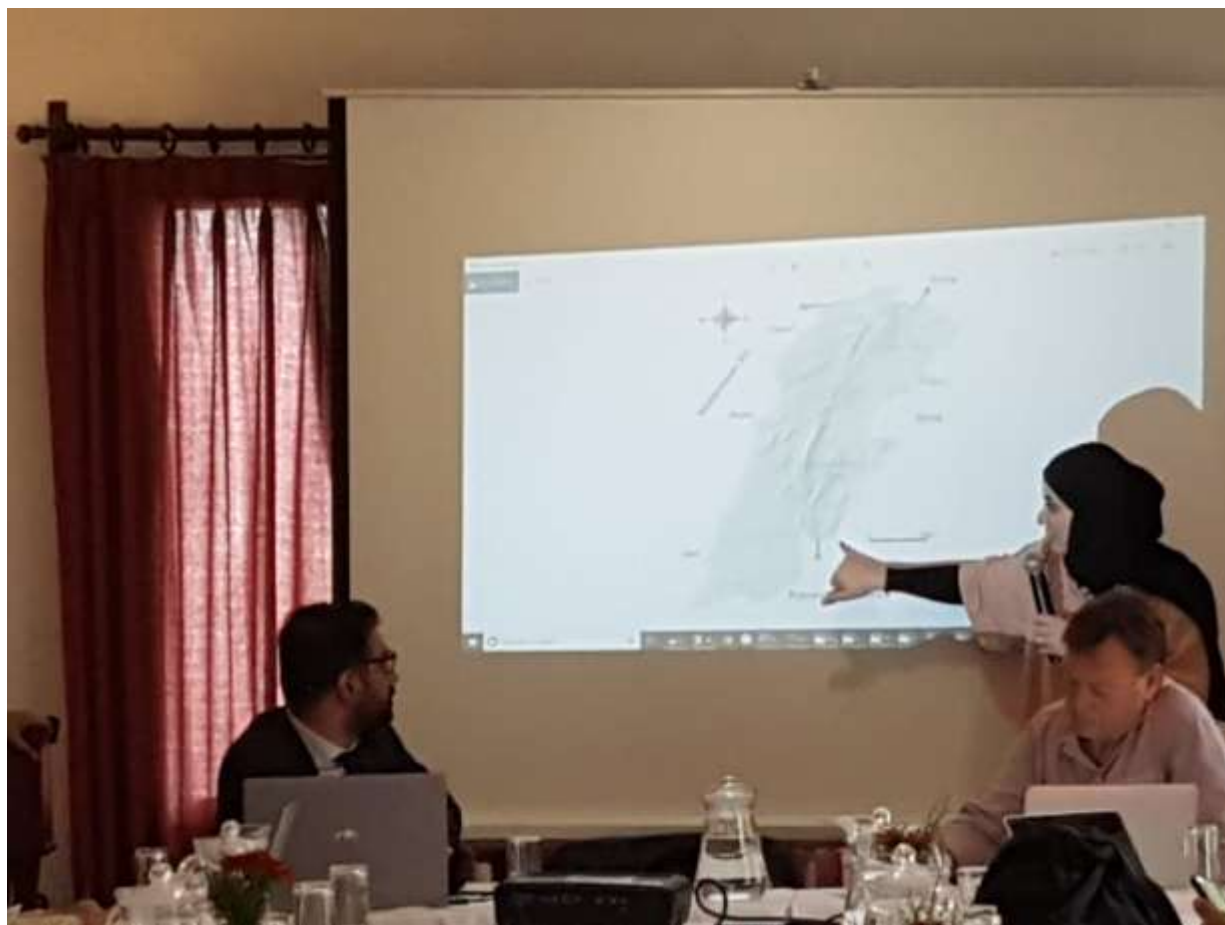
introduces mercury and other toxic chemicals into the waters of the Amazon. As a result, the indigenous peoples suffer the most. However, as air and water have no boundaries, populations living outside the forests suffer from pollution as well.

In the Middle East, the weaponisation of water by armed non-state actors coupled with the complex geo-political situation in the region only serves to enforce water as a multiplier of the conflict. In order to gain a strong foothold in the region, ISIS took control of several dams in the region such as Tabqa, Mosul, and Hadida dams.

In Lebanon, the Litani River Authority published a map in September 2019, which displays the number of people suffering from cancer who live along the banks of the Litani River in the Bekaa Valley. In one town, as many as 600 people have been detected with cancer.

The Euphrates basin is emerging as the theatre of war between the SDF, US forces and Turkish troops. Any solution to the crisis in Syria will have to take developments in the Euphrates basin into consideration.

In the US, water is seen simply as a humanitarian aid issue and nothing else. Therefore, attacks by ISIS, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab etc. on water infrastructure is seen as an isolated military incidents and not how water sustains such non-state actors.



Water and its Links to Security

In the Arctic region, there is a vast resource of minerals which has led to a race between different countries to make a claim on these resources. Russia has already begun muscle flexing in the region - they have decided to build ports and have acquired 6 nuclear powered ice breakers. The US has only two ice breakers, out of which only one is capable of breaking strenuous ice. The US and Russia have already begun to come into conflict in the Arctic and this is expected to increase as the melting of the sea ice exposes more resources and opens out sea-routes.

The role of water with regard to military bases and security establishments will become more critical with the rise in sea-levels which will compel countries like the US to relocate or even shut down coastal bases. A case in point being the Norfolk Virginia military base, the largest naval base in the US, which may have to shut down in the coming 25 years because of rise in sea-levels. The US hasn't given much thought to the crucial issue of rise in sea-levels and has been substituting strategic long term plans with interim plans by building piers. It is important to note that the question of closure of such bases will also depend on political sentiment. For instance, in the US, President Trump has increased the budget for such military bases.

A number of countries such as France, Japan, China, US, Italy all have their military bases in Djibouti to counter piracy and secure maritime interests.

In 2017, the US State Department released a report on water, wherein water was acknowledged as being a key component of national security. The report addressed the security angles related to water in broad and general terms and did not provide a comprehensive strategy to deal with the same. This report draws a lot from the 2014 report on the same subject and does not address water as being a potential source of conflict, but examples water as being a humanitarian aid issue.

Examples were also discussed on how water which is used in military operations can be used as an instrument of peace. Firstly, water is used as a tool to meet logistical operations. In Mali, the French troops require 150 litres of water per day per soldier. Sophisticated techniques and aircraft are required to transport large quantities of water across the Sahelian desert. The French army also builds wells in Mali so that water cannot be used as a bargaining tool by non-state actors. The challenge is how water can be used to manage the population on the ground in order to make people more autonomous and make them less susceptible to being controlled by non-state actors. Secondly, water as environment is used to put submarines and there is a potential that rebels could discreetly abuse water through use of submarines in the future. Thirdly, water is used as a weapon by rebels who target and destroy water resources, control the flow of river and poison wells to terrorise people. The question that arises in such situations is how to prevent water from being used as a weapon in conflicts - can it be done through diplomatic treaties or government policies? Fourthly, water also poses as a risk for the military and commandos working in the battlefield. The French military school has collaborated with WWF in order to ensure officers are given training on how to respond to water related threats. Fifthly, water is a threat. The difference between threat and risk is that a threat is deliberate whereas risk is incidental. Lastly, the threat of cyber- attacks is real, especially after the recent hacking of a database having information on dams in the US.



Positive Impact of Civil Society and Media

There are several heartening examples from the ground level in South Asia which display immense cooperation between cross-border communities. There was a dispute over the flooding of the Pandai river which intersects the Chitwan National Park in Nepal and the Valmiki National Park in India. The water panchayats of the communities living across the river got together and built dykes in order to prevent flooding, which now operate at the level of the local governments.

Whenever a flood occurred in the north bank of the Brahmaputra in Assam, the blame was immediately heaped onto Bhutan. It was on the initiative of the local people that Whatsapp messages were delivered whenever water was being released upstream, which not only saved livestock, but also enabled people downstream in India to get to safety.

The cross-border residents of the Karnali River which flows through Nepal and India have initiated an early warning system through WhatsApp in order to mitigate loss of agricultural crops. Another example is that of the Koshi River which has had a long history of floods, wherein women self-help groups get together to decide cropping patterns and the means to intimate their family if there is a flood. Additionally, communities along the Indo-Bangladesh border worked together on projects to re-populate the rivers with Hilsa fish. Such stories have been covered by the local media but not big publishing houses and the sources for such stories came from local stringers and staff

correspondents. The local media has played a major role in enabling local civil society groups to promote problem-solving interaction between upper riparian and lower riparian regions.

In the Middle East, the media played a very positive role in supporting the Tigris Consensus, an initiative for cooperation and confidence building on Tigris River between Iraq and Turkey, which began with exchanges between experts and eventually involved political leaders and government representatives. The initiative was steered by Strategic Foresight Group and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.



Views from Nepal

Since 2015, Nepal has adopted the federal structure of government and is already experiencing fights between the provinces over water. The main challenge for Nepal remains to manage its internal conflicts related to water.

Nepal is also among the first countries to start a community radio station which reports on all local issues including water issues and is extremely popular.

While trans-boundary water issues are an interesting subject matter for the media, what matters most is what happens with water at the micro level. Questions such as water supply available to all villagers assume greater significance as compared to the manner in which the Ganges River is managed.

Additionally, there is a definitive limit to the overuse of natural resources including water resources. It is not just climate change which has led to a decrease in water resources, but there are also drivers such as the misuse of technology, change in social mores, migration etc. which have led to wrong policies being formulated to tackle environmental crisis. It is here that journalism can play its role to highlight such issues and engage with stakeholders to deal with such issues.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

International Participants

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3. Mr David Duncan, Founder and CEO of Ooska News, United Kingdom
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5. Ms Gloria Dickie, National Geographic Explorer and Contributor to The Guardian, Vice and The Atlantic, Canada
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11. Mr John Andrews, Author and former editor and foreign correspondent for The Economist, Contributor to Project Syndicate, United Kingdom
12. Dr (Mrs) Marwa Osman, Anchor and producer at Press TV, Lebanon
13. Mr Mehmet Celik, Managing Editor at Daily Sabah, Turkey
14. Mr Michael Stang, Senior Author at Deutschlandfunk, Germany
15. Mr Patrick Quinn, Principal, ESPACIO Media Incubator and Contributor to the Bogota Post and The Sociable, Colombia
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18. Mr Taran Volckhausen, Contributor to National Geographic, Christian Science Monitor and Mongabay, United States of America
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