

# Fair access to scarce resources

*Demographic changes and climate change are squeezing the availability of many natural resources, heightening the imperative to improve the quality of governance*

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## Current issues

**F**air access to scarce resources has again emerged as a major issue in the current development discourse. A broad set of technical, ethical, social, ecological and economic considerations surrounds this debate. Throughout human history, people, communities, countries and even animals have fought over natural resources. When resources are scarce – be it water, land, energy or trees – competition becomes apparent. This exacerbates the stress on already fragile ecosystems and on the communities, groups and individuals who may be ill-equipped to cope with a sudden shortage. This, in turn, can lead to a breakdown of established codes of conduct, and even outright conflict. Even today, the need for these resources is a key element of geopolitical considerations.

The issue of natural resources and their growing scarcity has received considerable attention at all political levels, most significantly on the global stage, including in several UN conventions and agreements. Six of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted by the UN in September 2015, are closely related to the issue of resource scarcity.

The goals on water; food security and sustainable agriculture; energy; climate; sustainable consumption and production; and biodiversity and ecosystems all give significant attention to this subject. Other UN conventions – including the Ramsar Convention (on wetlands), the Convention

on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Convention on Biological Diversity – make references to the issue of scarce resources.

At the regional level, the African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (the Algiers Convention) adopted by the African Union (AU), which aims at ensuring the conservation, utilisation and development of soil, water, flora and faunal resources, significantly addresses the issue of resource scarcity.

Additionally, the six programme areas of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Environment Action Plan (also adopted by the AU Assembly in 2003) address the issue of resource scarcity and its governance. Certainly, the negative impacts of climate change and variability constitute a long-term driver that will likely aggravate resource scarcity and hinder access to and use of resources, resulting in mass migration and conflicts in resource-deficient communities.

## Controversies

The overarching concept of resource scarcity is principally one of an increase in demand and shortage in supply. This is largely due to the resource being non-renewable or, where it is renewable, the rate of exploitation exceeding its replenishment. Resource scarcity has been, and will therefore continue to be, at the heart of the global development discourse.

► Zam Zam refugee camp in North Darfur, Sudan. Competition for water and pastures between farmers and herders is a factor in the Darfur conflict



In a recent survey by the World Economic Forum, resource scarcity was ranked fourth in terms of expected upcoming trends. Historically, the insatiable appetite for natural resources has been led by western and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and in recent times by emerging economies such as China, Brazil and India. The increasing demand for scarce resources, particularly from Africa, has raised the

stakes for the governance of natural resources and their sustainable exploitation, fair use and equitable distribution of proceeds. The International Energy Agency's World Energy Outlook projects a rise in demand for oil of one per cent a year between now and 2030, with all of the growth in demand expected to come from non-OECD sources.

While there is strong correlation between resource scarcity and poverty, some

commentators argue that it is too simplistic and vague to say the former contributes to the latter. The contestations arise because resource scarcity is a "political (economy) issue that is much more about distributive issues and access to resources than it is about absolute resource shortages".<sup>1</sup> Another school of thought is that the problem may not be one of resource scarcity but rather resource misuse. Whatever the reality, it is undeniable that resource scarcity, whether



resulting from environmental degradation, overuse, inequitable access or politicisation of access, is a fertile ground for conflict, poverty and migration, as has been borne out in recent years.

In Africa, and as contained in the Algiers Convention, countries have a “sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant

to their environmental and developmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment”. For Africa, the imperative is therefore to harness its natural resource base as a foundation to develop its society and meet its developmental aspirations.

### Rising competition

According to WWF, 14 countries in Africa are already experiencing water stress, with 11 more set to suffer a similar fate by 2025. That means within the next decade, nearly half of Africa’s projected 1.45 billion people will face water stress or scarcity.

A June 2007 report by the UN Environment Programme suggested that the ongoing conflict in Darfur has in part been driven by the pressures arising from climate change and environmental degradation. This has been aggravated by a 30 per cent reduction in rainfall in the region over the past 40 years, with the Sahara advancing by more than a mile every year. The resulting tension between farmers and herders over disappearing pasture and declining waterholes underpins the genesis of the Darfur conflict.

Rising rural population densities in parts of Africa are profoundly affecting farming systems and the region’s economies in ways

### *The challenge is to place more emphasis on implementation and concrete action*

that are underappreciated in the current discourse on African development issues. Sub-Saharan Africa suffers from chronically overburdened water systems, which are under increasing stress from fast-growing urban areas.

Weak governments, corruption, mismanagement of resources, poor long-term investment, and a lack of environmental research and urban infrastructure only exacerbate the problem.

In some cases, the disruption or contamination of water supply in urban infrastructures and rural areas has incited domestic and cross-border violence. Incorporating water improvements into economic development is necessary to end the severe problems caused by water stress, to improve public health and to advance the economic stability of the region.

## CLIMATE IS WATER

The obvious links between water and climate have largely been ignored in international climate debates. COP21 changed that with water events organised by the French and Peruvian presidencies and in collaboration with non-state actors. Coordinated by the World Water Council, #ClimateIsWater played a key role in this process, forming an international collective of 24 organisations to speak with one voice for water.

Climate change manifests itself mainly through extreme weather events related to the water cycle, such as unpredictable rainfall, floods and droughts. Although water is ranked among the top global risks to society, ‘water’ remains invisible within the official UNFCCC negotiation, in particular the 2015 Paris Agreement. At the same time, water is mentioned in 93 per cent of the intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs), which correspond to each country’s public commitments for post-2020 climate actions under the new international agreement.

Water is, therefore, an intrinsic part of the solution to climate change, connecting policy areas, economic sectors and societies. Investment in water provides opportunities for improved access to energy and food and increases resilience to climate variability, while limiting potential costs related to water-related disasters. Moreover, actively involving the voices of women, youth and indigenous peoples, who are most often affected by climate change

impacts, is critical to ensure feasible solutions on the ground.

For continuity between COP21 and COP22, the French and Moroccan Governments and the World Water Council organised together the ‘Water Security for Climate Justice’ International Conference. This event launched a ‘Water for Africa’ call supported by over 20 ministerial delegations to elevate water politically during COP22.

Towards Marrakech and beyond, the #ClimateIsWater initiative invites you to join us to raise the profile for water within every aspect of climate discussions, since failure to address the relationship between water and climate puts our future in jeopardy.

#### #ClimateIsWater messages

- Climate change impacts water resources first and foremost.
- Water security is key to climate adaptation.
- Water underlies many low-carbon solutions.
- Urgent action is needed to incorporate water within UNFCCC processes.

For more information, please contact [climateiswater@worldwatercouncil.org](mailto:climateiswater@worldwatercouncil.org), [www.climateiswater.org](http://www.climateiswater.org)

#CLIMATE IS WATER

Regarding land, 90 per cent of Africa's surplus arable land is concentrated in a few countries, while its rural populations are highly clustered in relatively densely populated areas. In addition, median farm size is generally declining and land ownership concentration is rising, with more unsustainable forms of land intensification apparent in high-density farming areas. Meanwhile, land access remains important for absorbing youth into gainful employment.

Agricultural and rural development strategies in the region will need to anticipate more fully the implications of Africa's rapidly changing land and demographic situation. They will also need to factor in the immense challenges that mounting land pressures pose in the context of current evidence of unsustainable agricultural intensification, a rapidly rising labour force and limited non-farm job creation. These challenges are manageable but will require explicit policy actions to address the unique development challenges in densely populated rural areas.

### Governance and risk

Good governance is most critical in situations where resource scarcity is not intentional but exists because of excessive demand or over-exploitation. The adverse effects of inequitable access to scarce resources risk polarising societies, marginalising communities and affecting agriculture and food security. These impacts can have implications for peace and security as well as social cohesion. A strong correlation can be made between fair access to resources and issues of human rights and national security, implying that more attention should be given to this challenge.

At the global level, the implementation of the Paris Agreement and other related instruments should ensure that practical measures (including technical and financial) are put in place to support equitable access and sustainable use of scarce resources. Across Africa, we have seen the alarming decline in national budgets for environment and other relevant ministries, weak institutional capacity of government institutions at all levels, and

the deteriorating state of national parks and countries' natural resource base.

Urgent systemic reforms are needed, smart policies that promote and ensure: the use of appropriate technologies; the empowerment of women; the participation of the private sector; and the involvement of youth and civil society. All of these will contribute to the sustainable use of scarce resources, ensuring that everyone has equitable access to them and can share the benefits of using them. After all, these resources are the engines of development for most African countries.

Resource governance structures have been dominated by exclusive management approaches and protectionist strategies. In most countries, national parks and other

By 2025, nearly

50%

of Africa's population could face water stress



wildlife reserves have become a major source of conflict due to the protection afforded them by the state. This governance approach has pitched the state – as managers of natural resources – against communities that have historically relied on these resources to support their livelihoods.

Unfair and unequal distribution of natural resources that sees them concentrated in the hands of a privileged few have thrown countries into conflict situations. In the last decade, the top eight oil producers in Africa (in order, Nigeria, Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Equatorial Guinea) were all afflicted in one way or another by violent conflict or low-intensity civil wars. The issue of land grabs

has also seen land taken from communities without appropriate consultations or compensation. The World Bank estimates that about 40 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa has no access to an improved source of drinking water. This is despite the fact that the continent of Africa is endowed with 63 cross-border river basins that cover about two thirds of its landmass, and further strengthens the case for equitable distribution of the resources.

### Conclusion

The African continent has done reasonably well in developing policy frameworks to address the issue of fair access to scarce resources. Agenda 2063, the AU's aspirational vision for Africa's transformation, asserts the use of Africa's resources for its development. Like the NEPAD vision, it also recognises that only through inclusive governance can the continent truly achieve socio-economic transformation. Other continental strategies and programmes, including the African Mining Vision, the Environment Action Plan, Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme and the Rural Futures Programme, provide a solid framework and policy direction for Africa to maximise the use of its natural endowments.

The challenge is to place more emphasis on implementation and concrete action at all levels, with strengthening of stakeholder capacity a key requirement for success. Multilevel governance and dialogic policymaking is therefore essential in ensuring fair access and use of scarce resources. In many countries, particularly in Africa, the process of involving stakeholders is controlled by various legal and institutional structures, which invariably alienate resource communities from the management and sharing of resources. Information, knowledge-sharing and political and traditional leadership will create a conducive environment that would ensure that competition for scarce resources does not result in conflict. The time to act is now. ●

1 Daley, B. Resource scarcity and environment: Review of evidence and research gap analysis. Evidence on Demand, UK (2013) 26 pp. [DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.12774/eod\\_hd062.jul2013.daley](http://dx.doi.org/10.12774/eod_hd062.jul2013.daley)]