

Water Stress in the Cauvery Basin, South India — How current water management approaches and allocation conflict constrain reform

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Summary

This article presents insights on the state of water management in the Cauvery basin in South India and the ongoing interstate dispute concerning the allocation of the Cauvery's water between the riparian states Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. A lack of multi-level, intersectoral, and participative approaches on the one hand have led to inadequate conditions in water management and water use. On the other hand, the conflict between the two states on water allocation cannot be resolved due to strong reluctance and non-compliance by the states and a highly politicized debate. We identify some clear correlations between inadequate internal water management at the state level and the interstate dispute: the ongoing conflict constraining modernization of the system in the basin is used to justify non-action in irrigation-management reform and ties up state resources as well. Additionally, the current water-management approach does not provide for a mechanism to address the concerns and demands of stakeholders, nor does it promote dialogue between them.

Manuscript received on 2010-10-18, accepted on 2010-12-15

Keywords: India, water scarcity, water management,
water conflict, Cauvery river basin

1 Introduction

The watershed of the Cauvery River, situated in the federal states of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and the Union Territory of Puducherry in southern India, is a region strongly affected by water stress. Being a “closed” river basin, i.e., a basin in which the water use exceeds the amount of renewable water available, the river's water is heavily used — and much needed. The irrigation of almost 1.2 million hectares of agricultural land (Bohle 2004: 42) in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu requires over 90% of the Cauvery's water, mainly for the cultivation of water-intensive crops, like paddy and sugarcane (Prasad 2007: 47).

Additionally, water demands from other stakeholders and sectors are increasing, namely, the growing urban population of Bangalore and other cities that require water for drinking and household purposes, not to mention industrial users. Being completely dependent on the monsoon for replenishment, the amount of water the