

# Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India

## **Vision and Mission, Programmatic Direction, Structure and Decision Making Mechanism**

The Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India (henceforth, Forum) – a dynamic initiative of individuals and institutions – has been in existence for the last seven years. Founded by a handful of organisations that came together to document conflicts, it now has more than a hundred and fifty individuals and organisations attached to it. It has completed two phases of its work, the first centring on documentation, which saw the publication of ‘Water Conflicts in India: A Million Revolts in the Making’ – a compendium of about 70 case studies across India that brought together more than a hundred authors, and a second phase where it shifted its focus from conflict documentation to conflict resolution and prevention. As this second phase of work ends, the Forum is bringing out this vision document to outline its future work. This document is divided into three brief sections: the first describes the Forum’s vision and mission; the second outlines its programmatic direction in the near future; and the third describes its organisation.

### **1. The Forum’s Vision and Mission**

#### **The Forum's Vision**

The Forum is committed to the core values of equity, justice, environmental sustainability, efficiency of resource use, and democratisation of water governance. It recognises that water is a common pool resource, and that the brunt of water conflicts is borne by those who fall on the vulnerable side of gender, class, caste, ethnic and other divides. It is therefore important to resolve conflicts in a manner that sustains and protects the ecology and environment in general and water resources in particular, while ensuring that the poor and disadvantaged are assured of access to the water they need for their basic living and livelihood needs.

#### **The Forum’s Mission**

To achieve this vision, it is the Forum's mission to a) influence policies and actions at all levels, b) help prevent and resolve water conflicts in an environmentally and socially just manner, and c) create conditions for achieving participatory, equitable, and sustainable water use. The Forum aims to achieve this through stakeholder interactions, knowledge creation, policy advocacy, training, networking and outreach.

However, the events that are unfolding go against the grain of these beliefs. Climate change, rapid urbanisation, the wave of globalisation and privatisation, non-inclusive growth, the rising pollution caused by untreated industrial effluent and urban sewage, and the rapid escalation in fertiliser and pesticide use degrade the quality of life for the poor, affect the status of women and other disadvantaged sections, and damage the environment.

Freshwater availability is shrinking at an alarming pace. In almost all river basins, water use levels are approaching, if not exceeding, freshwater availability levels, which are themselves falling. The accumulated harm done to our environment is already manifesting in climate change, and the future is likely to be one of alternating extremes – of extreme hot and extreme cold, and of droughts and floods. Rising needs, shrinking availability and closing basins make for a deadly combination that has the potential to exacerbate water conflicts. The visible as well as not so visible water conflicts now impact all sections of society. A million revolts are in the making. It is important to take note of them and actively devise policies and actions to address them, else they can cause great loss, and even armed conflict, at the cost of the well-being of the downtrodden masses and the environment.

Conflicts are not necessarily negative. They can often lead to social change. There are conflicts that originate in the blatant injustice perpetrated on one party by the other, and these can be 'resolved' only by eliminating injustice. However, there are many other kinds of conflicts which can be resolved through mutual respect, shared learning, validated information, and agreement on social norms of allocation and use. They can be prevented through social consensus and an enabling legal and institutional framework. Moreover, all conflicts involve social, economic, and environmental costs. It is important that we minimise these costs, especially because it is the disadvantaged who pay the most.

## **2. The Forum's Programmatic Direction**

The Forum has accumulated a lot of experience over the two phases of work it has completed over the last seven years. The Forum's programme for the future takes into account its work so far, what it could and could not do, and the issues confronting the water sector in general and conflicts in particular. The Forum's programme could be divided into three parts. The first part is the core activity of the Forum which could continue through all its phases. The second is the thematically focused activity of the Forum, which may change from phase to phase. The third is the opportunistic or flexible component of the Forum's activity, which is determined not by the Forum, but by the demands placed by society at large.

### **a) Core Activity**

#### **i) Documentation and Research: Generating knowledge and perspectives**

The Forum aims to develop a better understanding of water, and better informed and inclusive public discussions so as to arrive at common enabling perceptions and positions that would facilitate a negotiated consensus. For this purpose, the Forum would undertake documentation and research of a) water conflicts, b) the norms of water allocation and use c) freshwater availability and use for different sectors and communities, d) the legal, policy and institutional frameworks at various levels around water conflicts and water, e) rapid deep-seated changes taking place in the water sector and f) the social ethnography of water use by different communities and societies.

#### **ii) Outreach, dissemination and policy advocacy**

The Forum has already accumulated a store of data, information and resources in its work over the last seven years. It is the duty of the Forum to place this store in the public domain. The Forum shall continue to expand this store and turn it into an easily accessible repository. The Forum has so far been hosted on the Web as a portlet by the India Water Portal. The Forum would establish a website of its own, and is committed to making it a channel of access to the store of information that it will place in the public domain. The Forum encourages its members to write on water conflict issues wherever possible, and to utilise all platforms to spread awareness of water conflicts. It organises national and regional workshops, conferences and public meetings on water conflict issues. It would continue to bring out policy briefs and recommendations based on its various studies. It also encourages its members to interact with policy and opinion makers on policy issues related to water conflicts.

#### **iii) Capacity building of different stakeholders**

The Forum has successfully developed and conducted training modules on understanding water and water conflicts for young researchers and CSO activists. The course contents, proceedings and source material provided at these training sessions, along with the resource persons the Forum has brought together, are valuable capacity building resources.

As a next step, the Forum aims to develop and conduct training modules targeted at different stakeholders. It will also explore more innovative forms of training, including online courses. The Forum also intends to develop a special module on legal and institutional issues that will be useful for members as well as others. It will also develop special modules aimed at legal professionals,

policy makers and legislators.

#### **iv) Backstopping of conflict resolution**

Our experience so far shows that the Forum can contribute best to conflict resolution by focusing on the backstopping of conflict resolution: supporting the process of conflict resolution through studies, developing different inclusive options and bringing them to the parties in conflict, developing conditions for negotiation, bringing the experience and learnings from other similar situations or conflicts to the table, and helping work out a middle ground without compromising on the core values of equity, sustainability and democratisation. The Forum will be alive to the conflicts on the ground, and utilise whatever means it is capable of to intervene in specific conflicts to the best of its ability in order to backstop their resolution, and in some selected cases, even to actively engage in their resolution if feasible.

#### **v) Networking**

The Forum itself is a network of individuals and organisations with diverse backgrounds, skills and capabilities working on water related issues and conflicts in the country. However, more and more networks and organisations are beginning to work on issues and conflicts surrounding water and rivers. The Forum believes that it seriously needs to network with these other groups, organisations and networks. In all such networking, the Forum would attempt to look at the outputs from the lens of water conflict, and to assess what can be adopted/adapted to suit the purposes of conflict resolution and avoidance.

#### **b) Thematic activity**

The second part of the Forum's programme is intensive work focused on relevant themes. These themes may change from time to time in response to exigencies. This can also broad base the Forum's work, as the thematic activity will be anchored by different individuals and organisations acting as theme leaders. At present, the Forum visualises five themes for its activity in the third phase of its work, namely, 1) Right to water and sanitation (RTWS), 2) Conflicts and competition around groundwater resources, 3) Agricultural and industrial allocation and use, 4) Environmental flows within river basins and 5) Climate change and access to water - implications and potential of water laws.

#### **c) 'Opportunistic' interventions**

It was realised during the earlier phases that water conflicts come up suddenly and in an unforeseen manner. They become urgent issues that may need prompt intervention on various scales. Such developments cannot be foreseen. The Forum should also have an uncommitted flexible fund for such 'opportunistic' interventions.

### **3. The Forum's Structure and its Decision Making Mechanism**

#### **Membership**

The Forum is a loose entity of individuals and organisations with no formal rules for membership. However, it has also been decided within the Forum that this vision and mission document including its programmatic direction and its structure and decision making processes shall comprise of the values and vision shared by its members.

The secretariat would communicate periodically with members, keep them informed of important developments, and share the annual reports and all important outputs. The Forum website would be an important means for communication between the members, the steering committee and the secretariat.

Efforts shall be made to bring the weight of the Forum to bear on its efforts. The Forum may take

up issues and arrive at common, agreed positions and interventions and try to spread the responsibility of activity on these issues as widely as possible. On such issues, the Steering Committee would prepare a broad draft that it would circulate, discuss as widely as possible, and finalise with due sensitivity to the difficulties of arriving at common positions across the diverse range of people that the Forum represents.

It has been the practice at the end of each phase of activity to call together as many members as possible and discuss the programmatic direction as well as organisational issues. This practice would continue, and larger meetings would provide the mandate for the work of the next phase.

### **Steering Committee**

The Steering Committee (SC) oversees the programmes of the Forum. All major decisions, including accepting funds, are taken by the SC. The SC would consist of about 11 to 15 members and would be representative, to the extent possible, of geography, issues, gender, etc. Its duration would be about 3 to 4 years depending on the duration of a particular phase. The SC would be reconstituted at the end of each phase (and the beginning of the next phase) taking into account the suggestions from the larger meeting/workshop held at the conclusion of the phase. The attempt would be ensure that about half of the members are newly inducted and the importance of thematic activity as an instrument for greater and wider involvement of members is given due consideration. Efforts would be made to have stronger and organic links between the SC and the general membership.

### **The Advisory Committee**

The Forum has an Advisory Committee (AC) of distinguished individuals from the water sector. The main role of the AC is to provide intellectual inputs, support policy advocacy work, and lend visibility and credibility to Forum's work.

### **The Secretariat**

The day to day activities of the Forum are handled by its Secretariat. Since the Forum is not a registered body, the Secretariat needs to be housed by a formal institution. Currently, the Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM), Pune houses the Secretariat, and is the formal holder of the projects that the Forum carries out. In addition, the work is carried out through the state centres/initiatives, while thematic activities are undertaken under suitable arrangements.