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Mainstreaming water governance amid UP's possibilities, challenges

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Water is the basis for life in all forms and central to economic growth and sustainable development. Uttar Pradesh poses a unique combination of possibilities and challenges, mainly due to its large size and availability of water resources. The risk of climate change is going to add an additional layer of complexity in the overall water governance framework. Water being a state subject under the Indian Constitution, the state has a prominent role to play in not only advancing the initiatives by the central government but also by strengthening water resources management focused on conservation and efficient utilization. While the state is blessed with a rich water endowment, being a large agrarian state, it is faced with tremendous water management challenges due to the large size of the urban and rural population and developmental aspirations.

Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) at the river basin level is therefore required for the success of water governance and management authorities. There are eight large river basins in the state, and the resource dynamics need to be understood from all perspectives to mainstream IWRM into practice. Moreover, it is also imperative to regularly document the spatial diversity of water systems in the state and their inter-linkages with availability to plan the future course of action. Pursuant to the global and national policy mandates on IWRM, several national initiatives such as the Jal Jeevan Mission, Atal Bhujal Yojna and Har Khet Ko Pani targeting drinking water, groundwater management and irrigation water supply, respectively, are being implemented by the state government. The state is attempting a number of water policy and institutional measures for addressing water scenarios. It is also evident that institutional and regulatory challenges could constrain the mainstreaming of IWRM at the state and local levels. IWRM is a well-known concept in the field of water governance. Based on principles of inclusion, sustainability, and integration, this concept has gained momentum in the face of increasing water scarcity.

Creating a roadmap in water management requires a fair amount of accurate and reliable hydrological data. And in case of IWRM, basin mapping based on iterative systems of measurements is necessary to obtain accurate data to base future plans on. Secondly, these plans should ideally be combinations of modern innovative technologies with traditional know-how. This would certainly enable policymakers to implement effective water management without disrupting the natural hydrological systems.

Similarly, adaptation to climate change is even more important to frame future plans and policies; especially in drought-prone areas like Bundelkhand. There is a deep need to involve all stakeholders, even private players, in attempts to make water policies that are resilient in the face of shortages. Doing so can enable knowledge sharing regarding best practices of water conservation in various fields that may have wider applications. On the other hand, pollution of existing water bodies also needs to be curbed. This requires a phased approach including establishing effective wastewater treatment plants at various levels where water is used and disposed. The state also needs to frame policy and guidelines on water reuse for effective application of a large amount of water that goes in our natural systems.

IWRM in UP means that we cannot overlook groundwater usage patterns across the state, assess the ecological, economic, and social efficiency it brings to the state and devise both supply and demand side methods that can increase the efficiency. Achieving water supply connections through household tap connections in different regions of the state under schemes such as the Jal Jeevan Mission, efficiency of delivery, widespread metering for establishing better tariff structures, and creating largescale water harvesting systems need to be some of the strategic focus points while considering IWRM.

This concept warrants a wide range of actions; from revising subsidy schemes to encouraging crop diversification and every such strategy in between. Technological interventions that can help achieve the underlined objectives also need to be leveraged as policy instruments.

(Venkatesh Dutta is a professor at BBAU, Lucknow, and Shawahiq Siddiqui is an environmental lawyer)