



Principles for Sustainable Water Management: Insights from Global Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the significance of water as an environmental resource having both public and economic value. We begin with a discussion of global water concerns that Sustainable Water Management can address. This paper defines the notion and discusses its political and economic implications. Developing a sustainable water price structure is another requirement for long-term water management. These include equitable water resource distribution, integrated water resource management (IWRM), conservation and efficiency, stakeholder participation, water valuation, and environmental protection. The study underlines the importance of a balanced strategy that views water as both a social and economic resource. It also emphasizes the significance of good governance, transparent policymaking, and adaptable solutions that respond to shifting environmental and societal needs. This study proposes that long-term water security and resilience can be accomplished by connecting water management policies with sustainability principles, such as those expressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals



(particularly SDG 6). The study concludes that only by adhering to these guiding principles will we ensure the availability and quality of water for present and future generations. Our conclusion is that effective water resource management requires a pragmatic approach that prioritizes cost recovery and efficient revenue management, incorporating the sustainable development goal of universal access to basic water and sanitation.

Introduction:

Water is a crucial environmental factor for a nation's long-term growth, as it is the most essential component of life. Proper water management is crucial for achieving sustainable development, including growth, social and economic development, poverty reduction, equity, and sustainable environmental services, all of which contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Improving water management, policy, and allocation procedures is necessary to meet societal and environmental needs and address competition for water resources. To address current water sector challenges, it is necessary to plan for water resources, assess accessibility and needs, change or expand existing reservoirs, prioritise water demand management, strike a balance between equity and efficiency, address insufficient judicial and institutional frameworks, and address the financial burden of aging infrastructure.

Water is an essential natural resource that supports life, economic progress, and environmental balance. As the world's population grows and climate change worsens, the demand for safe, dependable, and easily accessible water increases. However, mismanagement and overexploitation of water resources have resulted in increased water scarcity, pollution, and conflict in many regions of the globe. These challenges highlight the crucial need for a more responsible and forward-thinking approach to water governance one that protects the long-term viability of both water supply and quality. Sustainable water management is based on a set of guiding principles that include environmental, economic, and social considerations. These principles emphasize the value of fair access, efficient use, environmental protection, stakeholder participation, and robust policy frameworks. Importantly, they recognise water not just as a fundamental human right, but also as an economic good that must be carefully managed to ensure equal distribution and long-term sustainability.

This talk will look at the underlying concepts that underpin sustainable water management and how they can be used in policy and practice. By investigating frameworks such as implemented Water Resources



Management (IWRM), cost-recovery pricing mechanisms, ecosystem protection, and community participation, the study provides a full understanding of how sustainability can be implemented into water governance. The study adds to the global discussion about achieving water security and meeting Sustainable Development Goal 6: ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Literature Review:

The conception of sustainable water operation has evolved over time, driven by the environmental, profitable, and social aspects of water administration. The exploration underlines the significance of comprehensive, indifferent, and participatory approaches to icing long- term water security and adaptability in the face of rising demand and climate change.

- Integrated Water coffers Management (IWRM) is a generally used conception for sustainable water governance. The Global Water Partnership (2000) defines IWRM as” a process which promotes the coordinated development and operation of water, land, and related coffers.”Scholars similar as Biswas (2004) have blamed IWRM for being overly romantic, yet it remains a crucial reference for connecting water operation with environmental and social pretensions. According to Pahl- Wostl(2007), adaptive governance andcross-sector collaboration are critical for successful IWRM. Water equity has been recognized in the literature as a critical component of sustainability. Mehta (2006) explores the political economy of water availability, particularly in the Global South, where underprivileged people frequently confront water scarcity. The UN General Comment No. 15 (2002) supports the human right to water while emphasizing the ethical and legal imperatives for equitable distribution. These perspectives are shared by scholars such as Bakker (2010), who investigates the commodification of water and its consequences for social justice.
- Economic instruments are essential for sustainable water management. Rogers, de Silva, and Bhatia (2002) suggest a water pricing structure that includes full cost recovery, which takes into account the environmental and opportunity costs of water. While efficiency pricing can encourage conservation, it must be weighed against cost to prevent alienating low-income consumers. According to OECD (2010) reports, sustainable financing is crucial for infrastructure maintenance and service expansion.
- The ecological dimension of water management has received a great deal of attention. Postel and Richter (2003) advocate for the preservation of environmental flows in rivers and wetlands to



promote biodiversity and ecosystem services. UNEP and the Ramsar Convention are promoting the use of terms such as “ecological integrity” and “nature-based solutions” in water policy debate. Dudgeon et al. (2006) emphasize the fragility of freshwater ecosystems and the importance of conservation-oriented management.

- Ostrom (1990), as well as other authors such as Agarwal and Narain (1999), argue that community participation improves the effectiveness of sustainable resource management. Many sections of Asia and Africa have successfully implemented Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM), Water User Associations (WUAs), and decentralized government. Empirical research from India (Shah, 2009) and Latin America supports the notion that local stewardship and expertise improve accountability and resilience.
- Despite a solid theoretical foundation, real-world application of sustainable water management frequently presents substantial problems. According to the World Bank (2020), obstacles include institutional fragmentation, insufficient finance, a lack of political commitment, and poor data management. Climate change creates unpredictability, necessitating adaptive policy and strong monitoring systems. Scholars advocate for a multilevel governance model that combines local realities with national and global agendas.

Material and methods:

This study employs a qualitative research design, including a thorough evaluation of secondary data sources. To investigate and examine the concepts of sustainable water management, data were gathered from a variety of academic journals, government publications, international organization reports, and case studies. Databases such as ScienceDirect, JSTOR, World Bank studies, UN-Water publications, and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) policy briefs were among the primary sources. The literature was reviewed to discover current ideas, frameworks, and practical applications relevant to water management. In addition to worldwide references, the study included country-specific case studies from India, South Africa, Australia, and the Netherlands, chosen for their diverse approaches to implementing sustainable water policies. These cases provided insight into various institutional, environmental, and socioeconomic circumstances. A thematic analysis was used to categorize the data based on basic values such equity, integrated management, environmental sustainability, economic efficiency, and participatory governance. This strategy allowed for the discovery of repeating patterns, problems, and policy implications across multiple contexts, which contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable water management strategies.

**Case Studies:**

This part provides a comparative comparison of four countries: India, South Africa, Australia, and the Netherlands, to help readers understand how the concepts of sustainable water management are put into practice. Each case demonstrates several approaches to incorporating equality, environmental sustainability, economic efficiency, and participatory governance into water resource management.

- **India:**

Community Participation and Groundwater Management India is under significant water stress as a result of over reliance on groundwater, growing urbanization, and uneven distribution of water resources. Several initiatives have responded by incorporating community-based water governance ideas. The Atal Bhujal Yojana, a World Bank-supported initiative, focuses on participatory groundwater management through community involvement, data sharing, and local decision making. States such as Gujarat and Rajasthan have also pioneered decentralized water harvesting methods, such as check dams and percolation tanks, which are administered by local water users' associations. While implementation varies by region, these projects represent a trend toward more integrated and equitable water management.

- **South Africa: Equity and Legislative Reform**

Post-apartheid South Africa has made tremendous progress in promoting equity in water governance. The National Water Act of 1998 established a rights-based approach by classifying water a public resource under state trusteeship. It emphasizes water for fundamental human needs and environmental conservation over other purposes. Catchment Management Agencies (CMAs) were formed to encourage community involvement and decentralized decision-making. Despite these progressive measures, difficulties remain, including administrative delays, infrastructure shortfalls, and socioeconomic disparities. Nonetheless, legal framework of South Africa is seen as a model for balancing social fairness and sustainability.

- **Australia: Basin-Wide Integrated Management**

Murray-Darling Basin Plan of Australia is an example of large-scale integrated water resource management. Faced with diminishing river health and over-allocation, the Australian government implemented a basin-wide strategy that balances environmental, agricultural, and urban objectives. The plan outlines environmental water allocations, stakeholder discussions, and market-based methods such



as water trading. Scientific monitoring and adaptive management are essential for the plan's success. Despite opposition from some regional stakeholders, the plan proves the efficacy of IWRM when supported by strong institutions and data-driven policies.

- **The Netherlands: Technological Innovation and Public Participation**

The Netherlands is world-renowned for its advanced water governance. Water management is considered a national issue because a substantial amount of the country's land is below sea level. The country employs a combination of technological innovation (e.g., flood barriers, smart irrigation) and public participation through "water boards"—decentralized, democratically elected institutions dating back centuries. These boards oversee water quality, quantity, and safety at the regional level, demonstrating how participatory government may be institutionalized and digitally integrated. The Dutch model demonstrates how long-term planning, community participation, and innovation may coexist successfully.

Principles of Sustainable Water Management:

Sustainable water management is driven by a set of interconnected concepts aimed at balancing human needs, economic progress, and environmental sustainability. These principles serve as the framework for policy development, planning, and implementation in water governance across multiple regions. Drawing on worldwide best practices and case studies, the following concepts are critical to attaining long-term water security and fairness.

1. **Integrated Water Resources Management(IWRM):** Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) is a broad approach that encourages the coordinated development and management of water, land, and other resources. The goal is to maximize social and economic welfare equally while preserving the viability of critical ecosystems. IWRM promotes collaboration across sectors and administrative borders to ensure that water is managed holistically. It entails examining water supply, demand, and competing applications while taking into account the interdependence of surface water, groundwater, and ecosystems. Implementing IWRM promotes economic growth, environmental protection, and social fairness.
2. **Water: A Public Good and Economic Resource:** Sustainable water management recognizes water as both a fundamental human right and an economic resource. This dual recognition indicates that everyone should have access to water, especially for fundamental requirements such as drinking, sanitation, and hygiene. At the same time, water must be treated as an economic good, with pricing



mechanisms that reflect scarcity and encourage effective use. Governments and institutions can encourage conservation, decrease waste, and better allocate water by putting an economic value to it. However, any economic model must ensure that affordability and equity are maintained.

3. **Social Inclusion and Equity:** A key component of sustainable water management is equity. It calls for equitable access to safe and clean water for all people and communities, irrespective of gender, socioeconomic background, or place of residence. The demands of excluded groups, including rural communities, indigenous people, and the urban poor, are guaranteed to be included in planning and decision-making through inclusive water governance. Water management becomes more socially sustainable and adaptable to a range of requirements by reducing disparities and encouraging involvement.
4. **Preventing Pollution and Preserving Water Quality:** Sustainable water use requires maintaining water quality. Freshwater supplies are degraded by pollution from untreated sewage, plastic waste, industrial discharge, and agricultural runoff, which also poses major health and environmental hazards. Pollution prevention must be the top priority of effective water management, which includes wastewater treatment, environmental regulation enforcement, and the advancement of cleaner production technology. Maintaining water quality also heavily depends on educating the public about the effects of water contamination and promoting responsible behavior.
5. **Ecosystem Method:** The wellbeing of natural ecosystems is inextricably linked to water management. Important functions including flood control, water purification, and biodiversity habitat are provided by rivers, wetlands, lakes, and aquifers. The ecosystem approach places a strong emphasis on the necessity of preserving natural fluxes that enable these processes. In order to prevent overexploitation and deterioration of aquatic ecosystems, this principle promotes conservation measures, habitat restoration, and sustainable land-use planning. Therefore, ecological factors must be taken into account at every level of planning and execution for sustainable water management.
6. **Participatory Governance:** Participatory governance guarantees that water management is equitable, democratic, and transparent. It entails including stakeholders government agencies, civil society, the commercial sector, and local communities in all phases of decision-making. Such teamwork improves accountability, builds trust, and uses local knowledge. Community-based water management efforts have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing service delivery, boosting compliance with water rules, and assuring long-term viability. Participation also improves conflict resolution in situations where competing consumers share water resources.



7. **Effective Water Use and Demand Management:** Given the rising shortage of water, it is critical to improve water use efficiency. This theory aims to reduce water losses and optimize water use across industries. In agriculture, efficient irrigation methods such as drip and sprinkler systems can greatly reduce water consumption. Water recycling and reuse can help industries minimize their reliance on fresh water. In the home, water-saving equipment and public awareness initiatives can help to save. Demand-side management measures contribute to reducing pressure on water resources, lowering costs, and extending water supply for future generations.
8. **Climate Resilience and Risk Management** Climate change has a substantial impact on water resources, increasing droughts, floods, and seasonal unpredictability. Sustainable water management must consequently include climate resilience and disaster risk reduction. This includes climate-sensitive infrastructure design, early warning systems, and adaptable water allocation procedures. Building resilience also entails safeguarding natural buffers such as wetlands and floodplains, which lessen climate impacts. Integrated techniques assist communities in adapting to changing water circumstances and reducing vulnerability to climate-related water insecurity.
9. **Legal and Institutional Frameworks:**

Strong legal and institutional structures are essential for the governance and enforcement of water policies. Clear laws and regulations ensure that water rights are defined, responsibilities are assigned, and violations are penalized. Institutional coordination at local, regional, and national levels prevents duplication and gaps in service delivery. Decentralization of water management powers to local authorities often improves responsiveness and accountability. Legal frameworks must also address issues like transboundary water sharing, groundwater regulation, and environmental protection.
10. **Capacity Development, Research, and Education:** Knowledge and innovation are essential components of sustainable water management. Capacity building entails teaching water professionals, government officials, and community leaders about technical, legal, and managerial issues. Research institutions help by creating new technologies, evaluating water availability, and modeling future scenarios. Public education promotes conservation and ethical water use. Investing in human and institutional capacity makes water management systems more adaptable, informed, and robust to future challenges.

Current Challenges in Global Water Management:

Despite its crucial importance, water resources around the world are under unprecedented stress. Several places are already experiencing significant water shortages as a result of population growth, unsustainable farming methods, urban expansion, industrial pollution, and increasingly irregular weather



patterns caused by climate change. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN), over 2 billion people live in countries with significant water stress, and over one-third of the world's population does not have access to safe drinking water.

The overuse and poor management of freshwater resources is one of the most urgent problems. Water is being extracted more quickly than it can be naturally restored in many locations, which is causing aquifer depletion, lake and river drying up, and long-term ecological harm. Water quality is also seriously deteriorated by pollution from industrial discharge, untreated sewage, and agricultural runoff, which poses serious health and environmental hazards. Aging infrastructure, insufficient water system investment, and wasteful water use in industries like agriculture which uses around 70% of the world's freshwater withdrawals all contribute to this predicament. Adding to these difficulties is the absence of efficient governance structures. Many nations still rely on disjointed, antiquated, or ineffectively implemented water policies that do not take economic, social, and environmental factors into account. Furthermore, institutional flaws including inadequate finance, poor inter-sectoral coordination, low stakeholder participation, and corruption make water management initiatives even less successful. The over-extraction of freshwater from subsurface and surface sources is another significant issue. Aquifers that have taken thousands of years to create are being depleted as a result of groundwater withdrawals occurring at unsustainable rates in many arid and semi-arid locations. Wells run empty, agricultural production declines, and access disputes escalate as these subterranean reservoirs run out. Along with problems with quantity, extensive contamination is also lowering the quality of water supplies. Numerous factors contribute to water pollution, such as plastic litter entering water bodies, industrial waste including heavy metals and hazardous chemicals, home sewage, and agricultural runoff that is high in fertilizers and pesticides. The excessive growth of algae in lakes and rivers, known as eutrophication, is caused by nutrient contamination, which is primarily caused by agricultural runoff. Aquatic life may not be able to survive in dead zones created by this phenomenon. Due to a lack of wastewater treatment infrastructure and lax enforcement of environmental standards, industrial pollution frequently goes untreated in many low- and middle-income nations. Along with problems with quantity, extensive contamination is also lowering the quality of water supplies. Numerous factors contribute to water pollution, such as plastic litter entering water bodies, industrial waste including heavy metals and hazardous chemicals, home sewage, and agricultural runoff that is high in fertilizers and pesticides. The excessive growth of algae in lakes and rivers, known as eutrophication, is caused by nutrient contamination, which is primarily caused by agricultural runoff. Aquatic life may not be able to survive in dead zones created by this phenomena. Due to a lack of wastewater treatment infrastructure and lax



enforcement of environmental standards, industrial pollution frequently goes untreated in many low- and middle-income nations.

Water management is a significant and changing challenge as a result of climate change. Changes in precipitation patterns, glacier melting, higher evaporation, and more frequent and severe droughts and floods are all fundamentally altering the hydrological cycle. The availability and dependability of water resources are directly impacted by these changes.

For example, glacial retreat is causing lower flow in many areas that depend on rivers supplied by glaciers. In other regions, such as the Horn of Africa, Australia, and portions of India and Brazil, recurrent droughts have been brought on by changed monsoon patterns or protracted dry spells. Harvest failures, decreased hydropower production, and increased water insecurity are the results of these occurrences.

Conclusion:

Water is one of the most important resources for life, economic development, and environmental health. However, overuse, pollution, population growth, urban expansion, and climate change are all putting increasing strain on this essential resource around the world. Throughout this study on “Principles for Sustainable Water Management: Insights from Global Case Studies,” it has become obvious that, while the difficulties are complicated and multi-layered, a route to sustainability does exist based on strong principles and guided by real-world experiences. The core principles of sustainable water management investigated in this study such as integrated water resources management (IWRM), equity and inclusion, water use efficiency, climate resilience, pollution control, institutional governance, economic sustainability, community participation, policy coherence, and technological innovation have demonstrated their relevance in a variety of global contexts. These principles, rather than abstract goals, have shown to be useful tools for guiding water systems toward sustainability, especially when implemented in a coordinated and context-sensitive manner. The multinational case studies explored in this paper provided valuable insights into how these ideas are applied, altered, and challenged in different contexts. Singapore’s “Four National Taps” policy exemplifies a diverse and interconnected water supply system that relies on technology, public trust, and long-term planning. Australia’s Murray-Darling Basin Plan exemplifies both the benefits and challenges of managing shared water resources across nations. In South Africa, post-apartheid legal reforms founded on the idea of “water is life” show how rights-based methods might assist redress past disparities in water access.



Although it still confronts major challenges in terms of enforcement, community involvement, and interdepartmental coordination, India's Jal Shakti Abhiyan demonstrates a national level mobilization for water conservation. The Netherlands has emerged as a global leader in water resilience and infrastructure innovation thanks to its sophisticated delta planning and adaptable measures. Similar lessons about the possibilities and constraints of creative, inclusive, and long-term water governance systems can be learned from California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), Peru's payments for ecosystem services (PES), and Kenya's devolved water governance.

Many obstacles still exist in spite of the diverse range of initiatives and advancements. Sustainable water management is nevertheless hampered by fragmented governance structures, misaligned policies, a lack of data, political meddling, inadequate funding, fast urbanization, and enduring inequalities. With its ability to alter hydrological patterns, increase the frequency and intensity of droughts and floods, and need immediate planning and infrastructure adaptation, climate change continues to pose a serious danger. Particularly concerning is the depletion of groundwater in agriculturally intensive areas like northern India and the American West, which is a result of unsustainable extraction methods fueled by antiquated incentives and insufficient regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, due to limited participation in decision-making processes and unequal access to water services, vulnerable groups especially women, Indigenous communities, and those residing in informal settlements frequently bear the brunt of these issues.

Although international frameworks such as the Paris Climate Agreement, the Sendai Framework, and the Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) of the United Nations offer useful guidance and oversight mechanisms, their efficacy ultimately rests on their local application. Despite having a solid conceptual foundation and widespread support, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) still faces operational challenges, particularly in areas with limited administrative and financial resources. Furthermore, concentrating only on infrastructure investment has frequently ignored the necessity of maintenance systems, governance change, and community empowerment all of which are critical for long-term operation.

Success instead depends on local communities' active involvement, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems, and the empowerment of those most impacted by water scarcity and poor management. Citizen participation and community stewardship show up as effective levers for attaining sustainability. The participation of local stakeholders improves not just the success of implementation but also social cohesion and cultural relevance, as seen in Nepal's community-managed irrigation systems,



Mexico's participatory groundwater governance models, or the traditional water-sharing practices in Andean villages. These instances also demonstrate how successful and contextually grounded hybrid models can be produced by fusing traditional ecological knowledge with scientific research and policy-making. Furthermore, decentralized governance models especially when combined with financial autonomy, technical assistance, and legal authority have frequently shown themselves to be more responsive and accountable than highly centralized water agencies. Looking ahead, the field of water management is changing due to a number of revolutionary trends. Efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness are being enhanced by technological innovation, such as blockchain for water rights, AI-driven forecasts, digital water metering, and remote sensing. Wetland restoration, reforestation, green roofs, and urban stormwater capture are examples of nature-based solutions that present viable paths for increasing biodiversity and resilience. Cities are working toward zero-waste targets and less reliance on freshwater thanks to circular water economies, which encourage the recycling and reuse of water within industrial and urban systems.

Recognizing the interdependence of sectors and promoting coordinated planning to reduce trade-offs and promote synergies, the water-energy-food nexus approach is gaining traction.

There is an urgent need for a number of foundational activities notwithstanding promising developments. To guarantee comprehensive and successful plans, policymakers must give coherence across water, agriculture, climate, energy, and land policies top priority. Investing in institutional and community capacity building is crucial to giving stakeholders the skills and information they need to manage water in a sustainable manner. Economic tools that can offer the appropriate incentives for conservation include pricing schemes, environmental fines, and subsidies for water-efficient technologies. The incubation and scaling of context-specific technologies and behaviors require the support of research and development ecosystems.

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