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Water Governance in Iran: From Institutional Failures to Cascading Risk Crises

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Abstract

The water crisis in Iran has reached a stage at which it can no longer be explained solely by reference to low precipitation or climate change. Nevertheless, the critical question remains why, despite the abundance of plans, policy documents, and expert warnings, water governance in Iran has remained incapable of containing the escalating cycle of drought and water scarcity. Most existing analyses have emphasized only a single dimension of the crisis. At the same time, the absence of an integrated framework for the simultaneous examination of institutional, policy, and implementation dimensions has prevented a coherent investigation of the structural roots of the crisis. The objective of this study is to provide a three-level analysis of water governance in Iran in order to examine how deficiencies in decision-making, policy formulation, and implementation interact with one another to create conditions for the reproduction of the crisis. The research is conducted using a conceptual analysis approach and a three-level governance model consisting of macro-level decision-making, meso-level policy formulation, and operational implementation, drawing upon the literature on water governance, policy failure, and risk governance as the basis for evaluation. This model enables the interconnected analysis of key elements such as institutional misalignment, inappropriate policy instruments, the absence of a risk-oriented approach, and the persistent gap between expert knowledge and decision-making structures. The findings indicate that the water crisis in Iran is the simultaneous outcome of three categories of factors: institutional inefficiency at the macro level, incompatibility between policies and territorial capacities at the meso level, and weak implementation capacity and risk management at the operational level. On this basis, without structural reconfiguration across these three levels and a transition toward integrated and risk-oriented governance, it will not be possible to alter the trajectory of the crisis and achieve sustainable water security.

Keywords: water governance, policy failure, risk management, drought, water stress.

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How does water governance failure in Iran lead to the reproduction of cascading water crises?

Extended Abstract

This critical review report, focusing on the water crisis in Iran, argues that the persistence and intensification of this crisis cannot be explained solely by natural factors such as low precipitation or climate change; rather, its primary roots lie in the structural deficiencies of the water governance system. Adopting an analytical-critical approach, the present review challenges dominant frameworks used to explain the water crisis and demonstrates that a one-dimensional focus on climatic or technical factors has led to the neglect of institutional, policy, and implementation linkages in the formation of the crisis.

In the main body of the review, the limitations of prevailing approaches to water crisis analysis are first examined, followed by an emphasis on the necessity of adopting a multi-level and integrated perspective. To this end, the report employs a three-level analytical model, comprising macro-level decision-making, meso-level policy formulation, and operational-level implementation, to systematically examine the mechanisms through which the water crisis is reproduced. This analytical framework enables the simultaneous assessment of factors such as institutional misalignment, incompatibility between policy instruments and territorial capacities, weaknesses in risk-oriented approaches, and the persistent gap between expert knowledge and decision-making structures.

The findings of the review indicate that the water crisis in Iran is the result of the concurrent interaction of three categories of factors: institutional inefficiency at the macro level, leading to unstable and sectorally fragmented decision-making; misalignment between policies and ecological and spatial capacities at the meso level; and weak implementation capacity and risk management at the operational level. These conditions have caused each climatic shock, rather than serving as an opportunity for course correction, to intensify the cycle of crisis, such that even periods of above-average precipitation are unable to generate sustainable water security.

In conclusion, the report argues that without structural reconfiguration across all three levels of governance and a transition toward integrated and risk-oriented governance, it will not be possible to contain the water crisis or alter its trajectory toward sustainability.

The water crisis in Iran is not a temporary or isolated event; rather, it constitutes part of a broader pattern of risk management failure, planning deficiencies, and the inability of the governance system to effectively address interconnected (cascading) crises.The water crisis in Iran is the simultaneous outcome of three categories of factors: institutional inefficiency at the macro level, incompatibility between policies and territorial capacities at the meso level, and weak implementation capacity and risk management at the operational level.
Failure in problem diagnosis, misalignment between policies and ecological capacities, and the absence of risk governance have resulted in each climatic shock leading to the reproduction of the crisis, such that even wet periods are unable to generate sustainable water security.Without structural reconfiguration across these three levels and a transition toward integrated and risk-oriented governance, altering the trajectory of the crisis and achieving sustainable water security will not be possible.

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