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Cooperation counts in South Asia



IIASA's analysis indicates that a cross-boundary and multi-sectoral approach could lower costs of sustainable development in the Indus River Basin

Countries in South Asia could reduce costs, soil pollution and water stress through cooperation on the management and development of water resources, electricity and food production, according to research from IIASA, the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis.

The study examined food, energy, water and climate change in South Asia's Indus River Basin, an area that includes parts of Afghanistan, China, India and Pakistan, which is home to 250m people and is already seeing the impacts of climate change.

"The Indus basin countries are not currently on track to avoid critical issues—water scarcity in particular," said IIASA researcher Adriano Vinca, who led the study published in *Nature Sustainability*. "Under a business-as-usual scenario, the water demands in the Indus Basin will exceed the available water resources by 2050 and put the

system at risk of collapse. This risk could be exacerbated by climate change."

The study estimated that US\$10bn would be needed per year to mitigate water scarcity issues and ensure improved access to resources by 2050. However, collaborative policies could shrink this amount to US\$2bn a year, it said.

"Downstream regions would benefit the most, with reduced food and energy costs and better water access, while upstream regions would benefit from new energy investments," the IIASA stated. "Using integrated water-energy-land analysis, this study quantifies the potential benefits for novel avenues to sustainable development arising from greater international cooperation."

"Most research in the region has focused on just one country, or just one sector," said energy programme director Keywan Riahi. "Challenges like water scarcity, drought and temperature

extremes, however, don't stop at national borders, and the sectors are intimately interconnected."

The researchers acknowledged the challenges of implementing such policies given the political and sectoral realities, in spite of the major benefits for all countries.

The study was conducted by scientists from China, India and Pakistan, as well as Austria, Canada and the US, as part of the Integrated Solutions for Water, Energy and Land (ISWEL) project, which began in 2017.

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