

# What happens if groundwater is depleted?

The case of Balochistan, Pakistan

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# What happens if groundwater is depleted?

## The case of Balochistan, Pakistan

Written by Frank van Steenberg, Allah Bakhsh Kaisarani, Niamat Ullah Khan and Mohammed Shamshad Gohar

## 1. Introduction

The depletion of groundwater is a specter presented for many parts of the world that rely on the unmanaged use of groundwater. Based on research visits over a twenty-year period this magazine describes how the alluvial aquifer was exhausted in Kuchlagh in Balochistan Province, Pakistan.

This magazine describes the process of groundwater depletion and the gradual adaptation to it by water users. Intense and unsustainable resource use – as in Kuchlagh – is often expected to lead to conflict or cooperation. However, in Kuchlagh overuse did not lead to conflict nor did it trigger a process of cooperation or the use of efficient irrigation methods or the adaptation of local groundwater recharge measures. The situation is best described as a ‘socio-institutional void’ - in which at no point of time action is taken, whereas at the same time the resource is gradually destroyed.

### 1.1 Background and introduction

Groundwater irrigation has been a major force behind the spectacular increase in food production in South Asia. The reliability and timeliness of groundwater use and the additional water it brought has made it an integral part of the region’s green revolution since the 1970’s (Shah, 2009). However, groundwater is also the world’s ‘most mined resource’ (UNESCO, 2003). Over recent decades, groundwater use has grown exponentially in scale and intensity in many places, leading to aquifer depletion and groundwater pollution (Giordano, 2009; Wada et al., 2010). The National Academy of Sciences (2012) for instance in its report on glacier melt in the Himalayan asserted that groundwater over use was a bigger problem in the Indo Gangetic Basin than the melt associated with climate change and air pollution. In Pakistan, the decrease in water tables outside the canal areas is a threat to the sustainability of irrigated agriculture.

This magazine describes the steady decline in groundwater levels over a period of 30 years in Kuchlaqh Sub-basin in

Pishin Lora Basin in Pakistan’s arid western Province of Balochistan. It is based on a longitudinal study with research visits to the area in 1993, 1998, 2005 and 2011. Initially in 1970s the groundwater use was very nominal through *karezes* and open dug wells. Groundwater use however increased steeply around 1980 with economic expansion and in particular the development of transport to large markets like Lahore and Karachi and the influx of Afghan refugees, bringing skilled labor. By the late nineties and early part of 2000’s a point was reached whereby the main alluvial aquifer in Kuchlaqh was exhausted.

Kuchlagh presents a specter predicted for more semi-arid areas of the world that depend on unmanaged groundwater, particularly where there is little recharge to compensate for the intensive use of groundwater. This magazine traces how groundwater users responded to the falling and later disappearing water tables and how livelihoods were adjusted over time as the groundwater reserves vanished.

Several theories link more intense resource use and competition over resources to either one of two opposite outcomes: either there will be more conflict or there will be more cooperation. The main exponent of this first ‘pessimist’ cluster of theories is the Neo-Malthusian school. Resource scarcity is caused by an increase in demand whereas at the same time resources are in limited supply, and this may even exacerbated by unequal access. The resulting tension weakens institutions. This encourages resource capture and encroachment, which further undermines the resource bases. Instability increases. Another main cluster of resource scarcity theories is ‘optimist’ in outlook and predicts that resource competition will lead to cooperation. If resource scarcity does occur, technological innovation, efficiency, conservation or other forms of human ingenuity and cooperation are triggered. Boserup is the main inspiration for this school of thought. There is the assumption that humans can respond to scarcity by a variety of mechanisms: regulation, market mechanisms and pricing, technological innovation or more intense development investment.

A third theoretical perspective emerged more recently, particularly in the work in transboundary water management by Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2010). In their so-called TWINS perspective Zeitoun and Mirumachi demonstrate that conflict and cooperation can very well co-exist. Conflict is not necessarily problematic: it helps to raise the issue and come to a redefined and better system of resource management. Also cooperation is not necessarily good, as it can for instance consolidate relations that are asymmetrical and unbalanced. The drivers of cooperation and conflict are not exclusively related to scarcity and competition, but also include power hegemonies, governance arrangements and the dominant political discourses.

This magazine discusses an example from arid high land South Asia where groundwater depletion ran its full course and scarcity rapidly turned into exhaustion. The first part of this magazine (section 2) describes the so-called ‘race to the bottom’ in Kuchlugh: the accelerated use of groundwater till the point was reached whereby first water tables started to severely drop. The next section (section 3) discusses the tipping point that was reached in 1998 - 2004, when the alluvial aquifer was by and large exhausted. Section 4 describes the coping mechanisms of different groups of water users after 2004, the institutional responses in terms of conflict and cooperation and economic options. Section 5 is a summary of findings and section 6 discusses what the Kuchlugh case suggests for theories on conflict and cooperation over over-used resources.

## 2. Race to the bottom in Kuchlugh: 1980-1998

Kuchlugh is situated in the Pishin Lora Basin (see figure 1), just northeast of the centre of the basin. The Kuchlugh sub basin is a part of the intermountain valley system of Balochistan formed due to the ingression of Indian Shield under the Arabian Shield. This has resulted in over-folding of rocks with a series of thrust faults trending northeast – southwest, giving rise to a complicated hydrogeology. The

sedimentary rocks of the basin range in age from Jurassic to Recent. Over time the synclinal zones were filled with alluvial material – often deposits of gravels and boulders in the form of conglomerates and poorly sorted sand and clay sediments. These alluvial deposits constitute the most important aquifers in the area (Halcrow 2008a). The Kuchlugh sub basin measures 2,083 square kilometres. Of this area 340 square kilometres is cultivable. Rainfall measures 217 mm annually, with a large variability. Annual evaporation is in the order of 1,750 mm: the area is classified as arid.

Agriculture sector uses 97 % of the water in Balochistan (Khair et al. 2010) and Kuchlugh is no exception to this. In the entire Pishin district in which Kuchlugh is situated farming still provides the livelihood to 31 to 49 % of the rural population (Halcrow, 2008a). There were no landless families in Kuchlugh until the early eighties, but there was a difference in access to groundwater from the alluvial aquifer – depending on the share one had in the collective water systems. In Kuchlugh there were originally no people without land, but there were ‘waterless’ families, who instead depended on run-off farming only.

The original residents of Kuchlugh were Sargarha, Dumer and Essa Khel. These are sub clans of the Kakar and Kasi tribes of the Pashtun ethnic group. Though rules can be very strong and lineage solidarity is paramount, Pashtun tribes do not have a centralized authority. This clearly sets them apart from other ethnic groups in Balochistan Province (van Steenberg, 1996). At the census of 1977 the population of Kuchlugh town was 7,000 persons. At this time most of the farm land was under cultivation. Annual crops were common: wheat, vegetables and potatoes. Fruit trees – apples, mulberries and apricots – were cultivated as well but sporadically at this time. The main sources both of irrigation and domestic water were *karez*es and springs. *Karez*es are the marvel of traditional engineering with a “mother well” at the base of the hills and a number of other wells connected through tunnels - with an outlet near the valley floor with cultivable lands. These vertical well systems are known

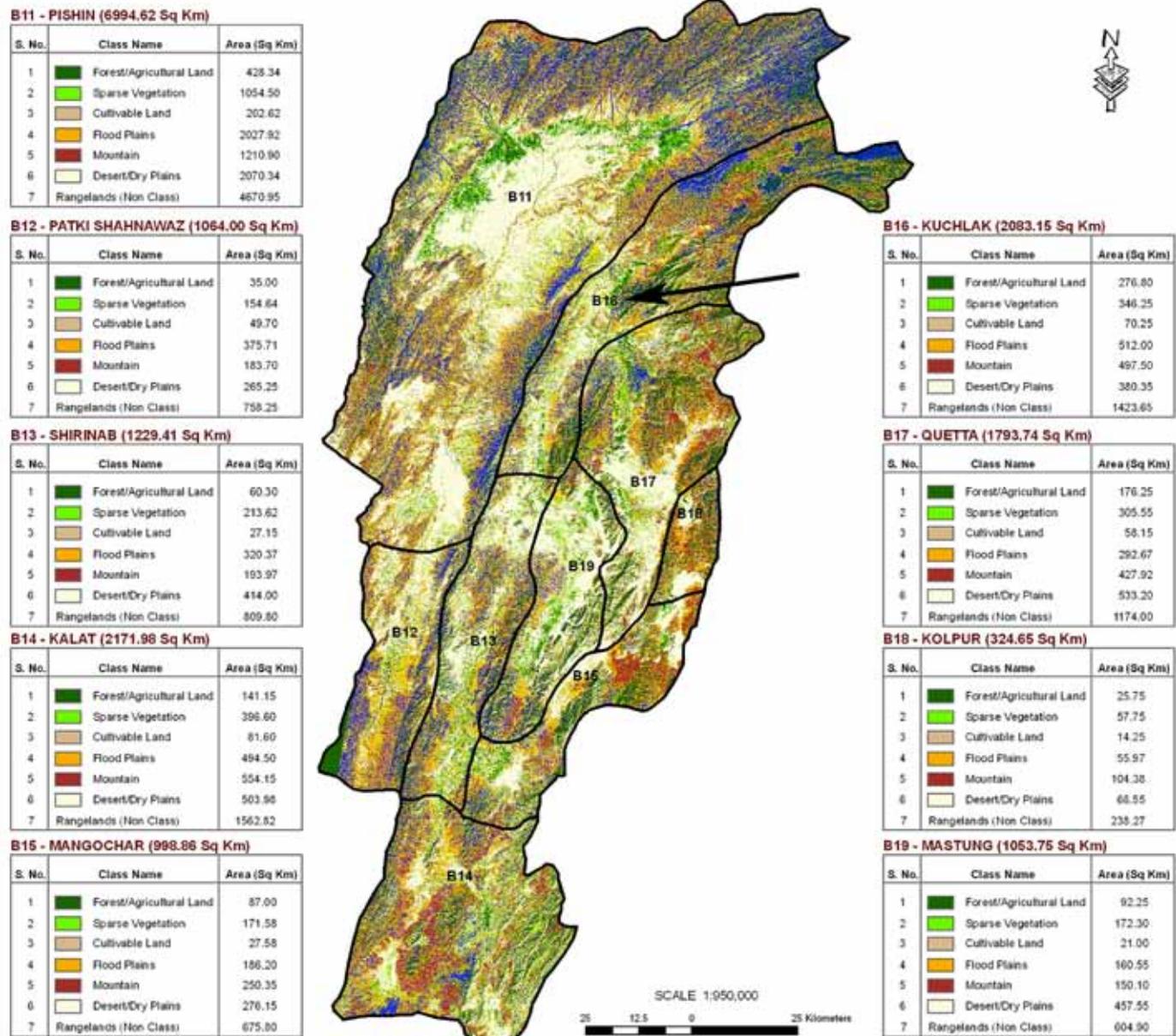


Figure 1: Land use in sub-basins of Pishin Lora Basin (Source: Halcrow 2008a).

as *qanats* in Iran and *aflaj* in Oman. Water rights in the Kuchlugh *karez*es were defined by time shares. These did not necessarily correspond to land holding, but more to the original investment in the development of the *kareze* and the subsequent exchange and trade of water shares.

From the 1970's onwards two developments took place that altered the local economy. The first change was the accelerated population growth, caused by the influx of Afghan refugees. This started in 1982 at the time of the USSR-Afghan war. Over the years the population in Kuchlugh grew very fast – with a second wave of displaced persons arriving after the Allied Forces operations in Afghanistan in 2001. The population of Kuchlugh eventually reached an estimated 120,000 in 2011. The small cross roads town was transformed into a satellite city of the provincial capital, Quetta, 30 kilometers away.

The second change was the emergence of the lucrative apple cultivation. This caused a steep increase in the use of groundwater. In the first stage – in the seventies – dug wells were developed often by 'have not' farmers – i.e. those without a share in the jointly-owned *kareze* or spring. In due time water tables dropped and went beyond the level where



Figure 2: Fruit orchard, Balochistan (own source).

*karez*es and springs could be relied upon. This set in motion a classical groundwater 'race to the bottom'. The faltering *karez*es accelerated the development of more dug wells in the late seventies and eighties by those who could afford it. Ultimately, these dug wells fell victim to the overexploitation of ground water as well. Spring boxes were installed inside the dug wells. However as water tables continued to fall, these failed too and dug wells were replaced from the early eighties onwards by electric powered deep tubewells, using submersible pumps (van Steenberg, 1995; Mustafa and Qazi, 2007). By 1990 the ground water level was 80 meter below the surface. It kept declining and tubewells were drilled ever deeper. Agriculture by that time had transformed – and the Kuchlugh area was dominated by high value commercial horticulture. The high returns from the apple cultivation was fuelling investment in more and deeper tubewells. By this time almost every farmer in Kuchlugh had established a fruit orchard, though not all farmers (5 - 25 %) had a tubewell of their own. They, however, had access to groundwater through 'water tenancies', whereby a tubewell owner provides irrigation services and in return receives one-fourth of the crop. On average a tubewell served 6-8 ha of land. Orchards were mainly cultivated through specialized hired labor, often migrants from Afghanistan. Small land owners relied less on hired labor, using family labor instead.

Change came in the mid nineties. First apple cultivation lost its luster. Production had increased so much throughout Balochistan that a glut was created. In Kuchlugh at this time also some of the older apple orchards were beyond their prime productivity – at an age of fifteen years. The worsened electricity supply further dampened orchard expansion. It also paradoxically encouraged additional tubewell development by those farmers that could afford it. The idea of the additional drilling was that several wells would operate at the same time, when there was no power outage. Farmers in the area were particularly concerned about adequate irrigation water supply in the last stages of fruit development, which determines the quality of the apple.

The major change manifested itself in 1998 when new

tubewells for the first time started to hit the bottom of the alluvial aquifer – at approximately 120 meters depth. The decline in water table continued with several tubewells going dry or having severely reduced discharge. In several cases a network of pipelines was developed to convey water from the remaining functioning tubewells. What is remarkable is that even though the writing was clearly on the wall, no initiative was taken either by farmers or others to reverse the trend – through local regulation or the imposition of more water-efficient farming for instance. Rather the opposite – farmers continued irrigating even winter wheat, whereas the same crop was very cheaply available in the market. No water saving measures were introduced – whereas pilots had shown that higher apple yields would come with less water (the reason being less loss of blossom and better fruit setting).

With tubewells reaching the bottom of the alluvial aquifer, the race to the bottom had reached its logical conclusion. In the period up to this a shake-out had already taken place – small farmers could not stay in the race to the bottom. Only the rich farmers were left on the ground to go for the deep tube wells, but these were eventually falling dry too.

### 3. Turning point 1998-2004

A new era started in the late 1990's with a substantial decline in the agricultural economy. From 1999 onwards some of the remaining farmers invested more in even deeper tube wells beyond the alluvial aquifer – penetrating the harder limestone formation. These wells were typically drilled at a depth of 250 meter. The yield of these new deep tubewells was far less – not more than 15 % of a production well in the alluvial aquifer in the good years. Other farmers continued to run their well in the alluvial aquifer but again with increasingly marginal results.

Irrigated agriculture reduced to 20 % of what it was in the heydays of the early eighties. The extended drought around 2003 - 2004 accelerated the transformation. At this time apple trees were cut down on a massive scale. Farming was not abandoned but apples were substituted for less water demanding and less water sensitive crops – apricot, grapes and vegetables. The cultivation of winter wheat – irrational from a water economics point of view – continued. Tubewell owners with a legal connection paid a flat rate of as little as PAR 4000 per month (USD 45 per month)<sup>1</sup>, so there was no financial incentive not to pump for winter wheat.

Table 1: Tubewells in Kuchlagh Sub Drainage Basin.

Type	No. of TWs	Remarks
Domestic water supply	15	Operated by Public Health Engineering Department
Agriculture - illegal connection	20	No payment of electricity charge
Agriculture – legal connection	244	Payment of flat rate of PAR 4,000/month (USD 45)
Total	279	

- 1) In this period there was a high level debate on the subsidized flat rates for agricultural water use. As part of a loan of the Asian Development Bank the rationalization of tubewell subsidies was agreed by the Government of Balochistan. To affect the first release of the loan the Chief Minister of Balochistan announced the closure of illegal connections and the changes in the electricity tariffs. After this opening gambit the policy stalled. A major opponent was WAPDA – the power company. WAPDA management and employees stand to benefit substantially from the flat rates as it makes it possible to cover electricity losses under the flat rates consumption.
- 2) All tubewells are powered by electricity. The main 'regulation' in fact is not the license for to operate a well under the 1978 Groundwater Rights Administration Ordinance but the sanctioning of a power connection for the tubewell.
- 3) These tubewells are powered by Sheikh Manda Grid Station and the newly built grid station at Kuchlagh.

The balance sheet is that 400 tube wells connections<sup>2</sup> were issued from 1977 to 2011 to the farmers in the area (sub tehsil Kuchlagh and some adjoining portion of Quetta tehsil). Currently, only 259 'official' tubewells are somehow functional in the area – see table 1 – but at significantly reduced discharges. In addition there are 20 tubewells that have an illegal connection to the power grid. The following table shows the use of tube wells<sup>3</sup>.

Most pumping is for agriculture, as mentioned for apricot, grapes and vegetables and winter wheat. Water sharing between farmers is still practiced. It is not based on payments, but on informal reciprocal exchange.

In addition, use of the shallow aquifer continues in a limited degree, mainly fed by seepage water from surface sources and leakage from pumping. As mentioned, the population of Kuchlagh increased tremendously – rising to more than twenty times the population of 1977. There are an estimated 27,000 households and approximately one-third of these – mainly in the south of the city - have excavated a small diameter tubewell or open dug wells in their compounds for domestic use. The water is used for washing clothes and for home gardening – not for drinking water as it brackish. Small quantities are tapped at 20 to 30 meter depth – lifted with buckets or small donkey pumps. The source of this recharged shallow groundwater water is the excess water of surrounding irrigated farms and the run-off trapped in artificial ditches that are excavated for selling of soil used for house construction. In addition, some water replenished from recharge ponds (so called 'delay action dams') after rainfall.

#### **4. Adapt or manage: 2004-2011**

Farmers and agricultural laborers responded to the collapse of the alluvial aquifer in several ways. Though no steps were undertaken to concern groundwater management, a large livelihood crisis was avoided. Neither did conflicts occur between obviously competing resource users nor did new forms of cooperation emerge that would have regulated the use of groundwater.

Instead farmers 'dealt' with the situation and adopted a number of coping mechanisms: either (1) selling out and seeking non agricultural livelihoods, (2) developing new farms elsewhere or (3) continue farming in Kuchlagh but tapping water from greater depth but under a changed cropping pattern.

The earnings from several decades of commercial farming and the parallel urbanization of Kuchlagh meant there were sufficient opportunities in the local economy to cushion the blow from the diminished agriculture that came with the depletion of the alluvial aquifer. Based on field survey, below the coping strategy for three categories of farmers is discussed, i.e. those that sold out, those that continued farming and those that shifted to selling water for domestic use.

##### **4.1 Farmers who sold out**

The sale of land became common after the drying up of tube wells. Small farmers in particular sold lands to the outsiders especially Afghan refugees, several of whom were rich through remittances from the Middle East or from business in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This was a departure from the past when the custom prevailed to preferably sell land to neighbors and not to outsiders. Farmers – especially large farmers - that had lands close to the main road changed their holding into commercial shops and started renting these out on monthly basis. In addition several ex-farmers joined government services and small trades.

The price of land increased with the demand for housing from the town. The number of shops in Kuchlagh for instance increased ten-fold in 15 years. Agriculture, moreover, became less attractive due to the proximity of the fast growing town: theft of standing crops and related incidents increased. In spite of the sell-out, there was no negative effect on the local economy due to decrease of apple cultivation in the area. Other areas took over Kuchlagh's earlier premier position in apple cultivation – able to compete in quality of production as well.

A new trade emerged in 2008 when a modicum of regulation of groundwater came into being. At this time the issuing of tubewell connections by WAPDA was tightened and was linked to the groundwater situation in Balochistan. An all-out ban on new agricultural connections was imposed by the Government throughout the Province. This ban, however, triggered an informal market in sanctioned tubewell connections that undid the intended effect of the ban.

If a tubewell ran dry the connection could be officially transferred to another farmer within the district or to the area of the concerned electricity grid. The transfer required an official no objection from the public power company WAPDA. The rates for the transfer were PKR 600,000 to 700,000 (USD 7,000 - 8,000). This amount includes cost of reconnection and all related equipments i.e. transformers, control panel board cables and the submersible pumps. Only with transferred sanctioned connection farmers can avail the attractive subsidized flat rate that was issued before imposing the ban.

The farmers who sold out in Kuchlagh did not all quit farming. Many farmers either purchased new agricultural lands elsewhere (generally at a far cheaper rate than in Kuchlagh) or irrigated lands on a lease and tenancy basis. Similarly, sizeable numbers of skilled agriculture labor migrated to other areas like nearby Qilla Saifullah or more remote locations – that were close to the Karachi market – in Lasbella and Uthal Districts.

#### 4.2 Farmers who continued

Drilling of new tube wells for agriculture did not stop but decreased drastically mainly due to non availability of new connections and the transformation and urbanization of the area. The high investment of a new tubewell, penetrating into the deep limestone aquifer – at USD 13,000 - with lesser yields discouraged the development of new wells.

After 1995 ground water further declined to the depth of 120 meters and more farmers in Kuchlagh started cutting apple trees due to scarcity of water and competition in market

price. Some farmers tried to sink new deep borewells to save their drying trees but usually failed to get the desired quantity of irrigation water. The new borewells in the limestone aquifer moreover had short life spans – typically five to seven years before they fell dry, the reason being that they were exploiting small crevices. Fluctuation in electricity and long load shedding (16 out of 24 hours in 2011) further added to the frustration. At this time the majority of the farmers changed over to low water consuming crops, such as apricot, vegetable and wheat. Apple orchards were abandoned - either cut down or left to wither.

At this time also the use of conveyance pipes became more common. They had not been used earlier. From 1995 onwards farmers made use of galvanized iron pipes to prevent seepage losses from the diminishing flows and to reach the outer corners of the command area. In some cases the pipelines were also used to overcome level differences. Reinforced concrete pipes were also used to save water saving. Currently, about 15 tube well owners in Kuchlagh have also provided underground connections to their personal houses, small hotels and sometimes car washing centers as well.

Table 2 shows the incomes and operation cost of the tube well. With the substitution of the very lucrative apple

Table 2: Expenditures and income on agricultural tubewell in Kuchlagh.

No.	Item	Expenditures (PKR)	Income (PKR)	Net Income (PKR)
1	Electricity	48,000	0	-48,000
2	O & M Cost	20,000	0	-20,000
3	Apricot	170,000	250,000	80,000
4	Vegetables	60,000	300,000	240,000
5	Afalfa	15,000	200,000	185,000
6	Wheat	25,000	150,000	125,000
7	Wheat Straw	0	40,000	40,000
Net				702,000

NB: Average farm size per TW is 6 - 8 Ha (15 - 20 acres)

cultivation for less rewarding crops profit margins of a tubewell farm are in the order of PKR 700,000 or USD 8,000. If electricity would be charged on market rates instead of subsidized flat rates this profit margin would be halved. The profit margin may also be compared to the cost of water in the nearby provincial capital of Quetta. To counter the overuse of groundwater and secure water supply to the city the construction of a drinking water reservoir is contemplated at a cost of USD 100 Million. The water from the reservoir would take care of 30 % of demand in Quetta. The interest on the investment costs equals USD 6 Million. For this amount one could 'buy out' 750 tubewells – which is three times the number of agricultural tubewells in the Quetta sub-basin that are seen as the major threat to the sustainable water supply to the city. These could be partly converted to drinking water resources and the others could be rested.

#### 4.3 Farmers who sell to water tankers

Of the running tubewells a small group of tubewell owners (5) sell water for domestic consumption. In fact these farmers had acquired agricultural connections and pay the subsidized rate to WAPDA, although they are primarily selling water to urban water trucks. As a minor side activity they also grow wheat and vegetables on small scale to justify their connection being used for irrigation, yet their income is primarily from water sales. The sales record of one of these five farmers shows benefits being more than double of the income that could be generated with farming that would require a far larger effort, see table 3.

Water is sold to private tractor and truck owners who fill their tankers from the tube well. The tankers owners pay PAR 80 - 150 (USD 1 - 1.8) for the filling of a 1,500 liter tanker – which is subsequently delivered to the houses in different areas in Kuchlagh town. Depending on the distance, tanker owners sell at the rate of PAR 500 - 700 for home delivery: transport in fact is the major cost. During electricity load shedding the cost for pumping go up as generators are used. This additional cost is born by the tankers owners. The

demand by water tankers varies – in the summer months it is double of what it is in the winter months as the tanker water is also used for small home gardens and household livestock. A tube well owner sells 70 - 80 tankers per day in the summer month and in winter months it reduces to 35 - 40 tankers. The returns for a tubewell owner more than equals the payment for the subsidized flat rate for the 'agricultural' connection in an entire month.

## 5. Some lessons

At this stage in the semi-arid Province of Balochistan groundwater use exceeds recharge with 22 % - see table 4 (Halcrow, 2007). In 10 out of 19 sub-basins groundwater use is overused. The Pishin Lora – of which Kuchlagh is part – accounts for the largest imbalance with consumption a factor four higher than recharge. Almost all use is for agriculture. What happened in Kuchlagh may be representative for other areas in Balochistan in the future as well as for other semi-arid areas dependent on groundwater for agriculture. The aquifer was depleted. What it means was

Table 3: Expenditures and income on drinking water tubewell in Kuchlagh

Sr. No.	Crops	Input / Expenditures (PKR)	Income (PKR)	Net Income (PKR)
1	Electricity	48,000	0	-48,000
2	O & M Cost	30,000	0	-30,000
3	Wheat	25,000	150,000	125,000
4	Water sale (Rs 5,600/day) in summer months	0	1,008,800	1,008,000
5	Water sale (PKR 2,800/days) day in winter months	0	504,000	504,000
Net Annual Income				1,549,000

not that groundwater pumping stopped. It continued from the hard rock aquifer – and even to some extent on ‘a hand to mouth’ basis from the alluvial aquifer. The buffer in the alluvial aquifer however was gone – and pumping was less secure and far less reliable.

There are several lessons to draw from the Kuchlagh aquifer depletion case – in terms of impact and response and in terms of lessons for the future.

*First* is that the response to the aquifer collapse in Kuchlagh was very much individual and consisted of adapting to the declining groundwater tables rather than trying to reverse the trend. Adaptation was first done by drilling deeper by those who could afford and accessing water through tenancy arrangements by those who were losing the ‘race to the bottom’. In the later stage, when the buffer capacity of the alluvial aquifer was largely exhausted adaptation consisted of searching alternative livelihoods or in a more limited number of cases pursuing the earlier coping strategy of drilling ever deeper. The fast urbanization of Kuchlagh provided the opportunities for (1) selling out land and starting agri-business elsewhere, and/or (2) finding non-agricultural employment in the area – including renting out commercial property.

*Second* is that all along there had been little interest in groundwater recharge. The main intervention had been the publicly funded development of recharge reservoirs, the so-called ‘delay action dams’. These delay action dams have been constructed in Balochistan since the 1970’s and now exceed 300. Their aim is to intercept flood run-off and retain it for recharge (Nippon Giken, 1997). Delay action dams typically have a storage capacity close to one Million m<sup>3</sup> – but there is wide variation (Halcrow, 2008b). While the first generation delay action dams in Balochistan was not successful, the new generation fared much better – because of better location and because the impounded water was recharged through the downstream riverbed by means of water released out of the storage reservoir. Where they were constructed - downstream water levels typically went up (with 1.4 meter).

Based on a study of 30 delay action dams their economic internal rate of return was calculated to be 19 % on average (Halcrow, 2008b). Delay action dams are public investments and expenditure is relatively high. There was no match in the private or community domain and there was never farmer investment in local recharge although by default the trenches made in Kuchlagh town for sourcing construction material served to retain some of the surface run-off and recharge the shallow aquifer. There is in fact a broader repertoire of recharge measures that could have been applied – catchment protection, sink pits, flood water spreading, cascade dams and spate irrigation (van Steenbergen et al, 2011), but these options were not used. There was in fact as good as no individual or collective investment in recharge – that could have triggered larger concern for and ‘ownership’ of the resource.

User cooperation, in particular participatory groundwater management has been recommended as a promising strategy for Balochistan – for instance in Techno-consult et al (2011). Its taking shape either spontaneous as in parts of Yemen or guided and supported as in parts of South India. It has not spread in Balochistan beyond a limited few examples (van Steenbergen, 1995). There are several



Figure 3: Garden fed by spring, Balochistan (own source).

possible explanations why no spontaneously self-regulation happened in Kuchlagh. One is that the number of wells in the Kuchlagh area is too large for a spontaneous process. The examples from Yemen show that where local management took off spontaneously the number of wells were in the tens or less (Taher et al, 2012). This reduces the number of players and agreement can be reached without external facilitation. The second reason for the lack of action in Kuchlagh is that the well owners after the influx of the Afghan refugees were not closely-knit but diverse. Coupled with the absence of dominating leadership in the Pashtun ethnic group it was difficult to see who would assume a leadership role in addressing the issue. Cooperation did not come off the ground, because no one – internally or externally - ever took the initiative in the area. In Kuchlagh even studies that were undertaken to chart the groundwater resource were never shared with the community of users themselves.

On a different level the course of events in Kuchlagh is strongly reminiscent of the ‘desakota’ phenomena, where in an urbanizing context rural-urban relations are redefined on several fronts: economically, ecologically and institutionally (Desakota Study Team, 2008). In case of the Kuchlagh ‘desakota’ the increased connections to outside markets triggered the unprecedented use of groundwater, resulting in its eclipse in a period of 15 to 20 years. The influx of outsiders weakened traditional social relations and made a community response less likely. On the other hand the

growing urban economy provided alternative livelihood opportunities and made it possible to cushion the blow of natural resource depletion. Land was converted into shop fronts and some well-owners turned towards selling water to urban consumers. The growing city provided job opportunities and skilled farm labor moved out and found employment in commercial horticulture in other parts of the Province. All in all the impact of the aquifer collapse on the livelihood of people was not overly dramatic. The decline was gradual and largely unseen (as no one ever discussed the groundwater situation). People adapted to the new reality and the diminishing opportunities related to groundwater use did not result in conflicts nor in cooperation. Even the rules on regulating groundwater use through electricity connections were circumvented and there was no protest or commotion whatsoever.

Though the possible shock of disappearing groundwater resource base was largely absorbed by new income opportunities in and around Kuchlagh Town what is lost the capacity of the agricultural sector to provide secure jobs. What is gone also is the capacity to tidy over a dry spell in Kuchlagh with local groundwater resources. This has left the area – including the town - more exposed to variability and climate change. In addition as the groundwater reservoir was depleted the option of high value and low cost horticulture disappeared in spite of a nearby market to be substituted by a less rewarding farm production system.

Table 4: Annual water balance for Balochistan and sub-basins in 2007 (billion m<sup>3</sup>), source: Halcrow, 2007

Province	Water Source	Recharge / Flow	Total use	Balance	Usages portioned			
					Agriculture	Nature	People	Livestock
<b>Balochistan</b>	<b>Groundwater</b>	2,210	2,659	-0.449	2.474	n/a	0.091	0.094
	(% of total)	(17)	(54)		(70)	(n/a)	(71)	(68)
	<b>Surface water</b>	10,793	2,221	8,572	1,059	1,079	0.038	0.045
<b>Sub-basins</b>								
<b>Dasht River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b>	0.100	0.094	0.006	0.069	(n/a)	0.013	0.012
	(% of total)	(13)	(53)		(90)		(81)	(67)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.66	0.083	0.577	0.008	0.066	0.003	0.006

Province	Water Source	Recharge / Flow	Total use	Balance	Usages portioned			
					Agriculture	Nature	People	Livestock
<b>Gaj River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.070 (23)	0.072 (74)	-0.002	0.070 (100)	(n/a)	0.001 (100)	0.001 (33)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.233	0.025	0.208	0.000	0.023	0.000	0.002
<b>Gawadar - Ormara</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.040 (7)	0.025 (28)	0.015	0.017 (68)	(n/a)	0.004 (80)	0.003 (75)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.546	0.064	0.482	0.008	0.055	0.001	0.001
<b>Hamun-e-Lora</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.040 (17)	0.141 (83)	-0.101	0.139 (95)	(n/a)	0.001 (100)	0.001 (50)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.189	0.028	0.161	0.008	0.019	0.000	0.001
<b>Hamun-e-Mashkel</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.300 (13)	0.027 (8)	0.273	0.012 (11)	(n/a)	0.008 (80)	0.007 (70)
	<b>Surface water</b>	2.078	0.312	1.766	0.099	0.208	0.002	0.003
<b>Hingol River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.200 (18)	0.168 (55)	0.032	0.156 (83)	(n/a)	0.005 (50)	0.007 (70)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.942	0.136	0.806	0.033	0.094	0.005	0.003
<b>Hub River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.080 (17)	0.088 (52)	-0.008	0.086 (68)	(n/a)	0.001 (50)	0.001 (50)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.38	0.08	0.300	0.041	0.038	0.001	0.001
<b>Kachi Plain</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.180 (9)	0.169 (21)	0.011	0.140 (25)	(n/a)	0.017 (61)	0.012 (67)
	<b>Surface water</b>	1.902	0.634	1.268	0.428	0.190	0.011	0.006
<b>Kadanai River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.030 (28)	0.115 (92)	-0.085	0.110 (100)	(n/a)	0.000 (n/a)	0.005 (71)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.077	0.01	0.067	0.000	0.008	0.000	0.002
<b>Kaha Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.190 (27)	0.319 (76)	-0.129	0.315 (87)	(n/a)	0.000 (n/a)	0.004 (67)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.515	0.103	0.412	0.049	0.052	0.000	0.002
<b>Kand River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.010 (36)	0.019 (90)	-0.009	0.018 (100)	(n/a)	0.000 (n/a)	0.000 (n/a)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.018	0.002	0.016	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000
<b>Kunder River basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.050 (33)	0.048 (64)	0.002	0.048 (75)	(n/a)	0.000 (n/a)	0.000 (n/a)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.103	0.027	0.076	0.016	0.010	0.000	0.000

Province	Water Source	Recharge / Flow	Total use	Balance	Usages portioned			
					Agriculture	Nature	People	Livestock
<b>Mula River basin</b>	Groundwater (% of total)	0.120 (26)	0.129 (75)	-0.009	0.126 (94)	(n/a)	0.002 (100)	0.001 (50)
	Surface water	0.338	0.043	0.295	0.008	0.034	0.000	0.001
<b>Nari River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.270 (25)	0.180 (59)	0.090	0.171 (81)	n/a (n/a)	0.006 (86)	0.004 (67)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.817	0.126	0.691	0.041	0.082	0.001	0.002
<b>Pishin River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.170 (36)	0.566 (77)	-0.396	0.513 (82)	(n/a)	0.024 (71)	0.029 (67)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.302	0.169	0.133	0.115	0.030	0.010	0.014
<b>Porali River basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.140 (11)	0.146 (38)	-0.006	0.142 (54)	(n/a)	0.002 (50)	0.003 (75)
	<b>Surface water</b>	1.106	0.237	0.869	0.123	0.111	0.002	0.001
<b>Rakhsan River basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.050 (14)	0.081 (70)	-0.031	0.075 (100)	(n/a)	0.003 (67)	0.003 (75)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.320	0.034	0.286	0.000	0.032	0.001	0.001
<b>Zhob River Basin</b>	<b>Groundwater</b> (% of total)	0.160 (37)	0.270 (71)	-0.110	0.267 (77)	(n/a)	0.002 (100)	0.001 (50)
	<b>Surface water</b>	0.267	0.110	0.157	0.082	0.027	0.000	0.001

## 6. Conclusion: conflict, cooperation or socio-institutional void

In contrast to what Neo-Malthusian or Boserup-inspired theories predict, at no stage did conflict arise or was co-operation triggered. No local rules on groundwater allocation were initiated, nor did anybody take steps to reduce on water consumption, by using efficient field irrigation or phasing out crops with a high water footprint or low returns per water consumed. Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2010) describe that conflicts and cooperation may co-exist at the same time and that cooperation may be repressive whereas conflicts may be liberating in that they may break

an impasse. However in Kuchlaq also this more diverse pattern did not emerge.

There were several factors explaining this collective 'sitting duck' attitude. First, understanding of the imminent disaster was for a long time hidden as farmers were least aware of the nature of the aquifer system<sup>4</sup> and were under the impression that the deepening of wells could continue forever – and so there was no urgency to act. Second, the group of tubewell owners was large and because of the influx of Afghan immigrants no longer homogenous. Several farmers expected the local leader of the area to take the initiative but nothing happened. Local rules or restrictions

4) Groundwater studies had been done for instance by WAPDA Hydrogeology yet these were never shared let alone communicated.

on individual groundwater use – would these have been formulated - in principle could get a formal legal cover. The Balochistan Groundwater Rights Ordinance first announced in 1978 and then ammended in 2001, in principle would provide the basis for such local groundwater management. The objective of the Groundwater Rights Administration Ordinance was “*to regulate the use of groundwater and to administer the rights of the various persons therein*”. Under the Ordinance existing groundwater extraction points were to be registered and location-specific rules to be developed and agreed by the main local stakeholders. Against such local rules the district civil administration would then issue permits for the development of new *karez*s, dugwells and tubewells. The relevant authority would be the District Water Committee, composed of government officials as well as two appointed local ‘notables’. As such, the Balochistan Ordinance was one of the first ‘enabling’ groundwater laws, but unfortunately it was not put in effect as such. With a few exceptions no one made the effort to come to the formulation of such local rules (van Steenberg, 1995). In Kuchlugh no one took the initiative – least of all the local traditional leadership. The Government of Balochistan similarly did not intervene. In the end rather than earlier envisaged location-specific locally agreed rules, a standard minimum distance rule was adopted in an amendment of the Ordinance, which also carried little meaning.

No conflicts did arise at any stage, in fact the gradual depletion was a collective problem, something all well owners faced – without this being attributed to the pumping behavior of any individual or group of individuals. There was no dividedness in the resource use. When some wells in fact fell dry they were connected by pipelines to the remaining

wells that were still operational. The closest the Kuchlugh farmers came to cooperation was to share the burden, not to address the overuse.

So there was no conflict and no cooperation – just adaptation to a new reality facilitated by the urbanization taking place. In fact one could argue it might have been better if there had been conflict: it could have triggered some collective action and effort to better manage the limited groundwater resource and use it more productively and strategically. Conflict is often seen as the opposite of cooperation: more conflict means less cooperation and vice versa. Conflict is associated with resource destruction, but it could be the opposite – it may well be the opening towards preservation of a resource under stress.

Focusing on conflict and cooperation one may overlook the situations where neither conflict nor cooperation occurs. These maybe called ‘socio-institutional voids’. Even though pressure mounts on a resource, no action is triggered. Forests may be depleted, rivers polluted, fish stocks depleted, erosion increased – but nothing happens: no conflict between the users but also no corrective action or cooperation that turns the depletion around. In case of groundwater ‘the race to the bottom’ runs to the very end and no stage any one intervenes. We would like to argue that it is useful to better understand and address such socio-institutional voids, than studying conflicts or cooperation that have already occurred. It suggest also a different handling perspective: not to mitigate conflicts, but to address the socio-economic voids by awareness raising and facilitating local discussion and action.

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