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Addressing water scarcity

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one-ninth for the youngest son. The man owned 17 camels.

How can one divide 17 camels according to the father's wishes?

Killing all the camels and dividing the meat may be an optimal solution that could meet the requirements of the will, but it is not a desirable one, as the live camels are more valuable than their meat. One of the sons could concede a portion of his own inheritance to his brothers, but that wouldn't meet his own interests and would violate his father's will.

A dispute started among brothers; the feud became heated; cousins were no longer playing with each other; the families were not talking to each other. They couldn't find a mathematical solution that would meet the requirements of the will and the positions of

after the youngest received his ninth (two), there was still one more camel.

The brothers quickly realised the wisdom of the woman, and decided that they would return the 18th camel to its previous owner in thanks for helping them solve their problem.

Reframe the Blind Men and Elephant Story and search for the 18th Camel

Within the context of addressing complex problems of water scarcity, security and sustainability, we need to look for ways to seek creative resolutions for problems that involve competing needs, wants, and demands. Two key features may help us to find the 18th camel – a pathway for resolving these seemingly intractable problems: (a) the initial formulation of the problem may appear unsolvable; consequently, we need to engage in a problem-solving mode with a focus on mutual gains; (b)

ing country" to address some of the trust concerns over the storage and transfer of shared water. Admittedly, this is a highly simplified example of years of negotiation and the details of the agreements. The groundwork for building trust and agreement may have developed over many informal problem-solving and joint fact finding sessions between Jordanian and Israeli stakeholders spanning the years between the "Johnston Plan" and the "Treaty of Peace".

How do we find the 18th Camel to address complex water problems in Bangladesh?

Complex problems – addressing supply-demand gap in the dry season in southwestern region or providing equitable access of water in the slums of Dhaka or creating sustainable development pathways for a growing population in a changing climate – are connected with many competing and often conflicting values, interests, and tools. These problems can't be addressed either by dogmatic principles or by deal-making pragmatism.

Any intervention will require an attention to both principles and pragmatism. Principle without pragmatism is often not actionable; pragmatism without principle is not sustainable. We need to continually assess context of the problem with a goal in mind: to logically order principles to best achieve them in practice. There are issues like agriculture versus aquaculture in the southwest that are subjected to deal-making while others like sustainability of Sundarbans or equitable access of water to local community are not.

Not all principles need to be equally important in all situations. Yet, principles are important and can't be ignored completely irrespective of contexts. If we do, we fall into the slippery slope of end justifying the means. When we say, we will not compromise our principles to explain our opposition to a public policy, we are confounding two meanings of compromise. A pragmatic compromise – a settlement of differences in interests – is not the same as compromising one's guiding principles. Compromise over interests is possible and actionable while compromise over principles is not sustainable.

This notion of principled pragmatism is what we need to address complex problems of our time. For example, water availability during the dry season may be the limiting factor to ensure access to water for rivers flowing from India to Bangladesh. Mismatches between values, choice of tools, and disparity in scales usually make water management decisions complex with

no clear-cut solution.

In such situations, a principled pragmatic approach – that can address mismatch between values (Is water more important to keep a port functional than sustaining the Sundarbans?) or choice of tools (Is building the Ganges barrage better than implementing high efficiency irrigation systems?) – grounded in translating global norms in terms of local understanding and the capacity to act on them is our way forward.

Finding creative solutions to address multitude of water issues for Bangladesh isn't going to happen through an article, a focused workshop, or even a multi-million-dollar water project. We need to focus on learning by doing and jointly looking to find the 18th camel to address issues of water scarcity, security and sustainability within the context, constraints, and capabilities of Bangladesh.

Given the informal nature of water economy, power inequalities and domination of elite interests at the local level decentralisation of decision-making and operations and maintenance of water projects through local government institutions - as opposed to through independently commissioned water management organisations - is likely to be more sustainable in Bangladesh. The key issue is to recognise that working only through public sector organisations can't provide a sustainable mode to operate and maintain these projects over time. Bangladesh needs to explore and adopt a systematic approach where resources are made available only if investment design includes continuous capacity building through learning by doing, and post-investment monitoring protocols for adaptive maintenance.

In 1976, a book titled "Bangladesh: The Test Case of Development" drew significant attention and the hopeless implications of the title got stuck ever since; most likely, in response to Henry Kissinger's infamous reference to Bangladesh as a "bottomless basket". At that time, many feared Bangladesh would not survive as an independent nation.

Bangladesh has not only survived, but prospered despite the hopeless predictions of 1970s. How did this happen? Not surprisingly, different groups will fight over who and what is responsible for the successes of Bangladesh. Success usually has many parents and an independent "paternity test" for this remarkable story would be difficult and may not be necessary or even helpful. Now, instead of looking for the parent for this story of success or surprise, we should ask: What made this success possible? What will it take

to make this sustainable?

While the challenges Bangladesh face to address water problems are many. A key problem, however, appears to be the vacuum in motivational ideology, accountability, and responsibility among the intellectuals and decision makers to guide their actions. In particular, we need to focus on institutions to make individuals accountable and responsible to internalise "if you're going to talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk". One way to do this is through principled pragmatism where a context dependent and problem centred process of inquiry will lead to identification of possible actions with measurable outcomes.

Building on the success of last four decades of development, the 18th Camel we seek to address issues of water

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scarcity, security, and sustainability for Bangladesh can be found – similar to the wise woman's sharing of her own camel – "if we are willing to walk the walk to explore creative solutions to address complex water problems rooted in accountability and responsibility of individuals and institutions and guided by emerging global norms of sustainability and equity.

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each brother to get their "fair" share. The problem was unsolvable.

In desperation, the brothers visited a wise woman in the neighbouring village. After hearing about the dispute, the woman agreed that it was a difficult problem; she would reflect on it, and advise them the next day. The next morning, the woman told the brothers she could not solve the problem, but she would give them her own camel, in hopes that it could help them resolve their problem and end the feud.

The brothers were puzzled, but pleased to have an additional camel, and began to walk home. While walking back home, they calculated how a herd of 18 camels might be divided. Half, or nine, would go to the oldest, the middle would get a third (six), and

involving a third-party (think of the wise lady) may help reframe the problem to arrive at a mutually agreeable solution.

Where do we see evidence of an 18th Camel in addressing complex water problems?

Water apportionment for the Jordan (1994 Israel-Jordan Treaty of Peace): (2) This agreement allows Jordan to store 20 mcm of water in Lake Tiberias (Kinneret) in the winter and have that amount transferred in the summer. The need for water is as much about timing as it is about quantity. The agreement further specifies "the quality of water supplied from one country to the other at any given location shall be equivalent to the quality of the water used from the same location by the supply-