

Third Upper Indus Basin Network Regional Strategic Committee meeting

Reflecting on shared learnings and expanding collaborative research in the UIB

25 June 2020 | Virtual platform: Microsoft Teams

Introduction

“The strength of a network emerges from the collective strength of its constituents.”

The words of Khalid Mohtadullah, chairperson of the network, mirror the goals of the establishment of the UIBN. The network formally started in 2014 with a vision of bringing the basin countries, institutions and individuals together on a neutral and voluntary platform to strengthen coordination on climate change issues in the UIB. Through the years, the network has firmly adhered to its guiding principle – climate change impacts are transboundary in nature, and we need to make collective efforts to enhance our understanding of these impacts and work towards innovative climate solutions.

A recent study ranks the Indus as the most vulnerable among the planet’s 78 water towers in terms of its water stress and future climatic and socioeconomic changes (Immerzeel et al., 2020).¹

In this context, networks like the UIBN can play a crucial role in increasing understanding of and strengthening climate change adaptation through collaborative work and knowledge sharing. As stressed by Peter Budd, the Australian ambassador to Nepal, regional cooperation is vital for addressing adaptation issues pertaining to “water availability, demand, and emerging hazards.”

The network began as a Monitoring Working Group in Pakistan in 2012, and by 2019 had expanded to four country chapters in Afghanistan, India, China and Pakistan, with six established Technical Working Groups (TWGs) working on data collection framework, cryosphere, water, hazards, vulnerability, and adaptation. The RSC, as a governing body of the network, convened virtually on 25 June 2020 for its third meeting. During the meeting, members, advisors and special invitees reflected on the progress of the country chapters, shared recent updates on scientific findings related to the Upper Indus Basin in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and discussed future strategic guidelines for the network.

¹ Immerzeel, W. W., Lutz, A. F., Andrade, M., Bahl, A., Biemans, H., Bolch, T., Hyde, S., Brumby, S., Davies, B. J., Elmore, A. C., Emmer, A., Feng, M., Fernández, A., Haritashya, U., Kargel, J. S., Koppes, M., Kraaijenbrink, P. D. A., Kulkarni, A. V., Mayewski, P. A., ... Baillie, J. E. M. (2019). Importance and vulnerability of the world’s water towers. *Nature*, 577(7790), 364–369. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1822-y>

Discussion

1) Maintaining the network's focus during the COVID-19 crisis

Originally planned as an in-person gathering, the meeting was held virtually considering the need to maintain social distancing during the COVID-19 crisis. The committee members acknowledged the severe impacts of the crisis in the world. At the same time they expressed their commitment to supporting ongoing work within the network and prioritizing science-based collaboration. The chair said that despite difficult circumstances, the network members are staying united and making consistent efforts to communicate and exchange knowledge through digital means.

In addition, the group members talked about links between climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. They reflected on how climatic factors have played a part in triggering the spread of the virus across different regions of the world. In his research, Muhammad Mazhar Iqbal (National University of Sciences and Technology) found weather to be an important factor in determining the incidence rate of COVID-19 in Pakistan. He explained the significant correlation between temperature, air quality and COVID-19 in Pakistan.

The members also dwelled on the positive impacts of the pandemic on climate. Improvement of air quality during the crisis and its possible impacts on the cryosphere in the UIB was discussed. A study by Shakil A. Romshoo (University of Kashmir) found significant reduction of black carbon and particulate matter during the lockdown period in Kashmir. Moving forward, it's important to focus on sustaining the climate friendly actions for the longer term.

2) Country chapters: Mirroring the network's vision

As emphasized in [the network's governance framework](#), the country chapters play a crucial role in its functioning. As one of the three key change pathways recognized in the Theory of Change (ToC) framework, the country chapters play an important role in establishing increased government ownership of the network, developing policy interactions, and enhancing regional collaboration.

For the Afghanistan chapter, the Afghanistan National Water and Environment Research Centre

(ANWERC)'s commitment to facilitate the TWG meetings and the country chapter meeting stood out as an important example of government support for the network. This provides an opportunity for doing collaborative work with the centre on issues of climate change and water management. Such government support can help achieve increased government ownership, an intended intermediate outcome laid out in the ToC.

In addition, ongoing research – of the China chapter on review of glacier hazards and mapping debris cover of glaciers in the Hunza valley of Pakistan – calls for a bilateral research opportunity between the China and Pakistan country chapters. The India chapter's efforts to collaborate with a journal on an Indus basin focused special issue will likely increase the visibility of climate change issues in the UIB.

In the Pakistan chapter, the newly formed Gender Resource Group (GRG) and its integration in the chapter has paved a path towards reducing the gender gap in science and policy and including gender perspectives in climate change research. In the most recent Pakistan country chapter meeting, the chairman of the Federal Flood Commission (FFC) mentioned the potential of UIBN-PC to act as an advisory forum in the national water policy implementation framework. Such initiative from the government can help the network achieve its vision in which the country chapters serve as think tanks and contribute in shaping national strategies and policies.

3) Knowledge consolidation for stronger policy influence

Members emphasized that as knowledge about the basin is being generated within the country chapters, it is important to consolidate and integrate the knowledge and work together on co-producing knowledge products including research articles and policy documents. Marian Neal (Australian Water Partnership) highlighted the need to understand the links between knowledge generation and policy making. She said it is important to map the needs of stakeholders and decision makers at different levels (sub-basin, inter-basin, community level) to bring knowledge closer to policy making.

In addition, the network will work on developing a climate profile of the Indus with the indicators agreed upon by the country chapters. The profile aims to expand the existing knowledge base of the Indus, and to encourage country chapters, through increased understanding of vulnerabilities, to inform policy decisions for better adaptation measures.

A way forward: Turning vision into action

1) Efforts for cross-country collaborations

Members discussed the joint research proposal initiated in the last RSC meeting. Ghulam Rasul, ICIMOD, presented the concept note, outlining the objectives and planned activities of the research. After further discussion, the members entrusted Rasul to take the lead in developing a detailed proposal for the research. The joint research aims to collate experience and expertise from various technical working groups in the country chapters, and offer a shared space for collaboration for a comprehensive understanding of water issues in the basin.

The members also briefly discussed the joint comparative study of the impacts of climate change on community livelihoods in India and Pakistan. They study looks at livelihood sources, climate change induced water hazards, and local adaptation practices in the mountain communities of Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan. The joint study between the India and Pakistan chapter, can help bring good practices to light and enable other areas in the basin to replicate them.

2) Capacity building: Opening doors for young talent in the basin

In the previous RSC meeting, the members had emphasized skills and knowledge sharing for stronger regional cooperation. The country chapters had tried to identify areas in which they could provide training/academic support to other country chapters and areas where they would like to seek support. Following the discussion, the members highlighted the need to support young researchers and scientists in the basin, and said they would provide training and educational opportunities to students and early career researchers at host institutions in the basin countries. As a start, India and Afghanistan chapter will work further on recognizing young scientists and researchers and linking them to relevant institutions within the chapters.

The India country chapter will plan to host an international conference where young researchers and students can share and exchange knowledge on climate issues in the UIB.

3) Theory of Change: A strategic roadmap for the country chapters

The members reiterated their commitment to strategic actions and sustainability of the network by endorsing the regional Theory of Change (ToC) framework. The Pakistan chapter has developed the ToC framework, and the remaining country chapters pledged to develop the country-level ToC framework.

4) Government ownership and sustainability of the network

The country chapters have made progress in different research areas and made proactive efforts to engage with policymakers and government ministries. They have worked in close coordination with the respective governments, ensuring that relevant government bodies lead the TWGs and key decision makers in the government participated in the meetings. The country chapters have the potential to work as advisory bodies for the government and contribute to the development of plans, strategies, and policies. Close collaboration with the government is important not only for the sustainability of the network but also for bridging the science-policy divide.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS/DECISIONS

- 1) Continuation of the current chair until the next RSC meeting
- 2) Next RSC proposed for October/November (virtual or in-person depending on circumstances)
- 3) Abdul Wahid Jasra's efforts in establishing the network to be acknowledged through an appreciation letter
- 4) An outline of an article on the UIBN to be shared with the committee for inputs

Additional event information and materials are available at: <https://www.icimod.org/event/third-upper-indus-basin-network-regional-strategic-committee-meeting/>

File links:

[Concept note and agenda](#)

[List of participants](#)

[Theory of change schema for the UIBN](#)



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