



Symposium on Water Security and the Climate Crisis

Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law, Bhutan

14-15 May 2026

In May 2026, WATCON co-organised the Symposium on Water Security and the Climate Crisis, focusing on preventing and addressing sectoral water conflicts. Held in Paro, Bhutan, at the Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law (JSW Law), the symposium brought together discussions on the legal, ecological, and governance dimensions of water security in the context of climate change.

The symposium opened with a stage-setting discussion led by Dr Helen Lansdowne, Assistant Dean at the Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Law at JSW Law, and Philippe Cullet, Professor of International and Environmental Law at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. They emphasised the growing water security challenges caused by climate change, which create water crises and governance issues, ultimately impacting ecosystems, communities, and economies. Drawing on Bhutan's context, they highlighted glacial melting, erratic weather patterns, rainfall variability, and the drying of spring sheds that communities rely on for their water supply as key water issues. As Bhutan continues to adapt to a changing climate, competing demands on water resources are fuelling a growing number of disputes across sectors. The discussion underscored the need for integrated legal and governance frameworks that can prevent and address conflicts while supporting long-term water security and climate resilience.

The symposium framed these challenges within the broader context of worsening water scarcity, water insecurity, and the growing number of water conflicts at local, national, and transboundary scales. Driven by changing patterns of water use, climate change, and mounting pressure on finite water resources, these conflicts threaten water security, the realisation of the human right to water, and sustainable social and economic development. Conflicts over water allocation between competing uses (such as drinking water, irrigation, industry, and hydropower) remain relatively underexplored in legal scholarship. Approaches such as the rights of nature may add important dimensions to the analysis of potential legal solutions to pollution, although they may still frame solutions narrowly. In this context, the discussion of river rights can be understood as a subset of the broader rights-of-nature debate. River-related conflicts are inherently multiscale and often shaped by tensions between development and water institutions. They necessitate solutions that consider context-specific customary practices that advance sustainability and social justice. The discussion also engaged with legal duties in India and Bhutan, and with the implications of framing environmental protection in terms of individual and state responsibilities.

Two relevant case studies were presented during the symposium: the Myntdu River in Meghalaya and Rajasthan's Rajsamand Lake.

The Myntdu River illustrates the complex, multi-sectoral nature of water conflicts. While the river supports drinking water, irrigation, fisheries, hydropower, and holds cultural significance, it still faces competing pressures from mining, infrastructure development, pollution, and dam construction. These conflicts extend across local and transboundary scales, affecting both ecosystems and downstream communities. The Myntdu River case highlights the limitations of existing legal and governance frameworks in resolving water-related disputes. While courts have sought to improve environmental accountability, responses have often been fragmented, prioritising specific issues over broader questions of watershed protection, community rights, and ecological integrity. Such context calls for stronger legal frameworks which address the interconnected environmental, social, and governance dimensions of water conflicts.

Water conflicts around Rajasthan's Rajsamand Lake stem from competing demands for drinking water, agriculture, and industry, leading to prolonged legal disputes. Water allocation decisions often prioritise technical and contractual considerations over the human right to water, equity, and environmental sustainability. While court interventions have affirmed drinking water as a priority, they tend to address only symptoms rather than the root causes of deeper governance failures. This underscores the need for integrated, principles-based water governance that accounts for ecological, social, and cross-sectoral interdependencies.

Overall, the symposium emphasised that water-related conflicts cannot be effectively addressed in isolation but require integrated legal and interdisciplinary approaches that recognise the inter-sectoral and multi-scalar dimensions. The symposium highlighted that water security is a question of law, governance, equity, and climate resilience. From indigenous legal traditions and rights of nature to transboundary cooperation, gender justice, hydropower governance, and climate adaptation, discussions underscored the complex and interconnected nature of water conflicts. As climate change accelerates pressures on water systems, preventing and addressing sectoral water conflicts will require integrated, context-specific, and inclusive approaches that bridge disciplines, scales, and sectors. The symposium provided a valuable platform for advancing this dialogue and identifying pathways towards more resilient and equitable water futures.

The following interventions were made by scholars working on WATCON.

Professor Philippe Cullet introduced the symposium by framing water security as a multi-scalar and multidimensional challenge rooted in the finiteness and essential nature of water. He emphasised that water must be understood across all levels, and not just through a human-centred approach. Although water insecurity is often perceived as a natural phenomenon, he noted that the drivers are anthropogenic. For example, the introduction of hydropower can cause other insecurities through displacement and biodiversity loss. Further, his presentation situated such issues within the WATCON project, which specifically centres on sectoral water conflicts and the fundamental right to water, and calls for integrated legal and interdisciplinary approaches across local-to-transboundary scales.

Dr Usha Ramanathan who works on the jurisprudence of law, poverty and rights, spoke about the need to broaden our lens to understanding the rights of nature and its importance, moving from a narrow perspective (looking at rights of nature as a way to reduce pollution in a specific ecosystem such as a river) to a more relational nature-humankind perspective that is grounded in sustainability and social justice.

Dr Sujith Koonan (Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University) presented on law and transboundary water cooperation in South Asia, examining the persistent lack of regional cooperation through historical, legal and political lenses. He discussed the legacy of doctrines such as the Harmon Doctrine and highlighted how bilateralism and flexible, non-binding approaches continue to shape water diplomacy in the region. Although India

participated in negotiations for the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention, it did not ratify it, reflecting concerns over rigid global frameworks and historical sensitivities. He argued that climate change could either intensify conflict or encourage cooperation beyond state-centric techno-managerial approaches.

Dr Rahul Yaduka (Postdoctoral Researcher, SOAS College of Law) explored the transboundary dimensions of water security in Bhutan-India relations, highlighting how shared water resources are increasingly shaped by climate change, governance, and geopolitics. While Bhutan faces localised water scarcity despite overall abundance, India experiences widespread water stress, creating both shared and contrasting challenges. He emphasised that climate change, hydropower development, flooding, and fragmented governance require cooperation beyond bilateral agreements. Advocating a multi-scalar approach, he argued that effective water security must integrate local, national, transboundary, and global perspectives, shifting the focus from sharing water to sharing the benefits of water.

Dr Gurpreet Kaur (Visiting Scholar, SOAS College of Law) examined water insecurity in India through a gendered lens, arguing that it should be understood not only as an environmental or governance issue, but also as a form of gender-based violence. Using the case of “water wives” in drought-prone regions, she showed how chronic water scarcity intersects with patriarchal norms, caste dynamics, and unequal labour divisions to place disproportionate physical, psychological, and economic burdens on women. Women are often required to travel long distances to collect water while managing domestic responsibilities, leading to severe health impacts and heightened vulnerability to exploitation and violence. The presentation highlighted how water insecurity reproduces and intensifies structural gender inequalities, calling for a broader understanding of violence that includes water-related harms.

Marta Simonetti (Teaching Fellow and PhD Researcher, SOAS; Director at Globalfields) presented on Bhutan’s policy and legal responses to glacial melt-induced water insecurity. She highlighted how Bhutan’s development philosophy integrates environmental protection, good governance, and climate resilience, with constitutional obligations under Article 5 mandating environmental stewardship and the preservation of forest cover. The presentation outlined Bhutan’s robust governance tools, including the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Screening Tool, the Integrated Environmental and Social Management Systems (ESMS) for safeguards, and strict water allocation hierarchies. It also underscored decentralised disaster management and GLOF early-warning systems, while noting that climate-driven losses exceed the limits of policy frameworks alone and require international finance and technical support.

Aman Gwjwn’s (Research Intern, WATCON) examined the multiscale dimensions of water insecurity in the Bodoland territorial region along the Indo–Bhutan border. Drawing on the Sarpang/Saralbhanga river basin, she highlighted how water conflicts are shaped by customary irrigation systems, ethnic relations, governance gaps, and transboundary dynamics. Despite the region’s abundant water resources, unequal access, changing rainfall patterns, deforestation, and limited state support have intensified water insecurity. She argued that addressing these interconnected challenges requires stronger legal and policy responses that recognise the local, national, and transboundary dimensions of water governance.