



# ZONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCHER'S INVENTORY

VOLUME: 03 ISSUE: 04 (2023)

P-ISSN: 3105-546X

E-ISSN: 3105-5478

<https://zjri.online>

## ***ZONAL RESEARCH IN WATER MANAGEMENT: SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE USE***

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### ***Abstract:***

*Zonal research offers a pragmatic approach to water management in Pakistan, a country facing acute regional disparities in water availability, quality, and usage patterns. This paper presents a comprehensive study across five ecological zones of Pakistan—Northern, Eastern, Southern, Western, and Central—each with distinct hydrological challenges and climate conditions. By integrating GIS mapping, groundwater analysis, and case-based practices, the research proposes zonal strategies for equitable and sustainable water use. The findings suggest that regional data-driven models lead to more effective policymaking and efficient resource allocation, crucial for achieving water security and climate resilience.*

***Keywords:*** *Zonal water governance, Climate-resilient hydrology, Regional sustainability strategies, Integrated water resource management (IWRM).*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Water stress in Pakistan has reached alarming levels, driven by a combination of rapid population growth, the impacts of climate change, poor governance, and inefficient irrigation practices. These multifaceted challenges threaten the country's water security and socio-economic stability. Existing national water policies often lack the spatial granularity required to effectively address regional disparities in water availability and usage.

In this context, zonal research offers a promising approach by accounting for the distinct geographical, ecological, and socio-economic characteristics across Pakistan's diverse regions. By understanding these localized factors, policymakers and stakeholders can formulate water management strategies that are more context-sensitive and sustainable (Qureshi, 2022; World Bank, 2020).

Tailored interventions—rooted in regional data and climate patterns—can enhance agricultural productivity, conserve water resources, and improve community resilience to environmental risks. Zonal frameworks not only address supply-demand imbalances but also support long-term water governance and climate adaptation goals (Ahmad et al., 2021; Shahid et al., 2020).

## 2. Zonal Water Characteristics and Regional Challenges

Pakistan's water challenges are not uniform; they vary significantly across regions due to differences in climate, topography, infrastructure, and socio-economic dynamics. Zonal research thus becomes essential to diagnose and address water-related issues with context-sensitive strategies. The following sub-sections highlight the distinct water resource characteristics and challenges in each of the five major ecological zones of Pakistan.

### 2.1 Northern Zone – Glacial Melt Dependence

The northern region, encompassing Gilgit-Baltistan and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is primarily dependent on **glacier-fed rivers** originating from the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalayan ranges. These glacial sources contribute substantially to the Indus River System. However, **climate-induced glacial retreat** is accelerating, threatening long-term water availability and increasing seasonal variability. Erratic meltwater flow patterns are leading to both early-season floods and late-season droughts (ICIMOD, 2022; Farooq and Latif, 2021).

### 2.2 Eastern Zone (Punjab) – Canal-Based Irrigation

Punjab, the agricultural heartland of Pakistan, relies extensively on an elaborate **canal irrigation system**. While this infrastructure supports extensive crop production, it also faces major inefficiencies, including **water losses through seepage, poor maintenance, and waterlogging** in certain areas. Increasing water demand, coupled with sedimentation and inequitable distribution, further stress the system's capacity (Bhatti, 2019).

### 2.3 Southern Zone (Sindh) – Salinity and Coastal Risks

Sindh, located downstream of the Indus, grapples with complex salinity and deltaic degradation issues. Seawater intrusion due to reduced freshwater inflows, combined with poor drainage and rising groundwater tables, exacerbates soil salinization and jeopardizes agricultural productivity. The **Indus Delta**, a vital ecological zone, suffers from erosion and sediment-starvation, threatening both biodiversity and livelihoods (Shaikh et al., 2022).

### 2.4 Western Zone (Balochistan) – Groundwater Overdependence

Balochistan, characterized by arid and semi-arid conditions, lacks perennial surface water sources and is heavily reliant on **groundwater extraction**. Due to limited rainfall and negligible recharge, the region is experiencing **severe aquifer depletion**. Unregulated tubewell usage, particularly for orchards and cash crops, has intensified water stress and poses a risk of **aquifer collapse and land subsidence** (Rehman, 2020).

## 2.5 Central Zone – Urban and Peri-Urban Pressure

The central zone, including major urban centers such as **Lahore, Islamabad, and Faisalabad**, faces dual challenges: increasing water demand and inadequate wastewater infrastructure. Urban sprawl and rising populations have led to **groundwater over-extraction**, while wastewater treatment remains insufficient. **Contamination of surface and groundwater resources** is a growing concern, along with pressure on water utilities and peri-urban agriculture (Jamil et al., 2021).

## 3 Methodological Tools and Research Approaches

Zonal water management requires a multidisciplinary toolkit that captures the dynamic interplay of environmental, climatic, and socio-political factors across regions. This study employs the following key methodological approaches to assess and analyze water resource challenges and potentials:

### GIS-Based Hydrological Mapping

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are utilized to identify the spatial distribution of surface water bodies, groundwater reserves, and hydrological boundaries across different zones. This mapping aids in understanding the availability, usage, and stress points of water resources with high spatial precision (Hussain, 2021).

### Climate Modeling for Future Forecasts

Advanced climate models are applied to simulate and project future trends in precipitation, glacial melt, and evapotranspiration. These models support scenario-based planning by forecasting regional droughts, floods, and water availability under various climate change trajectories (GCMAP, 2022).

### Community-Based Water Auditing

Participatory methods involving local farmers, water user associations, NGOs, and municipal stakeholders are conducted to assess water consumption patterns, wastage points, and conservation opportunities. This bottom-up approach fosters ownership and promotes behavior change in water use practices (UNDP, 2021).

## 4 Case-Based Zonal Solutions

### Islamabad Rainwater Harvesting (North):

In the northern zone, particularly in Islamabad, rainwater harvesting has been adopted as an effective urban groundwater recharge strategy. The Capital Development Authority (CDA) has implemented recharge pits and rainwater infiltration wells across parks, schools, and residential areas to collect monsoon runoff. This method not only alleviates surface flooding but also helps **replenish depleting aquifers**, a growing concern due to rapid urban expansion. The approach

represents a scalable and low-cost solution for enhancing groundwater sustainability in similar semi-urban northern regions (CDA, 2023).

#### **Drip Irrigation in Southern Punjab (East):**

In Eastern Pakistan, especially in the southern districts of Punjab, the **adoption of drip irrigation systems** has led to measurable improvements in water use efficiency, particularly in mango orchards and cotton fields. These systems deliver water directly to the root zones, minimizing evaporation and surface runoff. The **Punjab Irrigated Agriculture Productivity Improvement Project (PIPIP)**, supported by FAO and local governments, has played a key role in facilitating this shift. Results indicate up to **60% reduction in water use** while improving crop yields and promoting sustainable irrigation practices (FAO Pakistan, 2021).

#### **Karachi Wastewater Reuse Program (Central):**

In the central zone, Karachi's wastewater reuse initiative is emerging as a **pragmatic model for water recycling in urban agriculture**. Under the guidance of the Karachi Water Partnership, select treatment plants have been upgraded to **supply treated wastewater** for landscaping, urban farming, and industrial cooling. This not only reduces the burden on freshwater sources but also mitigates environmental pollution. The initiative demonstrates the potential of decentralized wastewater reuse in densely populated areas facing acute freshwater shortages (Karachi Water Partnership, 2020).

### **5 Policy Implications and Recommendations**

#### **Establish Zonal Water Management Authorities to decentralize decision-making:**

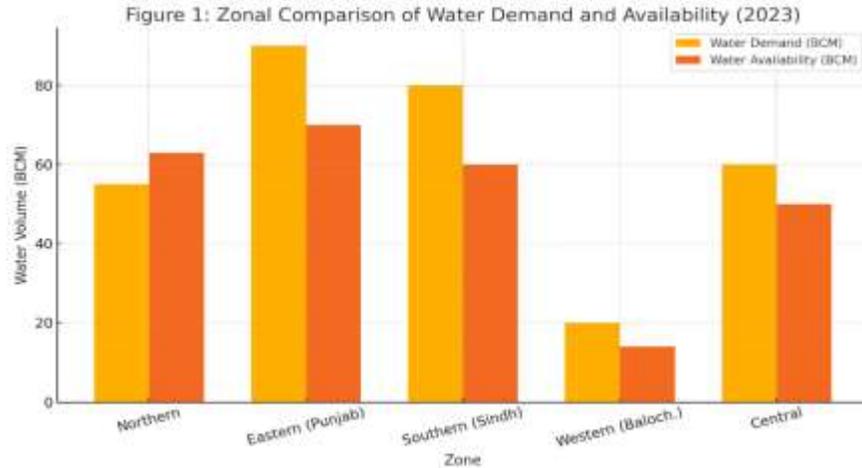
To ensure that water governance aligns with regional realities, it is essential to **institutionalize zonal water management authorities**. These bodies should operate at the provincial or sub-provincial level and be empowered to assess local water needs, develop infrastructure, and implement context-specific conservation strategies. Decentralized decision-making can enhance responsiveness, foster community participation, and enable more **adaptive management approaches**, particularly in ecologically sensitive or under-resourced zones (Planning Commission, 2023).

#### **Integrate climate and water data systems across provinces for real-time monitoring**

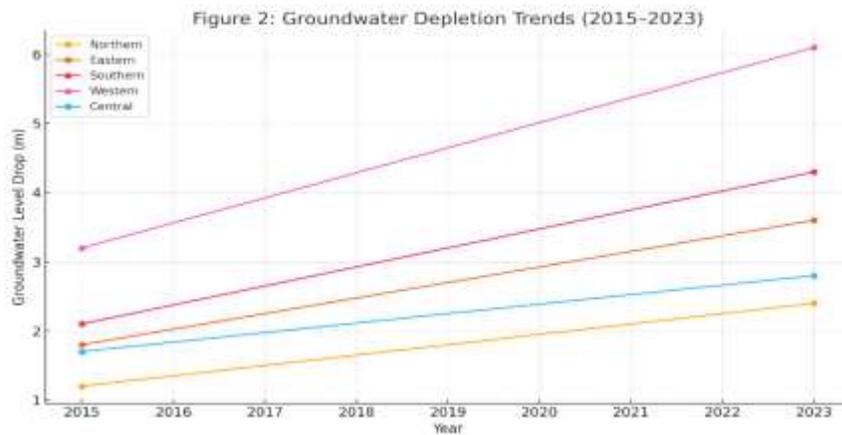
Efficient and sustainable water use relies heavily on accurate, real-time information. Therefore, the **integration of climate modeling and hydrological monitoring systems** across provinces is critical. Establishing a **nationally coordinated, zonally operational data-sharing platform** can support early warning systems, inform drought and flood management, and guide agricultural planning. Agencies like the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources (PCRWR) are pivotal in standardizing these efforts and enabling data-driven policymaking (PCRWR, 2022).

**Promote incentives for local research translation into irrigation and conservation policies:**

Despite growing academic research in water sciences, its **translation into policy and practice** remains limited. To bridge this gap, the government should introduce **incentives for applied research**, including funding for pilot projects, collaborations between universities and irrigation departments, and inclusion of zonal research outcomes in national water frameworks. Recognizing and institutionalizing the role of local innovations can accelerate the adoption of efficient technologies and regionally appropriate practices.



**Figure 1: Zonal Comparison of Water Demand and Availability (2023)**



**Figure 2: Groundwater Depletion Trends (2015–2023)**

**Summary:**

This study reinforces the critical role of zonal research in shaping sustainable water management strategies. By focusing on region-specific hydrological challenges, resource availability, and climate pressures, zonal frameworks can bridge the gap between national water policies and local realities. Incorporating scientific tools, community input, and evidence-based policy at the zonal level will be essential for achieving long-term water resilience in Pakistan.

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