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MAGAZINE NOTES

Megadroughts and the Global Water Bankruptcy

15 February 2026 ·

ENVIRONMENT

GEOGRAPHY

GS1

GS3

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Megadroughts and the Global Water Bankruptcy



Down to Earth

Chapter 1 · 2 min read ·

Ganga Basin at Historic Low

- Tree-ring data (PNAS study): Ganga basin experienced its **driest three-decade phase (1991-2020) in 1,300 years**
- 76% more intense than 16th-century droughts; beyond natural variability — points to human-driven climate change

Indo-Gangetic Plain Drying

- IGP identified as drying hotspot since 2009
- Climate Change (Dec 2025) study: analysed six Indian regions (1971-2020)
- Drying accelerating fastest in **IGP and northeast India**
- Weaker monsoon rainfall + rising temperatures = intensifying moisture stress

Groundwater Crisis

- Groundwater overextraction: 68% of terrestrial water storage loss in non-glaciated regions
- **Indus basin:** losing 1.23 cm water storage yearly
- **Ganga-Brahmaputra basin:** losing ~1.09 cm annually
- Continental drying now contributes **44% to global sea-level rise** (exceeds Greenland: 37%, Antarctic: 19%)
- In India, agriculture consumes over **85% of water**, exacerbated by power subsidies that incentivise indiscriminate pumping

Global Water Bankruptcy Report (UN University, Jan 2026)

- Three-quarters of world population live in water-insecure countries
- 410 million hectares of wetlands disappeared in 50 years (ecosystem services lost: US \$5.1 trillion)
- Excessive extraction caused land subsidence across 6 million sq km; some cities sinking up to 25 cm/year
- **“Megadroughts”** — prolonged dry spells spanning large regions for decades that permanently damage ecosystems

Global Case: Chile & Iran

- Chile's groundwater extraction surged by **383% between 1997 and 2022**, mountain lakes shrank by up to 25%, forcing water rationing in Santiago
- In Tehran, Iran, thousands gathered to offer *salat al-istisqa* (prayers for rain) amid a crippling six-year drought

Way Forward

- Agriculture must be the centre of the solution: shift away from water-guzzling crops, scale drip irrigation and solar-powered pumping, reform electricity subsidies, promote direct-seeded cultivation

UPSC Angle

- **GS3:** Water resources, climate change, environment
- **GS1:** Physical geography, drought

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

INDIA WATER CRISIS:

Indus basin water storage loss: 1.23 cm/year

Ganga-Brahmaputra basin loss: ~1.09 cm/year

Agriculture share of India's water use: 85%+

Continental drying contribution to sea-level rise: 44%

GLOBAL WATER BANKRUPTCY REPORT (UN UNIVERSITY, JAN 2026):

410 million hectares of wetlands lost in 50 years

Ecosystem services lost: US \$5.1 trillion

Land subsidence across 6 million sq km

Chile groundwater extraction surge: 383% (1997-2022)



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