

Water Scarcity Crisis and Social Instability: A Phenomenological Study in the Bam Posht Region

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Original Article

Abstract

Background and Aim: Water scarcity is a critical global risk, particularly in Iran, with extensive implications for the social, economic, and cultural structures of communities. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of residents in the Bam Posht region as they confront the water scarcity crisis in Sistan and Baluchestan Province.

Data and Method: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 37 residents of the Bam Posht district, who were selected via purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Findings: The emergent thematic pattern, titled "Social Instability and Insecure Living under Water Scarcity," comprises six main themes: 1. Socio-economic insecurity, including the structural transition of formal livelihoods into underground economies. 2. Social disintegration within the hydro-social crisis. 3. Erosion of well-being and the obstruction of sustainable development. 4. Psychological trauma and collective suffering. 5. Social inequalities and public dissatisfaction with institutional crisis management. 6. Resource instability and perilous migratory waves.

Conclusion: The water scarcity crisis functions as a chain reaction that erodes economic structures, amplifies migratory pressures, and precipitates regional anomalies, thereby posing a profound threat to social cohesion and population well-being. This situation exacerbates social inequalities and diminishes access to essential services, significantly undermining the quality of life and hindering the region's sustainable development. Consequently, a sense of insecurity and collective suffering emerges within the precarious lifeworld shaped by water scarcity, necessitating enhanced social resilience.

Keywords: Resilience, Security, Social Instability, Water Scarcity, Well-being.

Key Message: Social disorder and public dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of water crisis management have fostered institutional distrust and a growing sense of injustice. Therefore, addressing this crisis requires comprehensive, participatory, and sustainable approaches that integrate social considerations into resource management.

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Introduction

Water scarcity is defined as the lack of sufficient water resources to satisfy the consumption demands within a specific region (Vitkovic & Soleimani, 2019). Access to potable water is not only a fundamental human right but also a cornerstone of sustainable development (Unfried *et al.*, 2022). As a critical determinant of security, water directly impacts human health, environmental integrity, and socio-economic development. Globally, a significant portion of both urban and rural populations currently grapples with water shortages (Garrick *et al.*, 2019). Driven by population growth, rapid urbanization, and industrial expansion, global water demand is projected to increase by 50–80% over the next three decades (He *et al.*, 2021; Garrick *et al.*, 2019; Bonyad & Zare Shahabadi, 2025).

A central dimension of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6) emphasizes universal access to clean water and sanitation (Leal Filho, 2023). Within the framework of global indicators for sustainable water resources management and water justice (e.g., UN-Water, FAO, SDG 6), the Bam Posht region is in a critical situation. Local reports and data from regional water authorities indicate that a large portion of wells and traditional qanats have dried up, alongside a deteriorating piping infrastructure. Consequently, drinking water in villages is predominantly supplied by mobile tankers, and water quality remains substandard, particularly regarding high salinity and chemical contaminants. Furthermore, reduced rainfall, soil erosion, and plummeting groundwater levels have severely constrained local agriculture and livestock management.

As one of the arid regions of Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Bam Posht faces not only acute drinking and agricultural water shortages but also fundamental deficits in water supply, distribution, and infrastructure. These technical conditions, alongside the evident discrepancies when compared to international indicators, provide the empirical basis for understanding the lived experiences of the residents. Should the water-scarcity crisis intensify, it may serve as a potential trigger for both internal and external conflicts (Unfried *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the negative impacts of water scarcity transcend environmental dimensions, exerting broad and profound consequences on social and economic structures (Wheatley, 2024).

One of the most significant consequences of water scarcity is increased poverty and structural inequality. In regions where water resources have diminished, individuals encounter severe limitations in the supply of safe water. These constraints subsequently lead to compromised livelihoods, impaired public health, forced migration, and higher unemployment rates (Higgs *et al.*, 2024). For example, in developing countries, water scarcity

reduces agricultural productivity, thereby deepening poverty and class inequality (Rahman et al., 2024). Furthermore, water scarcity precipitates fundamental transformations in cultural and social structures. Reduced water resources may induce shifts in lifestyles, alterations in family dynamics, and a decline in social cooperation (Santos et al., 2023). In certain instances, water-scarcity crises give rise to ethnic tensions and localized conflicts (Gao et al., 2023).

Iran, and Sistan and Baluchestan Province in particular, have long navigated an intensifying water crisis (Zinati Fakhrabad & Asghari Moghadam, 2021). The structural isolation of border regions—particularly within mountainous and desert regions—has perpetually fostered socio-political challenges driven by prolonged drought, inadequate welfare, and a diminished sense of existential motivation (Esmaeilzadeh, 2006). These conditions frequently precipitate further insecurity, systemic deprivation, and regional underdevelopment (Heidaryani, 2021). Various empirical assessments underscore significant deficiencies in development indicators alongside a critical rise of social harms within Sistan and Baluchestan Province (Barimani et al., 2018). The persistent water scarcity in this region functions as a primary driver that exacerbates these social pathologies, leading to a precipitous decline in the residents' overall quality of life. Furthermore, these environmental pressures impede sustainable development and obstruct the realization of human potential (Parsai et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study explores the lived experiences of residents in the Bam Posht region regarding water scarcity, examining the mechanisms through which these perceptions culminate in social instability. This research seeks to contribute significantly to the improvement of living conditions and the fostering of sustainable progress within local communities. By attaining a more nuanced understanding of the social consequences and community-specific needs, it becomes possible to manage existing water resources in a more strategic, forward-looking manner. Ultimately, these insights are intended to inform evidence-based planning and decision-making processes to address the multifaceted impacts of the water crisis throughout the province.

Literature Review and Theoretical Considerations

A review of existing scholarship reveals the multifaceted social ramifications of water-related interventions and crises. Two studies by Jafari Azad et al. (2024, 2025) emphasize that water transfer projects, despite their developmental objectives, induce extensive social impacts within source regions, characterized by heightened inequality, injustice, and diminished social welfare. These scholars argue that such initiatives transcend environmental consequences, adversely affecting the political, cultural, and economic spheres of local

residents. Similarly, research by Karimi *et al.* (2024) in the semi-arid regions of southern Iran indicates that climate change, coupled with restrictive international policies, profoundly threatens regional sustainability. This necessitates a shift toward adaptation, long-term strategic planning, and the mitigation of economic constraints to maintain socio-ecological balance. Furthermore, Wheatley (2024) elucidates how water scarcity functions as a catalyst for exacerbating social conflicts across diverse geopolitical contexts.

Empirical findings by Sojasi Qeidari *et al.* (2022) demonstrate a significant correlation between drought-induced water shortages and the intensification of rural poverty, rising subsistence costs, and the collapse of small-scale enterprises in the villages of Neyshabur. Such shortages are shown to severely undermine social stability in rural peripheries. In a related context, Behzadfar *et al.* (2022) investigated the social consequences of the Zayandeh-Roud (River) drought on the farming community in eastern Isfahan. Their study identified social conflicts as the most severe consequence, whereas migration was ranked as the least prevalent among the agricultural population. Other documented repercussions included substantial declines in social health, social status, social capital, and social welfare among the farming community.

On a global scale, Unfried *et al.* (2022) utilized network data analysis in Africa and Central America to show that the depletion of water resources due to drought significantly correlates with increased internal conflict and warfare. Regionally, Mehrabi and Vali (2022) observed that drought in Yazd Province precipitates severe changes across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, suggesting that crisis management strategies should prioritize these impacts accordingly. Furthermore, Zenko and Menga (2019) contend that alterations in water flow, driven by the unequal distribution of power and resources, exacerbate socio-environmental crises in marginalized areas, such as the Lake Urmia basin. These disparities not only jeopardize the ecosystem but also adversely affect the mental and physical health of local communities, fostering chronic stress and conflict. The broader Iranian water crisis, through its socio-economic impacts and rural-to-urban migration, has led to diminished production, reduced export revenues, and increased unemployment. Papoli Yazdi *et al.* (2017) further emphasize that water scarcity in Ardakan County has fostered negative social outcomes, including poverty, instability, and a decline in social trust. Finally, the study by Piri and Ansari (2013) in the Hamoon region highlights that biodiversity loss, the disappearance of traditional agricultural livelihoods, and mass migration to Zabol and Zahedan are direct socio-economic effects of prolonged drought and water shortage, leading to the spread of unemployment, poverty, and illicit activities.

In the theoretical domain, this research integrates several analytical and conceptual frameworks to interpret the water crisis. First, the Hydrosocial Cycle Theory (Linton & Budds, 2014) provides a lens for examining the dialectical relationship between water, power, and social structures, conceptualizing water crises not merely as physical scarcities but as products of social and managerial constructs.

Second, Beck's Risk Society Theory posits that in modern contexts, environmental risks emerge from human decision-making and institutional vulnerabilities, where the perception of risk becomes a central element of the social experience (Chen & Wang, 2021).

Third, the Sociology of Crisis perspective emphasizes collective responses, resilience, and the emergence of novel patterns of social action in the face of adversity (Quarantelli, 1991). Large-scale disasters, such as the water scarcity crisis, can—depending on the specific geographical, cultural, and political context—trigger diverse reactions ranging from social convergence and adaptation to conflict, violence, and collective anxiety. Based on this framework, the severity of a crisis is deeply contingent upon resource distribution mechanisms and the historical trajectory of socio-economic inequalities (Peek *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, the Social Disorganization framework suggests that social harm arises when the various components of a social system fail to maintain normative communication, resulting in disrupted coordination and equilibrium (Seddiq Sarvestani, 2011). Within this context, environmental imbalances can directly underpin the emergence of social anomalies. According to the Theory of Anomie, the lack of access to normative consumption patterns within an environmental setting can destabilize stakeholder behaviors, creating fertile ground for environmental deviance (Bonyad & Zare Shahabadi, 2025). Collectively, these theoretical perspectives suggest that the lived experience of residents in Bam Posht regarding the water scarcity crisis emerges from the complex interaction between material (water resources), institutional (crisis management), and cognitive (meaning-making) structures.

Methods and Data

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of residents in the Bam Posht district, a rural subdivision of Saravan within Sistan and Baluchestan Province. Bam Posht district comprises 87 villages and, according to the 2016 General Population and Housing Census, has a population of 14,481. For decades, residents of central Bam Posht have been deprived of basic living infrastructure, including drinking water, healthcare, educational facilities, electricity, internet, and road infrastructure. As a mountainous border region, Bam Posht is currently grappling with a severe water crisis

compounded by dilapidated plumbing systems in some of its rural areas. Consequently, residents are often forced to travel long distances to obtain their basic drinking-water needs. By focusing on the daily lives of individuals within this precarious context, this study aims to elucidate the multifaceted dimensions and consequences of water scarcity.

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to capture the subjective experiences, beliefs, and meanings associated with the phenomenon of water scarcity. The primary interview inquiries focused on: 1)- The participants' direct experiences with the water scarcity crisis. 2)- The perceived impacts of water scarcity on various dimensions of their daily lives. 3)- The fundamental challenges faced by the community in the absence of adequate water resources.

The study population consisted of native residents of Bam Posht with a minimum residency history of five years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, prioritizing those directly impacted by water shortages. While theoretical saturation was initially observed at the 32nd interview, the researchers conducted a total of 37 interviews to ensure the depth and completion of the data. Interviews, lasting between 45 and 50 minutes, were conducted following informed consent and were transcribed immediately for analysis.

The analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method, a standard procedure for extracting shared themes from lived experiences. The process involved seven rigorous steps:

1. Repeatedly reading transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences.
2. Extracting significant statements and phrases directly related to the phenomenon.
3. Formulating meanings from these extracted statements.
4. Organizing formulated meanings into subthemes and main themes.
5. Integrating these themes into a comprehensive description of the lived experience.
6. Identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon and representing it through a conceptual model.
7. Validating findings through member checking with a subset of participants (Morrow et al., 2015).

Table 1- Characteristics of participants

Code	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Education	Occupation
1	Male	35	Married	3	Bachelor	Employee
2	Male	30	Married	1	Bachelor	Employee
3	Male	23	Single	0	Bachelor	Employee
4	Male	44	Married	5	Diploma	self-employed
5	Male	40	Married	4	Post-diploma	Employee
6	Male	37	Married	4	Bachelor	Employee
7	Male	32	Married	2	Bachelor	Employee
8	Male	20	Single	0	Bachelor	Employee
9	Male	55	Married	7	Illiterate	self-employed
10	Male	29	Single	0	Secondary school	self-employed
11	Male	25	Single	0	Secondary school	self-employed
12	Male	30	Married	2	Diploma	self-employed
13	Male	42	Married	5	Illiterate	self-employed
14	Male	45	Married	7	Illiterate	self-employed
15	Male	36	Married	3	Illiterate	self-employed
16	Male	27	Married	0	Illiterate	self-employed
17	Male	22	Single	0	Secondary school	self-employed
18	Male	50	Married	8	Illiterate	self-employed
19	Male	38	Married	2	Bachelor	Employee
20	Male	33	Married	1	Post-diploma	self-employed
21	Male	39	Married	4	Secondary school	self-employed
22	Male	43	Married	3	Illiterate	self-employed
23	Male	28	Single	0	Diploma	self-employed
24	Male	54	Married	6	Secondary school	self-employed
25	Male	50	Married	7	Illiterate	self-employed
26	Female	32	Married	3	Bachelor	Employee
27	Female	30	Married	1	Bachelor	Employee
28	Female	30	Married	2	Bachelor	Housewife
29	Female	49	Married	6	Illiterate	Housewife
30	Female	37	Married	4	Illiterate	Housewife
31	Female	29	Married	6	Illiterate	Housewife
32	Female	32	Married	3	Primary school	Housewife
33	Female	27	Single	0	Diploma	Housewife
34	Female	21	Single	0	Primary school	Housewife
35	Female	30	Married	2	Primary school	Housewife
36	Female	35	Married	5	Primary school	Housewife
37	Female	43	Married	4	Primary school	Housewife

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study utilized member checking and triangulation. Initial findings and representative quotes were presented to participants to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. Additionally, researchers conducted an independent review of codes and interviews (consensus analysis) to ensure analytical consistency.

As shown in table 1, the sample consisted 12 women and 25 men, with ages ranging from 20 to 55 years. Regarding marital status, 29 participants were married and 8 were single. The educational background of the group was diverse: 10 held a bachelor's degree, 4 had a diploma, 2 had an associate degree (post-diploma), 5 had completed secondary school, 5 had primary education, and 11 were illiterate. Occupationally, the group consisted of 10 employees, 9 self-employed individuals, 8 unemployed persons, and 10 housewives. All participants were of Baloch ethnicity and identified as Sunni Muslims.

Findings

In the present study, the lived experiences of Bam Posht residents regarding the water scarcity crisis and its multifaceted ramifications were analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The comprehensive thematic framework emerging from the data analysis is titled "Social Instability and Precarious Life amidst the Water Scarcity Crisis". This structural pattern encompasses six global themes, 11 secondary themes, 29 primary themes, and a total of 227 sub-themes. The pattern of unsustainable life in the face of this crisis unfolds across six main dimensions: 1. Socio-economic insecurity: The transition of formal livelihoods into underground economies. 2. Social disintegration within the hydro-social crisis. 3. Erosion of well-being and the obstruction of sustainable development. 4. Psychological trauma and collective suffering. 6. Social inequalities and public dissatisfaction with institutional crisis management.

1. Socio-Economic Insecurity: The Transition of Formal Livelihoods into Underground Economies

This theme is analyzed in the form of sub-themes of "Economic Crisis and Societal Insecurity" and the "Illegal Economy Replacing the Agricultural and Formal Economies", which together narrate the volatile and contentious economic atmosphere engendered by the water scarcity crisis.

1-1. Economic Crisis and Societal Insecurity

This dimension is derived from sub-themes concerning the "systemic economic pressure on water-dependent occupations" and "the prevalence of crime and insecurity in the region" as well as "the tendency among the youth to engage in deviant activities". The findings indicate that the rise in theft, smuggling, and subsequent insecurity serves as a critical indicator of the economic distress caused by job loss, regional depopulation through migration, and the failure to meet the basic subsistence needs of families. The experience of Participant (9) elucidates this reality:

"Water shortage has caused insecurity, crime, and conflict in the region. When poverty arises and income is not sufficient and the family cannot meet its needs, they turn to crime and delinquency".

The second sub-theme underscores that a lack of viable employment opportunities compels the younger generation toward high-risk activities, including substance addiction, trafficking, and begging. As Participant (6) narrates:

"Unemployment has caused the youth of the region to engage in drug addiction and begging".

1-2. Illegal Economy Replacing the Agricultura and Formal Economy

This theme demonstrates how the region's formal economic frameworks have yielded to illegal survival strategies as a direct consequence of the water crisis. It is characterized by the prevalence of "precarious/fake jobs" arising from rural unemployment and the transition from water-dependent occupations to fuel smuggling. The first dimension reveals that following the collapse of traditional economic activities, villagers have been forced into marginalized occupations such as human and drug trafficking, peddling, or informal trade. These structural shifts risk institutionalizing a legacy of economic precarity for future generations. Participant (5) observes:

"Previously, farmers had several hectares of land and these jobs covered several people. With the impact that drought had on these jobs and gradually destroyed them, farmers, livestock keepers, and their children turned to fake jobs".

The experience of the participants in the second dimension indicates that, given the region's border dynamics, fuel smuggling has emerged as a pervasive livelihood solution in the wake of agricultural decline. In this context, various participants, including Participant (10), mentioned:

"Due to the drought, people living in villages are forced to resort to fuel smuggling for their livelihoods".

2. Social Disintegration within the Hydro-Social Crisis

The water shortage crisis has caused the erosion of social bonds and instability in the family and social context of the region. This theme consists of two general dimensions: "Water Crisis and Social Erosion" and "Distance and Gap in Family Ties".

2-1. Water Crisis and Social Erosion

One of the main dimensions of social erosion is the conflict of interests and struggles that occur following the severe reduction of water resources. Such conflicts are manifested in various forms, such as disputes over water rights in the village, economic pressure, and anger caused by water shortage, especially in relations between farmers, families, and neighbors. Participant (15) narrates as follows:

"Sometimes, there are conflicts and tensions between farmers in the region due to water shortage. I have seen many struggles over a well and its use among people in the region".

Stagnation of social energy is the second dimension of this theme, which includes the reduction of economic and social interactions, the decline of public dynamism and collective happiness, and the cessation of collective celebrations and ceremonies, all of which lead to social erosion. For example, Participant (2) stated regarding rural relationships and solidarity:

"In the past, everyone in the villages had close ties with each other, and during wedding ceremonies, families and neighbors would gather together a few days in advance to cooperate".

Participant (37) further explained:

"During the planting and harvesting seasons, all the relatives would gather together, help in watering the fields at night, and we would be together at the harvest festival".

2-2. Distance and Gap in Family Ties

The economic crisis conditions engendered by water shortages have caused quantitative and qualitative changes in family relationships, such as the reduction of social gatherings, family parties, and intergenerational connectivity. Participant (10) states:

“Water scarcity, like the lack of financial resources, has a significant impact on social interactions. In the past, villages were always open to guests in their courtyards and hospitality was a well-known trait of our people; however, given the current adverse economic conditions, it is no longer the same”.

This disconnect is particularly observed in intergenerational relationships, as shared by Participant (9):

“Everyone no longer lives in the same place; the son is in one city, the daughter is in another city; we miss our children and grandchildren and see them very rarely”.

3. Erosion of Well-being and the Obstruction of Sustainable Development

The findings of this study demonstrate that the water scarcity crisis causes a severe decline in the level of psychological and social well-being. The three main dimensions of the decline in well-being—namely, "Reduced Quality of Life," "Precarious and Unstable Life for the Future Generation," and the "Public Health and Sanitation Crisis"—provide the structural basis for an unsustainable and precarious existence.

3-1. Reduced Quality of Life

The water scarcity crisis has severely compromised the economic conditions, available facilities, water quality, and the overall quality of life for the inhabitants. Participant (7) states:

“The purified water we used to consume in the past was far better than the current purified water. Our underground resources have been destroyed, and wells and aqueducts have dried up; therefore, the quality of life has decreased”.

Water scarcity has led to increased economic dependence, the impoverishment of farmers, the economic stagnation of the region, and a significant decrease in villagers' living standards, to the extent that the welfare and food security of the future generation are now threatened. In this context, Participant (4) explains:

“All aspects of life depend on water. Without water, there is no distinction between rich or poor, as the challenges of its absence affect all members of society. This is an issue that, if ignored, will cause irreparable problems for future generations”.

3-2. Precarious and Unstable Life for the Future Generation

The experience of water scarcity during childhood threatens the biological, economic, and social sustainability of the future generation. Continuous water shortages have direct and irreparable consequences for food resources and public health. In the midst of this crisis, children are not only at risk of contracting diseases caused by unsanitary water, but memories of a childhood marked by water scarcity and its severe limitations institutionalize a difficult and turbulent future in their minds. Participant (12) mentions:

“Life is exceptionally difficult in areas with water shortages because nowadays we need water for everything, even the smallest tasks. I remember as a child, we had to go to aqueducts and wells to fetch drinking water, carrying gallons of water home which often led to the contamination of our bodies”.

3-3. The Public Health and Sanitation Crisis

This dimension encompasses two primary aspects: the widespread prevalence of infectious diseases caused by unsafe water and the general decline in public health resulting from chronic shortages. The increase in pathologies linked to contaminated water, the deterioration of sanitation and hygiene facilities, and the spread of acute and chronic conditions—such as renal, digestive, and dermatological diseases—demonstrate that reduced access to clean water has placed public health and hygiene at critical risk. Participant (37) states:

“Unsanitary drinking water is perhaps the most significant consequence of water shortages, having caused numerous infectious, skin, pulmonary, and kidney diseases in this region”.

4. Psychological Trauma and Collective Suffering

The theme of “Psychological Trauma and Collective Suffering” constitutes a critical dimension of the lived experience and social emotionality of the residents of Bam Posht. This theme comprises two general dimensions: “Psychological Pain and Social Resilience” and “Decreased Social Morale”. Over time, the psychological pressures and resilience necessitated by water scarcity, coupled with the decline in collective morale, become internalized in the cultural and psychological memory of the people, evolving into profound psychological trauma and collective suffering.

4-1. Psychological Pain and Social Resilience

In this first dimension, three components—various psychological pressures caused by water shortage, dependence and forced adaptation to difficult conditions, and suffering and tension among the residents—contribute to the internalization of psychological distress and social resilience. Persistent anxieties in daily life, stress regarding water disruptions during social gatherings, phobias related to resource scarcity, and depression collectively disrupt individuals' mental health. As Participant (1) states:

“The concerns arising from the persistent water shortage and its psychological consequences cause us to experience stress and tension at all stages of life”.

Furthermore, deep-rooted ties to the homeland, family, and professional commitments compel residents to adapt and persevere despite the severe hardships. Participant (3) notes:

“Because my parents and dependents live in this city, I have to stay and cope despite the problems of water shortage”.

The sense of suffering produced by enduring chronic drought, dust, unemployment, and economic poverty remains in the region's collective memory, paradoxically strengthening social resilience. Participant (13) observes:

“Water shortage is like a plague... We have always struggled with drought-related problems over the last few decades”.

4-2. Decreased Social Morale

In the second dimension, a decline in optimism regarding regional improvement, the erosion of morale within an arid and barren environment, and the stagnation of joy illustrate how water scarcity undermines collective morale. Feelings of despair regarding worsening conditions, regret for a lost past, and the perception of the destruction of fertile lands indicate a deep erosion of trust and hope for the future. Participant (21) states:

“We are afraid that if this process of water scarcity continues, we will meet a fate similar to a burnt city and our region will become uninhabited”.

while Participant (23) adds:

“The future generation is raised with institutionalized concern and is always on the defensive”.

The reduction in green spaces, the absence of flora, and the aesthetic degradation of the living environment contribute to the weakening of morale and the emergence of a negative emotional atmosphere. Participant (26) observes:

"We have fewer flowers and plants, which has affected my mood. When I watered the flowers, I felt better".

Disruptions in daily household routines and the absence of social activities further reduce vitality. As Participant (29) explains:

"The majority of residents... have become depressed. The quality of life and the climate have completely changed. When we endure a month of consecutive dust storms, we feel like exiled prisoners".

5. Social Inequalities and Public Dissatisfaction with Institutional Crisis Management

This main theme is extracted from two sub-themes: "Dissatisfaction with Institutional Performance regarding the Regional Water Crisis" and "Public Dissatisfaction with Poverty and Inequality". The findings demonstrate that systemic management failures in addressing the water crisis engender a profound sense of injustice, societal dissatisfaction, and instability.

5-1. Dissatisfaction with Institutional Performance in the Regional Water Crisis

This dimension emerges from primary themes concerning the unsuccessful role of governing bodies in addressing water shortages and the perceived incompetence in crisis management. The inefficiency of institutional responses has raised public expectations and intensified demands among the people. Active grievances—including repeated requests for emergency water infrastructure, the lack of strategic development planning, and the prevalence of unfulfilled promises and rhetorical inaction—indicate significant disillusionment with governmental efficacy. In this regard, Participant (11) stated:

"The managers talk more than they act, and this has discouraged me; I am thinking of leaving".

Furthermore, the perceived indifference of officials, the absence of rapid intervention, and a lack of specialized expertise in resource management underscore the institutional weakness in the public mind. Participant (32) observed:

"No official provided assistance during the shortage or solved our problem. Within an hour of a water cutoff, long queues formed at water stations".

5-2. Public Dissatisfaction with Poverty and Inequality

The second dimension is centered on two themes: 'Public Discontent Regarding Declining Economic Power' and the 'Unequal Distribution of Water and Welfare Resources'. The first theme highlights how the decline of household purchasing power, the devastation of agricultural productivity, and escalating food insecurity have fostered widespread patterns of socio-economic discontent. Participant (35) explains:

"The majority of residents were engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, yet water shortages caused unemployment and poverty. People who were once independent producers now face empty tables and are dependent on the government or charities for their daily needs".

Additionally, the inequity in resource distribution—ranging from potable water and medical facilities to cooling infrastructure and basic amenities—reveals an unjust structure that has undermined public trust. Participants (17, 18) noted:

"Measures are taken irregularly and unequally; some parts of the city have more water while others have less".

They further added:

"In our village, the lower-class struggle during cutoffs due to a lack of pumps, whereas the upper-class face fewer problems due to their access to private amenities and transport".

6. Resource Instability and Perilous Migratory Waves

In this main theme, the unstable environment and the deprivation of essential life resources due to the water scarcity crisis are reflected, compelling indigenous residents—particularly the youth—to migrate. This phenomenon is analyzed through the sub-themes of "Economic Shock and the Propensity to Migrate," "Migration of the Younger Generation to Dynamic Urban Centers for a Better Life," "Growth of Migration in the Shadow of Continued Water Shortages," and "Migrant Dual Identity and Socio-Cultural Instability".

6-1. Economic Shock and the Propensity to Migrate

Participants within this theme report that the decline of purchasing power, increasing poverty among farmers and pastoralists, and the absence of economic opportunities are the primary drivers of migration. Participant (27) narrates:

"Poverty has gripped the people; rural residents have become dependent on the city, and because viable working conditions are no longer available, they

migrate. When water was abundant, farmers were among the wealthier strata of society, but today the situation has completely reversed; following the drought, their purchasing power has been reduced to a minimum”.

6-2. Migration of the Younger Generation to Dynamic Urban Centers for a Better Life

This theme illustrates the aspiration of the younger generation to relocate to large, dynamic urban centers in search of employment and welfare facilities. The exodus of the youth simultaneously introduces challenges such as regional depopulation, the stagnation of local development, and the erosion of social interactions. Participant (8) states:

“Most people, especially the youth, leave to work in other cities. Consequently, our province, city, or even our village will not progress because there is no one left to drive that progress”.

6-3. Growth of Migration in the Shadow of Continued Water Shortage

Institutional neglect and the perpetuation of the water crisis further encourage rural out-migration. The critical nature of water supply issues and economic hardship has forced residents to abandon the region. The intensity of this displacement is illustrated by Participant (31):

“If the necessary water is not provided, this region will become uninhabited in the coming years. Currently, our border and peripheral villages are already deserted”.

6-4. Migrant Dual and Socio-Cultural Instability

Migrants often experience a dual identity characterized by feelings of rootlessness, alienation, and displacement, alongside the profound grief of abandoning ancestral customs. During this identity transition, they are frequently exposed to social harms such as marginalization, criminality, and declining mental health due to the pressures of urban relocation. In this regard, Participant (26) mentions:

“It is difficult to separate from the region because it is our ancestral land; however, water shortages have forced people from villages into cities, leading to the loss of many past traditions”.

Participant (27) further explains:

“We loved our families, our land, and our roots, but now we are losing everything; our soil and our roots are effectively rotting and drying up”.

Table 2- Thematic Framework of Social Instability and Precarious Life amidst the Water Scarcity Crisis

Primary Sub-themes	Main Themes	Final Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic pressure on water-dependent jobs and regional insecurity • Unemployment and the tendency of youth toward deviant activities 	Economic Crisis and Societal Insecurity	1. Socio-Economic Insecurity: The Transition of Formal Livelihoods into Underground Economies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevalence of precarious "fake jobs" due to rural unemployment • Transition from water-dependent occupations to fuel smuggling 	Illegal Economy Replacing the Agricultural and Formal Economy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicts of interests over water resources and social strife Stagnation of social energy and communal vitality	Water Crisis and Social Erosion	2. Social Disintegration within the Hydro-Social Crisis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in family gatherings and connectivity • Intergenerational disconnect and domestic remoteness 	Distance and Gap in Family Ties	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water shortage and reduced quality of life • Impoverishment of farmers and economic stagnation of region • Decline in the quantity and quality of required water 	Reduced Quality of Life	3. Erosion of Well-being and the Obstruction of Sustainable Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irreparable consequences of water scarcity for future generations • Resource insecurity and compromised childhood development 	Precarious and Unstable Life for Future Generations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsanitary water and the prevalence of infectious diseases • Deterioration of public health and hygiene standards 	Public Health and Sanitation Crisis	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological stress and anxieties caused by water shortages • Forced adaptation and dependence on difficult conditions • Suffering and tension in water-scarce regions 	Psychological Pain and Social Resilience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline in optimism regarding regional improvement • Stagnation of collective joy and vitality • Erosion of morale in arid and barren environments 	Decreased Social Morale	4. Psychological Trauma and Collective Suffering

Primary Sub-themes	Main Themes	Final Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsuccessful role of governing bodies in addressing water shortages • The perceived incompetence in water crisis management 	Dissatisfaction with Institutional Performance in the Water Crisis	5. Social Inequalities and Public Dissatisfaction with Institutional Crisis Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public discontent regarding declining economic power • Unequal distribution of water and welfare resources 	Public Dissatisfaction with Poverty and Inequality	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline in purchasing power and the propensity to migrate 	Economic Shock and the Propensity to Migrate	6. Resource Instability and Perilous Migratory Waves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth migration to dynamic urban centers for better opportunities 	Migration of the Younger Generation for a Better Life	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalation of migration amidst persistent water scarcity 	Growth of Migration in the Shadow of Continued Water Shortage	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of rootlessness and loss of ancestral traditions • Socio-economic instability and marginalization of migrants 	Migrant Dual Identity and Socio-Cultural Instability	

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate that the multidimensional consequences of water scarcity have profoundly permeated the lifeworld of the residents in the Bam Posht region of Sistan and Baluchestan Province. These impacts constitute a cohesive thematic framework titled “**Social Instability and Precarious Life amidst the Water Scarcity Crisis.**” From the perspective of the local population, water scarcity is interpreted not merely as a physical deficit, but as a catalyst for a fundamentally “unstable and precarious existence.” The social ramifications were categorized into six core dimensions: 1. Socio-economic insecurity, including the structural transition of formal livelihoods into underground economies. 2. Social disintegration within the hydro-social crisis. 3. Erosion of well-being and the obstruction of sustainable development. 4. Psychological trauma and collective suffering. 5. Social inequalities and public dissatisfaction with institutional crisis management. 6. Resource instability and perilous migratory waves.

Overall, the findings highlight the negative, latent, and complex impacts of the water scarcity crisis on the economic, social, psychological, and political status of residents across

different strata and generations. These consequences are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, culminating in a systemic state of insecurity. Understanding these dimensions represents a pivotal turning point in addressing threats in regions facing persistent water shortages. This study aligns with the research of Karimi *et al.* (2024) and Sojasi Qeidari *et al.* (2022), which acknowledges that drought-induced scarcity significantly exacerbates social instability.

The surge in perilous migratory waves is the direct result of continuous resource depletion, which has transformed stable rural communities into transient and vulnerable populations. This ongoing cycle of scarcity and displacement dismantles regional economic structures, threatens social cohesion, and increases the physiological and psychological vulnerability of the inhabitants. Within the framework of the hydrosocial cycle, forced migration in this region is interpreted not as a simple environmental response, but as the reproduction of unjust power relations within the water management system. Consequently, water scarcity evolves into a profound social problem, leading to demographic collapse and the disintegration of social networks.

The transition of formal economic activities into underground economies indicates a fundamental shift in economic behavior and cultural norms, further intensifying regional instability. This economic unrest has long-term detrimental effects on the quality of life and highlights the urgent need to rethink development strategies. Interpreted through Beck's Risk Society theory, the water crisis has induced economic insecurity, eroded social capital, and diminished institutional trust—core characteristics of a risk society.

Erosion of well-being and unsustainable development are direct results of the scarcity of hydro-resources and welfare infrastructure. Beck's theory posits that environmental hazards are often distributed inequitably across social classes. In Bam Posht, water scarcity serves as a structural factor in the reproduction of poverty, leading to a decline in both subjective and objective well-being. Reduced access to health and economic infrastructure significantly compromises mental and physical health. According to the sociology of disaster, crises inflict "symbolic blows" to collective memory; the water crisis has become a chronic phenomenon fostering a form of "permanent social suffering" embedded in the residents' lived identity.

The erosion of family interactions and communal rituals, coupled with rising ethnic and local tensions, further weakens social solidarity. From the perspective of anomie and crisis sociology, water scarcity has undermined traditional cooperation and increased mutual distrust, signaling a transition from the "collective response phase" to the "cohesion-erosion

phase.” Ultimately, structural inequalities and public dissatisfaction with crisis management lead to a crisis of institutional distrust, a pervasive sense of injustice, and a decline in political legitimacy.

This situation demands an equitable distribution of resources and managerial transparency. Failure to address these inequities may trigger larger, unmanageable social upheavals. This study concurs with Jafari Azad (2025), Zenko and Menga (2019), Behzadfar *et al.* (2022), Papoli Yazdi *et al.* (2017), and Piri and Ansari (2013), indicating a profound link between water scarcity and socio-psychological harm. Residents perceive water scarcity as an acute, life-threatening phenomenon that has deprived them of existential and national security. According to Beck’s theory, environmental crises in both peripheral and internal regions—and their resultant intensification of socio-economic abnormalities—are conceptualized as cultural and social risks. These risks emerge primarily as a consequence of a vacuum in effective policy-making and strategic planning.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the water crisis in Bam Posht transcends being a mere local challenge; it is a multidimensional phenomenon generating pervasive economic, social, and psychological instability. Comparative insights drawn from other drought-affected regions in Iran (such as Yazd and Kerman), as well as neighboring borderlands in Afghanistan and Pakistan, reveal that forced migration, the expansion of underground economies, and the erosion of social capital are recurring structural consequences of water scarcity. Nevertheless, the intensity and specific configuration of these outcomes vary depending on institutional frameworks and resource management policies, thereby underscoring the critical necessity for regionally comparative analyses. The water crisis in Bam Posht can be evaluated via international indices of justice and resilience. According to the Social–Ecological Resilience Index, the region exhibits low adaptive capacity. The Water Justice Index highlights severe inequities in access to potable water. In alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities), Bam Posht represents a clear case of environmental injustice where drought intensifies social instability, forced migration, and the erosion of social capital. Overall, this crisis is assessed as a multidimensional risk that undermines both social cohesion and sustainable development, requiring the following measurable interventions to strengthen resilience and equity:

- **Smart Monitoring Systems:** Developing remote sensing and open-data platforms to enhance transparency and institutional accountability.

- **Equitable Redistribution:** Designing resource allocation with social justice indicators to ensure equal access to drinking water and health services.
- **Resilient Infrastructure:** Investing in small-scale storage and water recycling systems evaluated against resilience benchmarks.
- **Community Governance:** Institutionalizing public participation in water management to restore institutional trust.
- **Regional Cooperation:** Establishing cross-border mechanisms for shared water management, drawing on comparative international experiences especially from Central Asia and North Africa.
- **Livelihood Diversification:** Providing support for non-water-dependent sectors, such as local handicrafts and sustainable tourism.
- **Psychosocial Support:** Conducting group workshops to address collective trauma and provide social support during crisis periods.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

Informed consent was obtained from all participants following a comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifying details were removed from transcripts and final reports. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. Furthermore, the researchers practiced reflexivity through continuous self-awareness and systematic journaling to identify and mitigate potential biases. Findings are reported with full transparency; credibility was enhanced through the triangulation of participant accounts and member checking where feasible, prioritizing the safeguarding of participants' well-being throughout the process.

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Authors' Contributions

The first author conceived the initial research idea and conducted the comprehensive literature review. The first author also designed the study's methodology and led the data collection process, with substantial support from the second author. Data analysis was carried out collaboratively by both authors. The final interpretation, discussion, and conclusions were drafted by the first author. Both authors contributed to the validation of findings through consensus analysis and triangulation to ensure the study's credibility.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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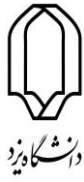
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بحران کم آبی و ناپایداری اجتماعی: مطالعه پدیدارشناسانه در منطقه

بمپشت استان سیستان و بلوچستان

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مقاله پژوهشی

چکیده

زمینه و هدف: کم آبی یک مخاطره مهم در جهان و ایران است که پیامدهای گسترده‌ای بر ساختارهای اجتماعی، اقتصادی و فرهنگی جوامع دارد. براین اساس، هدف این پژوهش واکاوی تجربیات زیسته مردم منطقه بمپشت در مواجهه با بحران کم آبی در استان سیستان و بلوچستان است.

روش و داده‌ها: این مطالعه با رویکرد کیفی پدیدارشناسی انجام شد. اطلاعات از طریق مصاحبه‌های نیمه‌ساختاریافته با ۳۷ نفر از ساکنان منطقه بمپشت و روش نمونه‌گیری هدفمند تا رسیدن به اشباع نظری جمع آوری گردید.

یافته‌ها: الگوی مضامین مشترک تحت عنوان "ناپایداری اجتماعی و زیست‌ناایمن در بحران کم آبی" از ۶ مضمون اصلی شامل ۱- ناامنی اقتصادی و اجتماعی؛ تبدیل کسب و کار مشروع به اقتصاد زیرزمینی، ۲- از هم گسیختگی اجتماعی در بحران آبی، ۳- تنزل بهزیستی و توسعه ناپایدار، ۴- ضربه روحی و رنج جمعی در بحران کم آبی، ۵- نابرابری‌های اجتماعی و نارضایتی عمومی از ضعف مدیریت بحران کم آبی، ۶- ناپایداری منابع و موج مهاجرت خطرزا پدید آمد.

بحث و نتیجه‌گیری: بحران کمبود آب به‌عنوان یک واکنش زنجیره‌ای عمل می‌کند که ساختارهای اقتصادی را فرسوده می‌کند، فشارهای مهاجرتی را تشدید می‌کند و ناهنجاری‌های منطقه‌ای را تسریع می‌کند و در نتیجه تهدیدی عمیق برای انسجام اجتماعی و رفاه جمعیت ایجاد می‌کند. این وضعیت نابرابری‌های اجتماعی را تشدید می‌کند و دسترسی به خدمات ضروری را کاهش می‌دهد، کیفیت زندگی را به‌طور قابل توجهی تضعیف می‌کند و مانع توسعه پایدار منطقه می‌شود. در نتیجه، احساس ناامنی و رنج جمعی در زیست‌بوم ناپایداری که توسط کمبود آب شکل گرفته است، پدیدار می‌شود و افزایش تاب‌آوری اجتماعی را ضروری می‌سازد.

واژگان کلیدی: امنیت، کمبود آب، بهزیستی، تاب آوری، ناپایداری اجتماعی.

پیام اصلی: بی‌نظمی اجتماعی و نارضایتی عمومی از ضعف مدیریت بحران آب، بی‌اعتمادی نهادی و احساس فزاینده بی‌عدالتی را دامن زده است. بنابراین، مقابله با این بحران نیازمند رویکردهای جامع، مشارکتی و پایدار است که ملاحظات اجتماعی را در مدیریت منابع ادغام کند.

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