The weaponization of water

Welcome delegates to the United Nations Economic and Social Council of SharkMUN 2026.

In this committee, delegates will address the growing international concern regarding the weaponization of water and its economic, humanitarian, and geopolitical consequences. Water is one of the world's most essential natural resources, necessary for human survival, agriculture, industry, sanitation, and energy production. However, increasing scarcity, climate change, population growth, and geopolitical tensions have transformed water into a strategic instrument of power and conflict.

Delegates will examine how states, armed groups, and political actors may use water access, infrastructure, and control as tools of coercion, economic pressure, or warfare. The committee must also evaluate the broader economic consequences of water insecurity, including food instability, forced migration, poverty, and regional underdevelopment.

ECOSOC provides a platform for international cooperation focused on sustainable development and global economic stability. Delegates are encouraged to develop practical, humanitarian, and economically sustainable solutions to ensure equitable access to water resources worldwide.

Introduction

Water is fundamental to economic development, public health, food production, and human survival. Despite this, access to clean and reliable water remains unequal across the world.

Rising demand, environmental degradation, and climate change have intensified pressure on freshwater resources, increasing the potential for political and economic conflict.

The weaponization of water refers to the deliberate manipulation, restriction, contamination, or control of water resources to gain political, military, or economic advantage. Water infrastructure, such as dams, reservoirs, pipelines, and irrigation systems, may become strategic targets during conflicts or instruments of geopolitical influence between states.

In recent years, multiple regions have experienced tensions related to water access. River disputes, dam construction projects, droughts, and water shortages have contributed to diplomatic crises and fears of regional instability. Armed groups have also targeted water infrastructure to weaken civilian populations and disrupt economies.

Climate change further worsens water insecurity through desertification, rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and shrinking freshwater supplies. These environmental pressures increase competition over transboundary rivers and shared water basins.

The issue extends beyond security concerns. Water scarcity threatens agriculture, energy production, public sanitation, healthcare systems, and industrial development. Economically vulnerable populations are often disproportionately affected by water-related crises.

The international community must therefore determine how to protect water resources from political manipulation while promoting sustainable management, international cooperation, and equitable access.

Key terms

Water Scarcity

A situation in which available freshwater resources are insufficient to meet demand.

Transboundary Waters

Water resources such as rivers, lakes, and aquifers are shared by two or more countries.

Water Security

Reliable access to sufficient, safe, and affordable water is necessary for health, economic development, and environmental sustainability.

Infrastructure Sabotage

The deliberate destruction or disruption of critical systems such as dams, pipelines, or water treatment facilities.

Background Information

Water-related tensions have increased significantly in recent decades due to population growth, climate change, urbanization, and rising agricultural demands.

One major example involves disputes surrounding the Nile River and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which has generated tensions between Ethiopia,

Egypt, and Sudan over water distribution and regional security.

The Middle East has also experienced severe water insecurity. In conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War, water infrastructure became a strategic target for both state and non-state actors. Armed groups have intentionally restricted water access to civilian populations to gain a military advantage.

Climate change is expected to intensify droughts and freshwater shortages globally. According to international organizations, billions of people could face severe water stress in the coming decades if sustainable management systems are not implemented.

Economic consequences are equally severe. Water insecurity can reduce agricultural productivity, increase food prices, damage industrial output, and force mass migration. Developing economies are particularly vulnerable due to limited infrastructure and financial capacity.

Some countries increasingly use large-scale dam projects and river diversions to strengthen political influence and secure economic benefits. While such projects may support national development, they may also threaten downstream communities and regional stability.

International law regarding shared water resources remains fragmented, and

enforcement mechanisms are often weak. This creates challenges for preventing disputes and ensuring equitable distribution.

Main Countries Involved

Egypt

One of the most critical victims of water weaponization. Egypt deeply relies on the Nile River for its freshwater, making it highly vulnerable to upstream political decisions. Ethiopia's GERD dam is perceived as a direct threat to its national security and survival.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia, while it frames the GERD as a sovereign right for economic development, downstream nations view its unilateral control over the Nile´s flow as a form of geopolitical coercion and hydraulic pressure.

India

India restricted water flows to Pakistan and suspended the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, a move Pakistan called a potential act of war.

Iraq

Iraq among the most severe victims of water weaponization. Turkey's dam projects on the Tigris and Euphrates have reduced Iraq's water supply by an estimated 80%, devastating agriculture and fueling internal instability.

Turkey

Turkey controls the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates, giving it significant leverage over downstream states. Its use of hydraulic dominance to exert political pressure on neighbors has been described by analysts as "hydraulic blackmail"

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Several international agreements and organizations have attempted to regulate shared water resources and promote peaceful cooperation. The United Nations has recognized access to clean water as a fundamental human right.

Treaties such as the UN Watercourses Convention established legal principles regarding equitable and reasonable use of transboundary waters. Regional negotiations and mediation efforts have also attempted to reduce tensions surrounding major river systems.

International organizations, including UNICEF, UNEP, and the World Bank, have funded water infrastructure and sustainability initiatives worldwide.

Despite these efforts, enforcement mechanisms remain limited, and geopolitical tensions frequently complicate long-term cooperation.

Possible solutions to the issue

1. Strengthening international legal frameworks governing transboundary waters.
2. Expanding investment in sustainable water infrastructure and desalination technologies.
3. Increasing international mediation in water-related disputes.
4. Developing climate adaptation and drought prevention programs.
5. Enhancing protections for civilian water infrastructure during armed conflicts.
6. Promoting regional water-sharing agreements and cooperative management systems.
7. Expanding access to clean water and sanitation in vulnerable regions.
8. Encouraging technological innovation in water conservation and recycling systems.