
Throwing away the Problem with Water

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The proposal to import food in order to conserve water has dangerous consequences for countries of the South.

It could not have come at a better time. With water scarcity looming large as ambient temperatures soar in most of the densely populated south, a recent report warns that if water productivity is not enhanced the world's poor will suffer most.

The report presented at the meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in New York has warned that if the present food production trends continue the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of undernourished people by the year 2015 will remain a dream.

Expectedly, the report plays with statistics to present a gloomy scenario. Not without reason as 840 million people across the world are currently undernourished and some two billion will join them in the next two decades.

The report argues that enhancing water productivity through influencing consumption patterns and restrictive trade policies may help to meet the increasing global food demand. But what such reports hide is more vital than what they tend to reveal.

Throwing away the problem with water. *Sudhirendar Sharma*, Deccan Herald, April 27, 2004. <http://www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/apr272004/edst.asp>
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Structural reform – Import Food, Save Water!

By suggesting that food imports may ensure food security in countries that are water scarce, the report may eventually favour the structural reform process unleashed by World Bank and IMF. These reforms have sought to decide what a country in the South must grow!

The Central American debt crisis of the 1980s was conveniently used to shift cropping pattern in these countries in favour of the supermarket shelves in the US. Having replaced their staple crops with melons, berries and broccoli, the countries had to import food from the US by eventually spending the dollars they earned through exports.



Presenting Egypt's case that had saved 11 cubic kilometre of water by importing 8.6 million tonnes of grains in 1995, might be justified. But spreading the logic of virtual water to conserve national waters at the cost of protecting food surplus of powerful countries may be contentious.

With global food trade increasingly being on an uneven turf, countries of the South rightfully wonder if this will be yet another imposition on them! Otherwise why should 550 litres of water to produce flour for one loaf of bread be of greater concern than 7000 litres for producing 100 grams of beef?

Increasing irrigation efficiency may be paramount, as 70 per cent of developed water resources are diverted for irrigated agriculture. But if 40 per cent of the world's cereal output of 2.6 to 2.8 million tonnes is likely to end up as animal feed in 2025, a sizeable human population that sustains at \$ 2 a day will continue to remain underfed. And if that is the justification to increase area under genetically modified crops in the developing countries from 4.3 to 63 million hectares, then the report is clearly serving hidden interests!

Despite some contradictions, the whole range of issues afflicting the food production sector are listed. It is written by a team of well-known water experts. The authors couldn't ignore the specific case of India, which is

increasingly becoming water scarce despite no change in its annual receipt of 4,000 billion cubic metres of precipitation.

Currently, India is producing grains at an average of 2.7 tonnes per hectare for which about 600 cubic km of water is diverted for irrigation uses. But *if the grain requirement of 2025 were to be met by sustaining the present production average, the country would need to double the current level of diversion for irrigation with the risks of environmental damage.*



This seems to be the core argument in favour of the interlinking of rivers proposal. However, the report presents an interesting alternative scenario. It says: "If grain yields increase by 70 per cent, no more increases in water diverted for irrigation will be required." The country only needs to tone up its agricultural research system to match China's current production average of 4.6 tonnes/ha.

Meeting Demands through Realistic Savings

Any savings at the farm will help meet the increasing industrial demand, sustain river flow to maintain the minimum ecological services criteria and help contain salinisation and water-logging.

Further, increasing water productivity makes economic sense at the global food market too. While India exports grains at a productivity level of 0.34 kg per cubic metre of water, the US does the same at 1.26 kg per cubic metre. At equal

cost prices, this means that India is incurring significant ecological losses by exporting more water per unit of grains.

Undoubtedly, increasing irrigation efficiency holds the key to managing food demand and controlling grain prices. Israel's 75 per cent and Iraq's 45 per cent irrigation water use efficiency are worthy examples.

However, it may need strong political commitment and a significant shift in the supply-side orientation of water managers. Though the report acknowledges hydro-climatic realities, it underplays peoples' wisdom in developing strategies under rainfed conditions.

Unless peoples' water wisdom is mainstreamed into policy thinking, the per capita per day yardstick will continue to present a gloomy scenario. ►