

## **A Flawed National Water Policy**

### **Bypassing community rights**

(Source: <http://www.indiatogether.org/environment/water/nwp.htm>)

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India's new National Water Policy emphasizes continued government control over water resources, ignoring pleas by environmental groups to involve local communities in order to overcome looming shortages.

"Successive droughts and the growing water scarcity are creations of government policy and this new policy will only perpetuate the disastrous policy framework of the past," said Sunita Narain, director of the Center for Science and Environment (CSE), which has vigorously campaigned for community control over water resources. Narain regretted that the new policy also ignores the potential of rainwater harvesting and the importance of involving local communities in simple methods to ensure that rainwater is trapped and refills natural aquifers in the ground. "The National Water Policy will remain inert and ineffectual because it is far removed from the two simple but important challenges of water management today -- rainwater harvesting and community management in this initiative," Narain said. The CSE and other leading environmental NGOs and activists hold that India has been hit by water shortages because of a shift away from traditional methods of storing and using rainwater to exploiting rivers, by damming them up through costly and centralized irrigation and drinking water schemes.

According to L.C. Jain, a former member of India's Planning Commission, India has over the last 50 years spent \$50 billion on developing water resources and another \$7.5 billion on drinking water with little to show for the money -- much of which was siphoned out through a corrupt contractor system. Apart from big dams and irrigation systems, the government has encouraged the digging of millions of tubewells and borewells energized by electric and diesel-driven pumps that now provide half of the country's irrigation.

As more and more water is pumped out of the ground, there has been a dramatic lowering of the water table across the country. Groundwater in states that have taken to intensive agriculture under the so-called Green Revolution of the 70s are now turning brackish or are ridden with fluorides or arsenic. By 1991 a review of the

irrigation sector by the World Bank showed that one of the world's largest irrigation investments was performing unevenly and far below potential, mainly because the focus was on construction of new projects rather than management of existing ones. "Sooner rather than later the burden will be financially unsustainable and infrastructure will be physically unsustainable due to declining construction and maintenance standards. The situation is compounded in some areas by environmental degradation," the Bank noted. According to Jain, who has served as vice chairman of the World Commission on Dams, the only solution is for India's Water Resources Ministry to be dissolved and for the empowerment of local bodies to embark on a massive rainwater harvesting program. The biggest argument in favor of harvesting rainwater stems from the simple fact that India receives annual precipitation of rain and snow totalling 4,000 cubic km, while the annual potential flow in the rivers, including surface and groundwater, is 1,869 cubic km.

But activists like Jain and Narain are up against a powerful, entrenched bureaucracy that is locked into a paradigm of dams, irrigation canals, pumps, pipes and borewells with their big budgets. Rajendra Singh, who in 2001 won the Ramon Magsaysay award for his efforts in turning the village of Arvari in western Rajasthan state's arid Alwar district into a lush, green area, had to face bureaucratic wrath that deemed his efforts illegal. His efforts had been successful partly because he turned to building small earthen checkdams to impound rainwater.

So powerful are the vested interests, says Narain, that they could ignore Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's stated view that the National Water Policy should be people-centered and recognize communities as the "rightful custodians of water." Vajpayee also emphasized the need to ease "exclusive control by the government machinery" over water resources so that "we can make a paradigm shift to participatory, essentially local management of water resources." But the final National Water Policy makes no such shift and speaks of communities only as an afterthought. The word "community" itself is used only once in its conclusion: "Concerns of the community need to be taken into account for water resource development.

If the Prime Minister cannot change the mindset of our pipe and drain-driven water policy makers, who can?" asked Narain.

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