
Groundwater - India's Water Lifeline needs urgent intervention Govt is non serious about the crisis

Government's own figures show that Groundwater is India's water lifeline. That lifeline is crisis situation and needs urgent intervention. However, even as the first National Groundwater Congress meets on September 11, 2007, it is clear that government is non serious about attending to this situation that has been created due to its own acts of omissions and commissions. Attention to Rainwater harvesting, watershed development, local water systems (tanks, lakes, ponds, talabs, pokhars... there are many names to it, but they are all local water systems), wetlands, forests, floodplains and rivers, all part of existing groundwater recharging systems, can help sustain India's water lifeline. But the Local water systems, wetlands, forests, floodplains and rivers are facing systematic destruction in the name of development and at best lip service is being paid for their conservation.

Why Groundwater is India's Water Lifeline Govt figures show that 85% of rural water supply comes from groundwater sources. More than half of the urban and industrial water supply comes from groundwater systems. At least two thirds of irrigated area foodgrains production comes from groundwater irrigated lands. 80% of additional irrigated areas in last two decades have come from groundwater sources. All these figures come from the government documents. The existing groundwater recharging systems listed above help sustain the groundwater lifeline and their systematic destruction is one of the reasons for falling groundwater tables. And yet 80% of the water resources budget for the 11th Plan is going for big dams. That cannot help sustain groundwater lifeline. In fact in many cases the big dams are reasons for the crisis. This is sure invitation for bigger trouble.

Misleading analysis Addressing a function in Delhi earlier this month, the Union Water Resources Minister Prof Saifuddin Soz said, "This (ground water) resource has, however, come under stress due to its overexploitation". This is typical, incomplete and wrong analysis as it ignores the role played by existing groundwater systems and how they are getting destroyed. If the destruction of existing groundwater recharging systems is stopped, the situation would certainly be better. But all over the country they are facing destruction. In fact the work of the Tarun Bharat Sangh and many such efforts in different parts of the country have shown that when local water systems are rejuvenated, the decline in groundwater levels can be reversed even in arid areas like Rajasthan. Scientists have repeatedly said that even to address the issues like the Arsenic contamination of groundwater, rainwater harvesting and groundwater recharging is the best option. But there is no policy for stopping the destruction of existing systems of groundwater recharge.

Wrong Prescription The govt has been trying to regulate the use of groundwater through a top down, unaccountable, non participatory mechanism of Central Groundwater Authority, in existence since eleven years. But such a mechanism cannot regulate use of groundwater. The Central Authority has failed to achieve its objective. Only a bottom up mechanism starting from local community controlled units can possibly regulate use of decentralised source like groundwater.

What needs to be done We need dramatic, fundamental changes in the way we approach water resources. As the World Bank said two years ago there is dangerous all round complacency about groundwater. We need a clearly defined policy to ensure that the existing groundwater recharging systems are not destroyed. Creation of more such systems has to be the focus of our water resources development policy. Our plans and budgets needs to reflect such policy, but they clearly do not at the moment. On management front, we need a legally enforceable regulatory system that has community at the focus of regulating use and management of groundwater. Our understanding of science of groundwater aquifers and use of that scientific understanding in groundwater management needs to improve. Use of water saving techniques like the System of Rice Intensification needs to be given more serious attention as it has big potential in reducing groundwater use. The National Ground Water Congress provides an opportunity to address these issues. Will it be used?