

WATER WISDOM DURING A PANDEMIC

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

Residents stand in queue to collect drinking water in Chennai on April 7, 2020. | Photo Credit: [PTI](#)

World Water Day was observed more online than in-person this year on March 22, given the guidelines notified by the WHO in the light of the ongoing [COVID-19 pandemic](#), yet its broader aim remained constant: to raise awareness on the importance of freshwater and advocate for its sustainable management.

More than any previous year, there was a recognition of the importance of water in handwashing and personal hygiene practices, an action that is as important as social distancing and nationwide lockdowns in breaking the circuit of coronavirus transmission.

The choice of theme for the event this year, “Water and Climate Change” reflected the desire of policymakers to address the impact of climate change on the water sector. Water is the primary medium through which climate change impacts trickle down to the community and individual levels, primarily through reduced predictability of water availability.

More broadly, climate change and water are inextricably linked. Growing populations and their demand for water increases the need for energy-intensive water pumping, transportation, and treatment. It contributes to the degradation of critical water-dependent carbon sinks such as peatlands. Due to climate change, water cycles experience significant change, which reflects in water availability and quality. A warmer climate causes more water to evaporate from both land and oceans; in turn, a warmer atmosphere can hold more water, roughly 4% more water for every 1°F rise in temperature.

These changes are expected to lead to negative consequences in the water sector, with increased precipitation and run-off (flooding) in certain areas and less precipitation and longer and more severe scarcity of water (droughts) in other areas. Hence, wet areas are expected to become wetter and dry areas drier. This influences almost all aspects of the economy including drinking water, sanitation, health, food production, energy generation, industrial manufacturing, and environmental sustainability and ultimately the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In coastal areas when more freshwater is removed from rivers and aquifers, saltwater will move farther upstream into the river mouth and the aquifer, which will put pressure on the limited freshwater available on the coast, forcing water managers to seek costly alternatives like desalination plants.

Water is a common pool natural resource that sustains ecosystems, biodiversity, food security, economies, and society; hence, its judicious use with balancing multiple water needs is significant. In developing countries like India, a large population depends on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture, fisheries and forestry for its livelihoods. We cannot afford to let climate change-induced hydrological challenges overtake us.

India has come up with climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies and appropriate policy measures. The government is implementing the ‘National Action Plan on Climate Change’ through eight National Missions, including the Water Mission. However, effective policies need the support of the local governments, corporates and NGOs.

Water resources planning must be given due consideration while dealing with climate impacts.

As tanks and ponds can store and recharge the excess rainwater to the aquifer, their rejuvenation (desilting) facilitates flood and drought management. We need to revisit our rich tradition and culture of water wisdom in water resources management. More public awareness on the need for climate-resilient actions, including protecting carbon sinks like oceans, wetlands, peatlands, and mangroves, adopting climate-smart agricultural techniques, rainwater harvesting, waste-water reuse, and judicious use of water, should be generated and inculcated in each citizen.

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