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‘SHIFT FOCUS TO DEMAND MANAGEMENT OF WATER’

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Changing patterns and intensity of precipitation require greater emphasis on agility, resilience and flexibility in water management, says **Mihir Shah** *, Distinguished Professor, Shiv Nadar University, and Chairman of the 11-member drafting committee of the country’s new water policy.*

We have had a National Water Policy in 1987, 2002, 2012 and now the latest one that is in the works. Why do we need a new one, or is it necessary to have a review once a decade?

We need to take very serious cognisance of the current context of climate change and the grave crisis of water facing the country. Recent estimates suggest that if the current pattern of demand continues, about half of the national demand for water will remain unmet by 2030. With water tables falling and water quality deteriorating, a radical change is needed in the approach to water management.

Changing patterns and intensity of precipitation, as also rates of discharge of rivers, show that it can no longer be assumed that the water cycle operates within an invariant range of predictability. This requires greater emphasis on agility, resilience and flexibility in water management, so that there could be an adequate response to the heightened uncertainty and unpredictability of the future.

What are two major recommendations of the proposed NWP?

The two major recommendations are one: shift focus from endlessly increasing supply of water towards measures for demand-management. This means diversifying cropping pattern to include less water-intensive crops. It also needs lowering the industrial water footprint, among the highest in the world by reducing fresh water use and shifting to recycled water. Cities must mandatorily shift all non-potable uses, such as flushing, fire protection, vehicle washing, landscaping etc. to treated wastewater.

Two: shift in focus within the supply-side also because the country is running out of sites for further construction of large dams, while water tables and groundwater quality are falling in many areas.

There is mounting evidence across the globe in favour of “nature-based solutions” for water storage and supply. Thus, the NWP places major emphasis on supply of water through rejuvenation of catchment areas, which needs to be incentivised through compensation for ecosystem services, especially to vulnerable communities in the upstream, mountainous regions. Renewed thrust on local rainwater harvesting to catch the rain where it falls, when it falls, must be combined with demarcation, notification, protection and revival of traditional local water bodies in both rural and urban areas. This would form part of urban blue-green infrastructure for improved water levels and quality, as also flood mitigation.

Does the policy have recommendations on having ‘more people pay’, or ‘some people pay more’ models for the use of water?

We propose that economic services (like industrial and commercial use) be charged at a rate where the O&M (Operation and Management) costs and part of the capital cost would be the basis for the water service fees. At the same time, concessional rates should be provided for

vulnerable social sections and care should be taken not to price out the poor from basic water service.

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