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Close the Tap Before It's Dry



Rohit Jawa

While we observe World Water Day — 'leveraging water for peace' — Bengaluru is grappling with severe water shortage. This is not because the city had poor rainfall last year, or because the 150 main reservoirs supplying water to the city are well below last year's levels. Such water crises are likely to become commonplace across India if we don't act decisively.

Rationing and containment of water until sources fill up are temporary measures. Given how water and climate issues are linked, we need to plan strategically and well into the future — not



just how to augment supply of fresh water but also how to use it wisely and sparingly.

Decades back, agriculture was termed a 'gamble on the monsoon'. Earlier, with surface water being tapped through canal irrigation systems, parts of India were somewhat insulated from this. However, groundwater, which was supposed to be a reserve for challenging times, became a primary resource.

India is the largest user of groundwater in the world. The Gangetic belt, with its cropping patterns, has exploited wells to the extent of 78%, and may face critically low groundwater availability in a few years.

A 2023 United Nations University-Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) report highlighted that the world is approaching a tipping point on groundwater. More than half of aquifers globally are depleting faster than they recharge. South Asia, with a large population, has become vulnerable.

The policy challenge, then, is to plan for food and nutrition security that can be sustained at available water levels. But this needs to be done without affecting farmers' livelihoods.

Several GoI water supply-enhancing schemes like Atal Bhujal Yojana, MGNREGA, Mission Amrit Sarovar, and Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain address different perspectives. Simultaneously, demand-side schemes like PM Krishi Sinchayee Yojana and Sahi Fasal Campaign actively support crops like pulses and millets that offer high nutrition but consume comparatively lower amounts of water.

However, it is not GoI's responsibility alone. As an industry collective, we have a role to play.

► **Every drop** All matters within the direct domain of our businesses must be made water-efficient, and all forms of wastage eliminated. It is essential to have demonstration effect, which raises consciousness across the board.

► **Do it different** Innovation, both in processes and products, is vital. We must use best available research capabilities to address crucial water concerns.

► **Engage with communities** No one knows the water situation better than local communities. This would be the surest way of ensuring that initiatives for water management stand the test of time through local-level checks and balances.

To date, Hindustan Unilever Foundation (HUF), along with its partners, has delivered a cumulative and collective water potential of over 3.2 tn litres, equivalent to more than two years of drinking water requirement for India's entire population. Further, empowering them with access to resources through deep-impact programmes is also essential. India's flagship Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) has successfully provided tap water connections to 142.5 mn rural households (almost 74% of a total 192.6 mn).

Nuanced access to groundwater and facilitating recharge are vital. With sustainable water sourcing, these JJM taps may run dry. Establishing a Bureau of Water Use Efficiency is critical in ensuring that a comprehensive perspective on water use for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes is factored in while creating actionable strategies for each.

As we examine past and present water crises, need for concerted action across the board only grows urgent. While we may look to international bodies and governments to define how we work towards this agenda, we are equally responsible for crafting initiatives that drive conservation of this indispensable resource.

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