

Public distribution system for water?

It is a tragedy that should arouse us all to fury. In Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra, farmers have parched fields while dam reservoirs are full. Wells have run dry despite normal summer rainfall. Things are so bad that Andhra and Karnataka have declared a drought. Maharashtra is on the brink.

The consequences for the poorest will be severe. Yields of coarse grains, oilseeds, and pulses grown in these three states are expected to drop by up to 40%. These crops are the last resort of small and marginal farmers trying to eke a living from arid and semi-arid plots. An even smaller harvest means higher cost of cultivation per quintal and lower net returns.

To worsen matters, these farmers will be blamed for their own suffering. The government – both at the state and Centre – will call them irresponsible for sucking ground water dry. But hey, do farmers have a choice? Large dams exist but where is the last mile connectivity to their fields? Maharashtra has the largest number of dams in India – an unbelievable 1845. Yet 97% of its arable land has zero irrigation. Andhra Pradesh has 334 large dams and Karnataka another 236. Would someone explain?

Left to their fate, farmers depend on private sources such as wells. When their fields are watered timely and well, yields jump even with same seed and fertilisers. Excited farmers start drawing more and more water from their wells. When all farmers in a village adopt this strategy, eventually the “tragedy of the commons” takes over.

Wells have to be sunk deeper and deeper as the water table recedes. It is falling 4 cm annually in Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana. In Telangana villages, it costs Rs 50,000 to bore one well with no assurance of finding water. Sometimes a well is good for only one season.

The Centre has a “national mission” (nothing less) for micro irrigation, which subsidizes installation of drip irrigation tubes and pump on a farmer’s field. Micro irrigation uses small devices such as sprinklers, drips and sprays. It’s a great idea except for two flaws. The pump needs electricity to run. The farmer must have some water.

Often both are missing. Except in Gujarat, it is a rare Indian village that gets assured power. Near Nagpur, farmers switch on drip irrigation pumps at 3am when electricity returns for an hour. Diesel is scarce. Farmers without access to any source have no use for drip irrigation or power. They have been abandoned by the state.

What is the solution? Planning Commission says pricing water is the answer. The assumption is that farmers are exploiting a free resource which will stop once they are made to pay. As usual it needs a reality check.

Together Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have almost half the large dams in India, according to the Central Water Commission. If their farms are still frequently drought hit, the problem is clearly not with availability but delivery. All along, policy has focused on building large dams but paid scant attention to reaching individual farms. That's as mindless as building mobile telephony towers without supplying handsets. If farmers don't receive a drop from publicly owned resources, what will you price?

Government is attracting private investment by subsidizing drip irrigation. But step one ought to have been incentivizing investment in a distribution network that touches each village. Once farmers know water is available, even at a price, why would they not invest in an economic tool like drip irrigation? Demand for mobile phones is growing fastest in rural India. It's the same logic.

The urgency is escalating. On the availability of water hinges India's future food security. Government wants farmers to use hybrid seeds for higher yields and better utilization of crop inputs. But hybrid seed can be a dud without adequate water.

Policymakers blame people for digging too many wells but don't acknowledge that 60% farmers have no choice. Ultimately, use of ground water is self-limiting. The day is not far when farmers will stop digging wells because it is too expensive to pump the water from great depths or its quality is unsuitable. What then? Will state after state simply declare a drought or will we wake up to the crisis of water distribution? Several million frustrated farmer families and all the companies dependent on the rural economy are waiting for the answer with bated breath (ET 16-1-12).