

Agriculture and water scarcity - it's time to act

Growing water scarcity is one of the leading challenges for sustainable development, warns FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva - a challenge that will intensify as the world's population continues to grow and climate change intensifies.



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Competition for water will intensify as humanity's numbers exceed nine billion people around 2050 — already, millions of family farmers in developing countries suffer from lack of access to freshwater, while conflicts over water resources already surpass those tied to land disputes in some regions, he noted in remarks made at the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (19-21 January) in Berlin.

Additionally, climate change is already altering hydrological regimes everywhere, Graziano da Silva said, citing estimates that around one billion people in dry regions may face increasing water scarcity in the near future. These are regions with a high concentration of extreme poverty and hunger.

Agriculture a major cause and casualty of water scarcity

Agriculture is both a major cause and casualty of water scarcity. Farming accounts for around 70 percent of freshwater withdrawals in the world today and also contributes to water pollution due to pesticides and chemicals.

To tackle these challenges, the international community created a stand-alone sustainable development goal (SDG) on

water and wove better management of this key natural resource throughout the entire architecture of the SDGs, Graziano da Silva said. Improved water matter is particularly important to the SDGs related to extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition, and climate change, he added.

"Agriculture and food systems bring all of these global goals together and provide opportunities for a transformational change," he said.

The FAO director-general urged listeners to rise to the food security challenges posed by water scarcity on two fronts: first, promoting ways to both use less water and use it more efficiently, and secondly, by taking steps to secure access to water — especially for poor family farmers.

Doing so will not prevent a drought from occurring, he said, but it can help in preventing droughts from resulting in famine and socioeconomic disruption.

Graziano da Silva also said that cutting back on food waste has an important role to play in using water more wisely. Each year, one-third of the food we produce is either lost or wasted — that translates into a volume of agriculture water wasted equal to around three times the volume of Lake Geneva, he said.

Water and your food, by the numbers

FAO projects that irrigated food production will increase by more than 50 percent by 2050, but the amount of water withdrawn by agriculture can increase by only 10 percent, provided that irrigation practices are improved and yields increase.

The world contains an estimated 1,400 million cubic km of water. But only 0.003% of this amount, about 45,000 cubic km, are "freshwater resources" that can be used for drinking, hygiene, agriculture and industry. Not all of this water is accessible because part of it flows into remote rivers during seasonal floods.

It takes between one and three tonnes of water to grow one kg of cereal. A kilogram of beef takes up to 15 tonnes of water to produce. FAO estimates that between 2,000 and 5,000 litres of water are needed to produce a person's daily food.

A global framework for action

At the last UN Climate Change Conference FAO launched a global framework for coping with water scarcity in agriculture to support such efforts, Graziano da Silva added.

The framework seeks to support the development and implementation of policies and programmes for the sustainable use of water in agriculture and encourage cooperation among different stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, financing institutions and development organisations.

"It is time to act. Improved management of natural resources translates into better livelihoods now and in the future," the FAO Director-General urged.

About the GFFA

The Global Forum for Food and Agriculture, organised by the German Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture (BMEL) takes place every year, bringing together high-level decision makers, technical experts, researchers, and farmers to discuss pressing issues affecting agriculture worldwide.

The Forum's theme this year is "Agriculture and Water - Key to Feeding the World." An organising partner of the event, FAO is taking the lead on a number of events at the Forum.

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