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A Healthy Water Footprint is Key for a Healthy Earth

What will really move the needle for the climate change agenda is to evolve a citizen's action framework that is water-centric



SWATI PIRAMAL & ANUJ SHARMA

"Ours is the last generation that can take steps to avoid the worst impacts of climate change," said former United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon. Another World Environment Day is passing by, and climate change-abetted disasters are growing, with experts predicting that our world is hurtling towards a tipping point from which there may be no return.

CATASTROPHE LOOMS LARGE
The alarming Arctic meltdown is seeing irreversible economic and geopolitical consequences. The California wildfires destroyed 4,397,809 acres of forest area, while Amazon fires have charred over 43,000 sq km of forest. Closer home, a severe heatwave was recorded in large parts of India last month. Floods in Assam, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Kerala continue to leave millions displaced, thousands dead and vast tracts of land affected. Chennai city officials declared in 2019 that 'Day Zero', or the day when almost no water is left, had arrived.

The deluge of disasters is only

dimming the hope that people harbour of a better, safer world.

RENEWING HOPE

India is the only major country to be on track to achieve targets set out in the Paris climate agreement, according to the UN Environment Programme's Emission Gap Report. India's COP26 pledges and progress of its solar mission are commendable. The government has announced audacious plans of reducing Indian economy's emissions intensity by 45%. All states are building solar capacity and moving away from fossil fuels.

WATER MATTERS

India has 18% of the world's population but only 4% of the global freshwater resources – being an agrarian economy it is the world's largest extractor of groundwater. This makes India one of the world's 17 'extremely water-stressed' countries. A NITI Aayog report (2018) reveals that nearly half of India's population faces extreme water stress.

For millions potable water sources pose contamination-led serious health risks and 70% of our major rivers are dying because of pollution. The government is doing what it can. The momentum to find innovative solutions out of the crisis has gathered speed through Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission. Most developed economies have an agricultural water footprint of about 70%, while India and most developing economies are well over 80%, with agriculture being the biggest water user. The potent combination of fast-changing rain patterns induced by climate change, sea ingress, water-intensive farming and depleting groundwater can push India over the edge very soon unless immediate



action at scale is taken. What then, are we, the people of India, doing about our colossal water footprint?

THE ANSWERS LIE WITH US

Efforts are underway for improving agricultural efficiency, as also for moving away from water intensive crops, but this has yet to become common practice. Similarly,

THE IMPACT

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reclaiming grey water for agricultural use, despite the availability of technology, is waiting to go to scale. Responsible irrigation choices using solutions like drip irrigation and demand side intervention that can influence crop selection together would help in reducing the heavy agri-water footprint.

If even 10% of agri-water usage can be saved through efficiency measures, the entire household segment can have much more. The immediate need is to bring a revolution in water-use efficiency. Israel, through tech innovation, and Australia, through focused policies, have achieved some success worth emulating.

DAILY CHOICES MATTER

Responsible food choices, water usage, energy consumption, mobility construction, etc., can make a big difference. Our consumption can influence demand, and thus farming patterns. Adopting healthy foods that include heavy and light

water user crops like wheat, rice and millets is a choice only we can make. Cotton, sugar and tobacco are other highly water-intensive crops. Thus, wise choices of fashion, food and fun will make the much-needed difference.

Simple prudent daily choices like bathing using bucket water and keeping a check on our daily water use can add up significantly to conserving water. Rejuvenation of water bodies, like Bengaluru's lake rejuvenation, and reducing plastic pollution (a major cause of water body pollution) like Sikkim showed, are other steps that can be initiated by local governments and supported by communities.

WE HAVE TO MOVE NOW

What will really move the needle for the climate change agenda is to evolve a 'citizen's action framework' that is water-centric and leverages the proven Jan Andolan approach to make for an effective strategy.

Every society must address lack of awareness along with the pervading hopelessness through mobilising mass movements, with youth essaying a key role, and continue to track progress, until change is visible. India should create a sound water-centric framework for citizen's climate action leveraging everyone's participation. The time for debate has passed. If we are to leave something to the next generation, each one of us has to take positive action to avert the impending water disaster, as if our lives depended on it. Because, now, they do.

(Swati Piramal is vice-chairperson, Piramal Group; Anuj Sharma is lead, Climate Action and Sustainability, Piramal Foundation)

[World Environment Day: A healthy water footprint is key for a healthy earth](#)

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The Answers Lie with Us

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Daily Choices Matter

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