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Dams, Rivers & People

VOL 7 ISSUE 5-7 JUNE-AUG 2009 Rs 15/-

Lead Piece

Letter to the Prime Minister on climate change:

NAPCC and water mission are non-serious and worse

As the government started the process of finalizing the eight missions under India's National Action Plan on Climate Change announced in June 2008, nineteen groups from all over India got together and wrote a letter expressing serious concerns over the process and content of the NAPCC in general and National Water Mission under NAPCC in particular. The letter dated July 27, 2009 raises some very important issues that will continue to affect us for many years to come. Hence we are reproducing the letter in full here.

To,
The Prime Minister of India
7, Race Course Road, New Delhi 110 001

Respected Sir,

We understand that you & the Advisory Council on Climate Change appointed by you are in the process of finalizing the India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and the various missions under the same. We are writing this letter on our concerns regarding the National Water Mission under the NAPCC, as also some concerns about the NAPCC.

There was no participatory or transparent process in formulation of NAPCC or even the specific mission plans. This cannot be an acceptable situation in any democracy.

NAPCC: Issues of Process There was no participatory or transparent process in formulation of NAPCC or even the specific mission plans. When this issue was raised before the joint secretary, Union Ministry of Environment and Forests in September 2008, he said that participatory process should be taken up during formulation of the mission plans, but that too has not happened. This cannot be an acceptable situation in any democracy.

Hiding behind the Poor The Indian government rightly says that they have no obligation to reduce GHG emissions, following the 'common but differentiated responsibility' as described in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The question is, why should the same principles of common but differentiated responsibility and equity not be followed within India?

Limited solutions All the solutions offered across the world so far suffer from the limitation in that they do not advocate reduction in consumption by the rich, including the rich in India. They all seem to suggest the current consumption levels and even further growth in the same is possible to be sustained by various measures, including improving efficiency, shifting to renewable sources of energy and electricity and by adopting some new technologies. While Indian government claims it is serious about mitigation, in practice the entire development trajectory and specific policy measures such as promoting cheap flights and finance for cheap and luxury cars promotes the growth of emissions, and largely directed to benefited the rich. Can the earth's environment sustain this if all the people of the earth were to aspire for the level of consumption now being used by the US and Western Europe?

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No Targets for emission reduction[1] The NAPCC has no targets for emission reduction for India, except saying that India will not exceed the levels of emissions of the developed countries. India would be suffering greater impacts of climate change than US, Europe or even China. Within India, the worst sufferers would be the most vulnerable sections depending on the natural resources for their daily needs, including the adivasis, the coastal communities, the mountain communities, the rainfed farmers, the land less and the marginal and small farmers, the dalits, the women and the poor. The contribution of these vulnerable sections of our population is very little or negative. It is in the name of development of these people that Indian government is saying we need to be allowed to increase emissions. The trouble, Sir, is that these people are not participant selecting the development options. Nor are these people benefiting from most of the mega projects of development. On the contrary, they are suffering further deprivations of their meager resources. If the development of these sections, including providing access to electricity to them is the objective, then there are options available that does not require India to continue to increase emissions. In fact, for the sake of these vulnerable sections, the government of India needs to commit nationally (NOT internationally) that India will cap its emissions, the target can be decided through a participatory process.

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CDM Projects: In principle the claimed benefits from CDM projects and carbon trade projects are suspect. Therefore, our government should dissociate itself from it as soon as possible. But as long as it continues as part of the Kyoto Protocol, some minimum steps need to be taken to bring it under public scrutiny. Firstly, most projects that have entered the CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) projects pipeline from India can not be described as part of sustainable development, nor do they deserve CDM credits. It is noteworthy that most of these are controlled by corporate bodies that are responsible for lion's share of India's corporate emissions. While the practice of giving single window clearance to such projects must stop, we need to make the host country clearance process transparent, accountable, participatory and credible. Moreover, at least 75% of the credits from the credibly certified projects should go to local development projects.

THE WATER SECTOR Some important recommendations in this sector include the following.

Opportunity to reverse wrong policies The climate change has provided us a unique, once in a century kind of opportunity to assess, review, reflect on our current policies and reverse them where we have gone wrong. This opportunity must not be allowed to go waste. We have a water crisis on our hands even without the climate change, with vast populations still not able to get water for basic human existence. More areas are slipping into problem zones as we are not able to ensure source sustainability, because of the wrong kind of priorities we have been following in water sector. Unfortunately, the National Water Mission and the NAPCC largely is a collection of business as usual projects, dominated by the misguided and wrong agenda of more big dams, more big surface storages, more large hydro projects, interlinking of rivers and so on.

Participatory process for NWM As noted above the proposed NWM has been formulated through a completely non participatory and non transparent process. A time bound, participatory process for formulation of National Water Mission, National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture and other missions should be taken up immediately. Credible panels can be set up for taking up this exercise.

Knowledge Base Our knowledge base on the issue of impacts of climate change on water sector is poor. Immediately, we need to come out with a report on the state of the knowledge in this sector and we need to have annual updates of this report.

National Water Security Act We urgently need an act from 3 perspectives: Human Right perspective, including health perspective, ensuring provision of clean water required for drinking and domestic water use for all as a right; from the livelihood perspective, ensuring the water required for livelihood for all and from the ecologic

[1] Same letter has also been sent to members of the PM's advisory council on climate change, to the members of high level steering group and various sub committees of the National Water Mission, to the members of the Planning commission, ministers and secretaries of the concerned ministries, large number of members of the Parliament. Colleagues from endorsing organisations have also sent the letters to the concerned at the state level.

perspective, ensuring protection of rivers, wetlands, lakes, water bodies, etc.

Review and Reform Water Law There is an urgent need to review prevailing water related laws in India from the perspective of environmental sustainability and social justice. Current laws are totally devoid of an ecological, integrated approach and do not reflect the basic principle that water is a common good and a precious natural resource. The reform process needs to be undertaken in a highly participatory, decentralized, and democratic way.

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Common Property Resource Water is essentially common property resource, the state, where it has a role, is supposed to act as a trustee of this resource, in the interest of the people's basic needs, in a democratic manner, which is not the situation today. The proposition in NAPCC and NWM proposal for developing "new regulatory structures, combined with appropriate entitlements and pricing" and also the urban water regime seem more like a push towards privatization of water resources, which is not helpful, appropriate or acceptable.

Governance The fundamental problem plaguing this sector is lack of democratic governance. We urgently need to set up legal and institutional mechanisms to ensure bottom up, participatory, accountable governance for rivers, for pollution control, river action plans, for groundwater, for environment management, irrigation systems, lakes, rivers, wetlands, embankments, canals, pipelines, and other related water infrastructure. Such project/river specific committees should be statutory bodies with powers to make necessary mandatory orders with respect to the functioning of the projects.

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Reservoir Operation Committees To ensure proper & optimum functioning of the existing and under construction reservoirs in the interest of the people, each reservoir should have a reservoir operation committee, in which at least 50% members should come from the local communities. As a step in that direction, the reservoir operation rules & actual reservoir operation details (inflows, outflows, levels, capacities, & anticipated inflows) should all be made public *suo moto* on daily basis for each large dam.

Irrigation Efficiency The objective of increasing the irrigation efficacy is much needed and laudable, but such attempts in the past has not succeeded because of the top down, unaccountable governance systems. Such attempts have left the governance of the larger systems outside the reach of the water users. Unless this is changed fundamentally, such attempts won't succeed.

Groundwater We need to understand that groundwater is India's national water lifeline and will remain so for many years to come for all sorts of water use. If we want to ensure sustainable existence of this lifeline, we need work on three fronts: Firstly, ensure the sustenance of the existing groundwater recharge systems including local water systems & their catchments, wetlands and rivers; secondly, give top priority to creation of more such systems and thirdly, put in place credible, legally enforceable community led regulation. At the same time, the government needs to promote greater access of groundwater to the underprivileged, particularly dalits and other backward classes.

Rivers, wetlands and water bodies Indian culture and religions are supposed to value Rivers, but our governance system has no value for rivers flowing with freshwater all round the year. To bridge this serious lacuna, we need a law for ensuring that perennial rivers have freshwater flow all round the year, sufficient for various purposes including groundwater recharge, social and environment needs. Similarly we need law for protection of wetlands, water bodies and catchment of water bodies. We also need to declare some of the river/ tributaries in each state as NO GO zones, where no dams/ barrages/ hydropower projects are allowed.

- Given the link between forests and fresh water flows in rivers, there is an urgent need to take up catchment area eco restoration of at least the highly degraded river basins as a long term strategy, such restoration would also help the cause of climate.
- There is also a need to have comprehensive, credible assessment of basin wide potential of water resources development through watershed development, groundwater recharge, local water systems. Such systems are efficient in harvesting rainwater, in ensuring groundwater recharge and are in fact more appropriate from employment

generation point of view. Such an assessment does not exist for any basin, it can be started with say Ken and Betwa rivers basins. In the context of climate change, such options should have top priority.

- Local water systems are efficient in harvesting rainwater, in ensuring groundwater recharge and are in fact more appropriate from employment generation point of view. Such systems, through examples like Hirwe Bazar in Maharashtra, Laporia in Rajasthan and numerous other places, have shown that they are the best adaptation measures even in the climate change context.

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Agriculture Organic farming practices must be incentivised, chemicals based farming dis-incentivised. Increased organic matter in soil will also increase the water security for the rain-fed farmers, since it will help increase the moisture holding capacity of the soils, in addition to having mitigation effect from climate perspective. Water saving, high yielding and low input requiring practices like the System of Rice Intensification should be taken up in right earnest at all the appropriate locations, including North West India. **In fact, SRI can be of immense help in the current situation of uncertain monsoon rains as it would help spread the limited irrigation water over long distances, reduce the crop maturing period and reduce seed requirements by upto 90%.** Water intensive crops and cropping methods should be discouraged.

Urban areas Big cities are increasing going farther and farther away for tapping water resources for its seemingly insatiable thirst. This is not sustainable, equitable or climate friendly. Cities must be made to use its available local sources, including rainwater, local water bodies and groundwater in a sustainable way, the waste water must be treated to recyclable level and a cap must be put on how much water they can get. The massive Renuka dam on Giri River in Himachal Pradesh, being proposed for the water requirement of Delhi, is an example of inappropriate water project for an already water rich city. For example, the Planning Commission document *Integrated Water Management Policy and Actions* dated May 2009 says, "Delhi, for instance, has more water per capita than Paris."

Decentralised waste water treatment Decentralized waster water treatment facilities should be the norm. The decentralized systems would also be less energy intensive, less cost intensive, more efficient and is actually likely to lead to more recycling of the treated water.

Mainstreaming Climate Change The environment impact assessment and decision making process of the water reservoirs in India should include an assessment of the possible impact of climate change on such projects and also the possible contribution of such projects to climate change, including the assessment of methane emission from such projects. On this last issue, India should take up a study of methane emission from existing reservoirs. In the decision making process, relative carbon footprint of different water options should also be an issue of consideration.

Approach The approach towards water must not be a purely supply side response, in any case not through more large projects. Equity and access to water for all through rights based regime and democratic, bottom up, management must be a central plank for any plans.

A fundamental problem plaguing this sector is lack of democratic governance. We urgently need to set up legal and institutional mechanisms to ensure bottom up, participatory, accountable governance for rivers, for pollution control, river action plans, for groundwater, for environment management, irrigation systems, lakes, rivers, wetlands, embankments, canals, pipelines, and other related water infrastructure.

National Water Policy For the formulation of a new NWP, a detailed participatory exercise should be started immediately. The NAPCC recommends such review only in consultation with states, but this has to be a bottom up, participatory process.

Priority for Maintenance of existing infrastructure Make available adequate funds in the budget as a first priority to maintain the existing water related infrastructure before spending money on new schemes. For example, there is a need to ensure that water bodies, reservoirs and canals do not get silted up and therefore there is a need to make adequate investments for catchment area treatment of existing large, medium and small dams and also for regular desilting of canals and smaller systems. Similarly maintenance of the canal infrastructure to ensure optimum use of created infrastructure should be given a top priority. To ensure that all this actually gets done in a transparent and

accountable way, the governance in water sector will have to be changed so that the local people have decisive say in planning, decision making, implementation and operation of the systems.

Weeding out unviable ongoing projects There are a very large number of ongoing big irrigation projects, many of them are non viable or amounting to zero sum game as the basins or sub basins where they are situated are already over exploited. They are a drain on the economy & there is a need for a credible, independent process to ensure that unviable & undesirable projects may be weeded out or scaled down appropriately.

Big cities are increasing going farther and farther away for tapping water resources for its seemingly insatiable thirst. This is not sustainable, equitable or climate friendly. Cities must be made to use its available local sources, including rainwater, local water bodies and groundwater in a sustainable way, the waste water must be treated to recyclable level and a cap must be put on how much water they can get. The massive Renuka dam on Giri River in Himachal Pradesh, being proposed for the water requirement of Delhi, is an example of inappropriate water project for an already water rich city.

Environment Impact Assessment Our EIAs are notorious for numerous fundamental failures, including blatant plagiarism, falsehoods, and inaccuracies. Firstly, the EIAs must be made available to local people in their languages. Secondly, all large dams, irrigation projects, flood management projects, hydro projects above 500 KW must go through the EIA and public hearing process.

Lack of integration across NAPCC There is no attempt to ensure cross sectoral integration across the various parts of NAPCC, missions and development path. Thus while the mission for Himalayan ecosystem talks about the vulnerability of millions in mountain environs, the ongoing and proposed initiatives on hydropower projects and the infrastructure that comes along with it is not only threatening the lives and livelihoods of these people, it is also hastening the process of glacier melt through direct impacts, through change in climate in the mountains and also through some local positive feedback mechanisms. Similarly, the initiatives on thermal power projects and mining (including coal, bauxite) proposals are threatening the water resources at numerous sites. The inappropriately undertaken massive agenda of road construction in mountains is cutting of local water streams, which are local people's lifeline. Inappropriate mining is destroying both surface and groundwater. There are no policies for appropriate citing of industries, considering the situation of land, water, forests, climate implications and so on.

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We would be happy to meet you to explain this further, if necessary. Thanking you for your attention, we look forward to your detailed response.

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