

## The Dilemma of Interlinking Indian Rivers

*The proposed scheme of Interlinking Indian rivers has taken the centre stage because of the social and economic impacts expected to be delivered, once implemented. Proponents speak about achieving food security, economic prosperity, while opponents claim that there will be serious disadvantages of the project in relation to the environment and others. CUTS Policy Option Note makes an attempt to raise the issue of inefficient governance structure and policy imbalance in the water sector, which might hamper the successful implementation of the scheme.*

### Background

National River Linkage Project (NRLP), the plan to interlink the river basins and to create a new 'Water Grid System' comes at a time when the issue of water scarcity is being raised as one of the key global concerns. Threat of drought, contamination of surface water and fast depleting ground water has altogether pushed the Indian Government to come up with a strategy of ensuring sustainable water supply for its growing population.

The mentioned initiative follows from the objective of balancing water between the surplus and the scarce basins while developing further opportunities for power generation, for achieving food security and for planning the enhanced irrigation scheme.

Rivers in India play an important role in the life of people as they are perceived with the feeling of sacredness and sustenance. They provide drinking water, agriculture, electricity and most importantly, provides livelihood to a large number of people. The entire concept of 'National Water Grid' is not new; this has been introduced before by numerous eminent experts like, Dr. K L Rao, Sir Arthur Cotton,

among others. In 1994, the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), under the Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India, had proposed the National Perspective Plan consisting of 14 canal links, under the Himalayan component and 16 canal links, under the peninsular component to transfer surplus water to the deficit areas. Later, in the year 2006, NWDA started a study on intra-state river links.

The proposed water development scheme has generated several debates. Those who are advocating the implementation of the project, argue about achieving food security by increasing the irrigation area. The proposed scheme will boost the national economy by sectorial growth in agriculture, power and fisheries.

A new navigation route within the states will be integrated through interlinking of water basin and will be financially more beneficial and efficient to the nation for transportation of bulky commodities like coal, food grains, ores, etc. in comparison to road transportation. Significantly, the challenge of availability of clean drinking water would be resolved by ensuring continuous supply in all the urban and rural areas.

## Issues and Concerns

However, several NGO's/experts disagree with the concept and believe that manipulation with environment on such a large scale could result in ecological imbalance. The proposed scheme envisages transfer of water from surplus basins to drought prone basins irrespective of whether they are riparian/co basin or not. The country has witnessed a bitter quarrel and enmity amongst the states as for example, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the sharing of water from the river Kaveri, even though both the states are riparian. One can well imagine the degree of complexity and the dispute that will arise over sharing of water once the proposed scheme is implemented. Who is going to control and operate this mega project? This is the key question to be answered.

In India, due to geographical diversification, water is available unequally across the states resulting into inadequate water administration. There is an absence of division of powers among the Centre and State governments over water resource management. The lack of inter-ministerial coordination in general and the absence of sound policies will further add to the worries. Also, the dearth of comprehensive approach towards policy formation among various Ministries could result in the mis-management of water usage. For instance, while the Water Ministry may formulate sound water conservation policy and the other Ministries may have contradictory priority of water usage.

The proposed scheme involves construction of a 2,640 Kilometre canal, linking the Ganga in the north with Kaveri in the south. This massive level construction will require land for power plants and canal building. Consequently, the issue of

resettlement and rehabilitation of the displaced people, under scheme will be raised. For this, proper coordination between the Central and the State Governments will be crucial to develop the comprehensive approach otherwise the situation will be exacerbated.

## The Way Forward

Management of water is one of the national priorities and to achieve the same, efficient water governance is vital. Water has to be treated as a community-owned resource, thus people's participation is imperative while formulating policies/schemes. It cannot be just top down approach; it has to be bottom-up approach as well. And to follow the same, the Centre needs to work in coordination with all the State Governments and vice-versa as also resonated by the present Prime Minister. Therefore, State Governments are expected to be in a better position to handle the policy concerns as they are familiar with the ground realities and the lack of synchronisation among the State and the Centre Government has resulted into policy distortions in the sector.

The role of key stakeholders is important in knowledge sharing on inter-linkage. Thus, one can conclude that the focus should be on settling the inter-state disputes, strengthen inter-ministerial coordination while ensuring the quality of river basins. The scheme should be implemented with the cooperation right from the State Government to the local bodies and involving private-public partnership and integration with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme.

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