



MEDIA RELEASE

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WATER AND FOOD CRISES INEXTRICABLY LINKED

Colombo, June 18 2008. The International Water Management Institute today issues a warning that we will not be able to feed all the world's population in the coming decades unless we begin to manage our water supplies better. Dr Colin Chartres, Director General of IWMI said "The world's population is predicted to increase from 6 to 8.5 billion over the next 20-30 years. If people are to be adequately nourished we need to find at least a further 2000 to 3000 cubic kilometers of water for irrigated and rainfed cropping. This is no easy task as it is about 33% of what is currently used and many countries are already water scarce."

It takes 1 liter of water to grow 1 calorie of food and as more people move to western style diets an average person will be "consuming" 2500-3000 liters of water per day that has been used to grow their food. About 70% of the world's extracted fresh water is currently consumed by agriculture.

Water scarcity already exists in many developing and some developed countries. Unfortunately, many of the water-scarce countries are home to the world's most under-nourished people, numbering almost 1 billion. Water scarcity can be physical, in which case most of a country's available fresh water resources are being extracted and used. It can also be economic, in which case there has not been adequate investment in knowledge and infrastructure required to develop water resources for agriculture or for drinking water and sanitation.

The current food crisis has occurred because of growing demand in a period when supply has been hit by a series of poor harvests, biofuel producing crops competing for land and water, dietary change and changes in commodity trading. Water supplies are coming under equal demand pressure. Water currently used in agriculture is affected by all these factors and comes under increasing competition from urban users, environmental flow requirements, and potential supply reductions due to climate change.

Dr Chartres said, “The current situation for many countries is very serious. However, it seems to take drought and starvation for us to resort to a stop gap solution that requires emergency aid for food imports. The sensible way forward is to plan water supplies for agriculture more carefully, so that we can tide ourselves through drought years.”

In sub-Saharan Africa, water storage per head is as low as 38 cubic meters. Compare this to the US or Australia where approximately 4-6000 cubic meters are available per person. Improving water storage can be achieved not only by large dams, which may be required in some countries, but also through a range of other options. These options include better use of groundwater, water harvesting on small plots to small irrigation schemes fed by small reservoirs. All have a role in helping people have enough water for food production and domestic supplies. Similarly, increasing the productivity of existing irrigation and rainfed production systems is possible given investment in appropriate research and development that leads to better crop cultivars, better farming management and better soil water storage.

Unfortunately, since the success of the green revolution 40 to 50 years ago, investment in all areas of agricultural research and development has dwindled seriously. A major effort is now required to renew and increase this investment, focusing on a new green, and “blue” revolution that helps all developing countries adopt sustainable ways of providing and managing water for agricultural and other uses.

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Note to Editors :

IWMI is a non-profit, scientific research organization focusing on the sustainable use of water and land resources in agriculture, to benefit poor people in developing countries. IWMI’s Mission is ‘Improving the management of water and land resources for food, livelihoods and nature.’ IWMI has its headquarters in Sri Lanka and regional offices in Africa and Asia. The Institute works in partnership with developing countries, international and national research institutes, universities and other organizations to develop tools and technologies that contribute to poverty reduction as well as food and livelihood security.

For more information on IWMI and its work visit: www.iwmi.org.

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