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Bridges Trade BioRes • Volume 9 • Number 14 • 21st August 2009

## Asia Faces Increased Reliance on Food Imports without Water Reform: Report

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Developing countries in Asia could have to import more than a quarter of the rice, wheat and maize needed to feed their populations by 2050, a new report by the [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#) and the Food and Agricultural Organization says.

According to the report, entitled 'Revitalizing Asia's Irrigation: To sustainably meet tomorrow's food needs', Asian food and feed demand will double by the year 2050. This increase, the authors say, will be driven by continued population growth, rising demand for dairy and meat products in urban centres, and diversification of agriculture into more lucrative 'niche' markets. With limited capacity to expand arable land in most parts of Asia, meeting the additional demand will require a combination of improved land and water management practices and an increasing reliance on trade.

Colin Chartres, director-general of the warned that choosing to rely on trade to meet a significant portion of this demand would place a massive burden on the economics of many developing countries where a large number of people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Compounding the risk of this strategy are increasingly volatile international markets, which could cause cereal prices to continue to rise.

The degree to which Asia turns to trade to meet their growing food demands will depend on their ability to refine current agricultural production strategies. "The best bet for Asia lies in revitalising its vast irrigation systems, which account for 70 percent of the world's total irrigated land," Chartres says.

Large, outdated irrigation schemes have failed to meet the needs of modern farming methods, which require reliable, flexible year round service, the report says. As a result, millions of farmers have taken it upon themselves to irrigate their land, in many cases employing antiquated and inefficient pump technology. "Governments' inability to regulate this practice is giving rise to scary scenarios of groundwater over-exploitation, which could lead to regional food crises and widespread social unrest," said [IWMI's](#) Tushaar Shah.

Under the status quo, the report found that South Asia would need to see a 57 percent increase in water available for irrigation, while East Asia would require a 70 percent increase. Additionally, the scenarios forecasted in the report do not include the impact of global warming, which is expected to make rainfall more erratic and less plentiful in some agricultural regions over the coming decades.

In this light, the study concludes that improving the water productivity of irrigated agriculture not only offers huge opportunities to increase food production and enhance livelihoods, but will also help the region respond to climate change impacts and water scarcity. Realising this potential will require new approaches to investing in infrastructure, reforming institutions and building capacity, the authors say.

Strategies put forward by the report range from modernising outdated irrigation infrastructure to encouraging public-private partnerships in order to increase investment in modern, more efficient methods, among others.

The report's findings were presented at the start of the Stockholm World Water Week, a conference that brings together 2,500 scientists, politicians and other officials to discuss the converging challenges that characterise the world's growing water crisis.

### More information

A copy of the full report can be accessed here: [http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/SWW2009/PDF/Revitalizing%20Asia%27s%20Irrigation\\_Low.pdf](http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/SWW2009/PDF/Revitalizing%20Asia%27s%20Irrigation_Low.pdf)

ICTSD Reporting; "Asia faces food shortage without water reform: UN," AFP, 17 August 2009.

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