Prioritising the processes beyond the water sector that will secure water for society - farmers in political, economic, and social contexts

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Re-thinking paradigms: water and food security

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Sub-themes

Communication and impact

Doing the right thing a little badly is better than doing the wrong thing extremely well

Wicked problems – uncertainty linked to urgency

Risk >>> Probability v Uncertainty >>>> Ambiguity
Sub-themes

Communication and impact
What appears in the press is only as good as our ability to engage with journalists AND the prejudices of the media owners

Guardian 20080813
Sub-themes

Communication and impact

Doing the right thing a little badly is better than doing the wrong thing extremely well

Wicked problems - uncertainty linked to urgency

Risk >>> Probability v Uncertainty >>>> Ambiguity
The oil market has an extraordinary history. It has massively advantaged the advanced economies.

Constant prices
A Wicked Moment
Urgent & Uncertain

Our current Wicked Moment
25 years doing the wrong thing extremely well.
25 years doing the wrong thing extremely well

Atmosphere-slaughter but not Atmosphere-murder
Two types of water of water by volume of demand – water for food is ten times all other uses
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1. Farmers manage big water
2. Farmers compete with the environment on our behalf for water - and some of us over-consume
3. The importance of food commodity prices for farmers - and other determining contexts
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1. Farmers manage big water

2. Farmers compete with the environment on our behalf for water - and some of us over-consume

3. The importance of food commodity prices for farmers - and other determining contexts

4. International food commodity trade - successes and failures
First, farming communities manage the big water used and consumed by society.

They manage about 80 per cent of the water used in our economies - about 70 per cent by volume of this water is green water and 30 per cent is blue water.

Unless society reduces its food consumption we shall have to rely on farmers worldwide to raise the productivity of green and blue water to meet the food consumption needs of a future global population of about nine billions.
Secondly, farmers compete on our behalf with the environment for water and tend to impair the water services of the environment.

A joint effort is needed - both via:

1. increases in water productivity on the farms
2. changed patterns of food consumption by society.

The latter will both enhance human and environmental health and reduce the consumptive use of water.
The third element of a more secure water managing scenario is one where the prices of food commodities and other incentives send signals to farmers that they should produce crops with less water and with practices that do not impair the services of the water environment.

Farmers have achieved spectacular increases in returns to water even in our own lifetimes. Price incentives work when they are reliable and long term and not a misguided solution to wicked problems.

e.g. NW Europe, India & China, Vietnam
The fourth element of fundamental importance is international trade.

International food commodity trade has been spectacularly successful in meeting the needs of at least 150 economies that have run out of water.

But global trade is not fair. International trade in agricultural commodities has been severely distorted for decades.

Its terms punish the weak economies of for example Africa. Food production is the major livelihood of most of the peoples of Africa. But the water productivity of African farmers is the lowest worldwide.
Millions of African farming families are repeatedly driven back into poverty by the level of international food prices kept low by the governments and food producing interests in Europe and the United States.

Farmers everywhere must be nurtured and encouraged to prosper by increasing - in some cases doubling or more - their water productivity.

Doubled rainfed water productivity in Africa would be of global significance with respect to future global water security. [Absence of FAO]
Not everyone trades
Inter-regional trade – net exporters and importers

Cubic kilometres per year

Net exporter km³/yr

Net importer km³/yr

Australia & NZ
North America
South America
Western Europe
Eastern Europe
Central America
Central Africa
Southern Africa
Former Soviet Union
Middle East & N Africa
South East Asia
East & South Asia
Inter-regional trade – net exporters and importers

Cubic kilometres per year

Net exporter km³/yr

Net importer km³/yr

Water Loss

Water Saving

Australia & NZ
North America
South America
Western Europe
Eastern Europe
Central America
Central Africa
Southern Africa
Former Soviet Union
Middle East & N Africa
South East Asia
East & South Asia
Virtual water 'exports' and 'imports' - some industrialised, BRICS and less developed economies - 1997-2001 - cubic kilometres per year
Virtual water 'exports' and 'imports' - some industrialised, BRICS and less developed economies - 1997-2001 - cubic kilometres per year

- 35 economies
- 5 economies
- 165 economies
Water security is an elusive concept.

The volume of water is important but what we do with water is more important.

Farmers do more with water than any other agent and societies need to nurture farmers and incentivise them to gain even higher returns from green and blue water than they have. They can achieve higher returns, in some cases much higher returns, in conditions that protect them from environmental and especially market uncertainties.
In addition society itself has the solution in its own hands as it can modify its demands for water resources by reducing waste, modifying diet and levelling-off the rate of population increase either as a consequence of socio-economic advancement or demographic policy.

As usual

We need to look beyond the water sector to achieve water security.
In addition society itself has the solution in its own hands as it can modify its demands for water resources by reducing waste, modifying diet and levelling-off the rate of population increase either as a consequence of socio-economic advancement or demographic policy.

As usual

We need to look beyond the water sector to achieve water security.
Thank you

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Other ways of considering water saving

Through raising crops in places that achieve high returns to water

1Global system savings thro’ trade in:

Grains 222 km3  Oil crops 68 km3  Total 352 km3/yr
Chapagain & Fraiture make similar estimates

2National water savings – for example Egypt

Total saving thro’ vw ‘trade’  3.2 km3/yr
Chapagain