

# A flood of questions



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## Several issues must be sorted out first before the ambitious river linking plan is taken up

The National Democratic Alliance government is all set to begin work on an estimated \$87 billion plan to connect around 60 of India's largest rivers; this includes the Ganga. Once complete, it is expected to help end farmers' dependence on fickle monsoon rains, bring millions of hectares of cultivable land under irrigation and help generate thousands of megawatts of electricity.

### Water management

The river-linking plan was first proposed in 2002 by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government. However, it was stalled as States failed to end differences over water sharing contracts and clearances. This government has been able to push through clearances for the first phase of the project. Work is now set to link the Betwa and Ken rivers which pass through Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, States ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Several issues should be sorted out first before billions of rupees are spent on a project like this. Water is listed as entry 17 in List II of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. While the government has initiated discussions to bring the subject under the concurrent list, it may not be an easy task to achieve. Also, if there are changes in the political dispensation in various States, the government in a State that is upstream, for example, may refuse to share water with downstream States. When there has been a deficient monsoon, we have seen conflicts arise among States over water

access. Thus, without having a full-fledged architecture to solve disputes, it would not be prudent to embark on a mammoth project like this.

Second, India is technically poor with respect to data related to the water sector. Unlike other countries, the Central Statistics Office has neither attempted nor funded studies to gather data on water tables at an all-India or State level. Many water stressed countries produce these on a regular basis at a regional level and link them to national accounts statistics. Basically, 'water resource accounts provide an accounting framework that enables the integration of specialised physical resource sector data with other information on the economics of water supply and use in a structure that is consistent with the way data on economic activities are organised in the system of national accounts. In addition to facilitating the integration and sharing of a more comprehensive knowledge base, the natural resource accounting framework provides the basis for evaluating the consistency between the objectives and priorities of water resource management and broader goals of economic development planning and policy at a national and local scale. This in turn improves communication between various agencies generating and using information about water for various purposes and contributes to better coordination, packaging and analyses of such information that are more relevant to the needs of water managers and policy-makers'. The advantage of such an account is that it makes it possible to capture direct, indirect and induced water demand in the process of economic production. Since indirect and induced water demands are typically higher/closer to direct demand, it is essential to include them in combination with water supply table data while estimating the water balance situation in a region.

#### Context of agriculture

Fourth, the government should pay more attention to its 'more crop per drop' mission, to what extent Indian agriculture follows this practice and whether water-stressed regions are water exporters due to the crops they cultivate. However, there is a dearth of studies in the Indian context — unlike other countries — addressing the gap by first analysing water flows embodied (virtual/hidden) in agriculture products moving between the States to create knowledge on the flows. The absence of a well-informed

water policy reflects a knowledge governance gap. A recent study (Katyaini and Barua, 2016) on virtual water (VW) flow assessment in respect of foodgrains indicates that though the north zone is highly water scarce, it is a net VW exporter to the highly water scarce west and south, which are net VW importers. Among the north zone States, Punjab has the highest water losses, while Maharashtra (west) and Tamil Nadu (south) the highest water savings in 1996–2005 and 2005–2014, respectively. Therefore, at a subnational scale, VW flows are not consistent with relative water scarcity. This finding is also crucial as it emphasises the need to carry out a subnational VW flow assessment. Such analysis for all the major crops at subnational levels is a must for efficient planning of a scarce resource such as water.

There is much to be done before embarking on a gigantic project of river linking.

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The views expressed are personal