

Water scarcity affects one in three

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A third of the world's population is suffering from a shortage of water, raising the prospect of "water crises" in countries such as China, India and the US.

Scientists had forecast in 2000 that one in three would face water shortages by 2025, but water experts have been shocked to find that this threshold has already been crossed.

Frank Rijsberman, director-general of the International Water Management Institute, said: "We will have to change business as usual in order to deal with the growing water scarcity crisis."

About a quarter of the world's population lives in areas of "physical water shortage", where natural forces, over-use and poor agricultural practices have led to falling groundwater levels and rivers drying up. But a further 1bn people face "economic water shortages", because lack the necessary infrastructure to take water from rivers and aquifers.

The findings come from a report compiled by 700 experts over five years, the Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture from the International Water Management Institute, presented on Monday at World Water Week in Stockholm, an international meeting of water experts.

David Molden, co-ordinator of the report, said: "If we continue to manage water in the way we do now, there will more problems with scarcity."

He said agricultural practices could easily be improved to reduce the wastage of water.

Farming uses up 70 times more water than is used for domestic purposes such as cooking and washing. In Thailand, the amount of water used to grow food is about 2,800 litres per person per day. In Italy, about 3,300 litres are required to produce each person's food every day, of which about half goes on making ham and cheese and a third to pasta and bread.

Shortages of water are already biting in countries such as Egypt, which imports more than half of its food because it lacks enough water to grow more. In Australia, there is a water shortage in the Murray-Darling basin because so much has been diverted for use in agriculture. In the US, there are increasing disputes with Mexico over the sinking levels of water in the Colorado river.

Water shortages are compounded by corruption, according to Transparency International. David Nussbaum, chief executive, said between 20 and 40 per cent of total investment in the water sector "does not flow to the people who should be getting the clean water and sanitation".

He said big water projects, such as the construction of water networks and treatment facilities, were subject to corruption on a grand scale, but that petty corruption was also common, for instance in cases of people paying bribes to have their water bills reduced.

The result of both was that it cost poor people more to get access to water, he said.

But he pointed to the success of a high-profile water "integrity pact" developed in Karachi in Pakistan since 2002 and completed in May this year, as an example of how water projects could be made more transparent. He said the pact had saved at least \$3m that would otherwise have been lost to corruption.

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