Water for Food

A summary overview of the online consultation on Water for Food revealed that:

1) The dilemmas on what to grow with the water available;
2) The dilemmas on where to put the water allocated to the agriculture sector – commercial farmers versus smallholders;
3) The role of technology in limiting water used for *food*;
4) Consumer responsibility in the water used for food; and
5) Food production, distribution and consumption responsibility in water misuse in agriculture, particularly in urban context when food is wasted.

Key messages

Agriculture - crop farming, fishery, forestry and livestock - is the largest water user but production and water use is influenced by our consumption patterns. Agriculture can do more with less water and become more adaptive if supported adequately. Changes are needed along the whole food chain from production to consumption.

1) Impact assessment required to choose cropping patterns - The crop selection matter for the economy and has implications. It implies tough decisions. The discussion on water for food or water for energy from agriculture seems to conclude that a) priority in a country is clearly food for its population and crops should not been used to produce energy (except in cases where there are no impact on the local population); b) first generation biofuels should be avoided, only 2nd to 3rd generation biofuels using waste of crop transformation should be explored. However proper impact assessments should be done as "costs may out weight benefits" and c) the policy trade-offs needed to balance options: food import, local food production/food security, biofuel production, etc.

2) A human rights-based approach to water for food - Many different farming systems, in type and size, co-exist. The question is not commercial versus small holders but how they should co-exist to contribute to food security, and demonstrate their ability to use water in the most efficient and responsible way. Smallholders should be given the same opportunities, rights and obligations to access and use water.

3) Integrated approach to water management in agriculture - Technology has a key role to play to support agriculture water management transformation into a "smart" water user. However, these changes will require more than technical inputs, knowledge need to be shared – knowing how much and when to apply water - and mindset is to be changed in some cases understanding changing circumstances. A key issue is whether the technology is available to the poorest and most vulnerable who need water, and then whether they have the skills required to use it efficiently. Education and awareness from grassroots to decision maker level are key.

4) Mindful eating - Consumers have a key responsibility on how water is used in agriculture. They are influenced by the price of the products they buy and are often not informed of the way food items are produced. Consumers want to know how their food is produced. This has led to product differentiation on ethical grounds, which includes environmental considerations. There are: organic products, animal welfare-friendly products (free range eggs) and fair trade products (more of the consumer dollar goes to the farmer). It is time to inform consumers of the water footprint of the products they consume and they will change their attitude.

5) Mindful buying and mindful production - The whole supply chain can play a role in limiting the losses and waste. Education is key at all levels throughout the chain–for consumers, traders, supermarket, hotels etc.- about the products consumed, their life time, the waste volumes, composting techniques. Different means should be used (campaign, informing consumers, schools etc.). Farmers can also play a key role in rationalizing production and avoiding massive production. Cropping scheduling with adequate storage can help spread production on a longer period. Government and/or farmer organizations can coordinate with the farmers and develop a cropping pattern/cropping calendar, giving consideration to the irrigation and other facilities available.

Key issues for follow up

Integration - Access to water is needed for food production and demand for food increase with development and population growth. Water for food cannot be considered in isolation to the broader debate on water for the economy and its decisions made for energy, agriculture, trade, nature conservation and urban development.

Education and awareness rising are key to demystify the idea of a "greedy water for food" sector, and change mindset to build a "smart" society able to use efficiently water in agriculture acting along the whole chain from production to consumption.

Reducing water use in agriculture can be done addressing our diets, waste and mostly by **modernizing agriculture** (52% voted for that last option in the poll).