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Research News

Water Scarcity: A Shared Problem With a World of Solutions

2011-08-02



Tanya Heikkila (L) and Upmanu Lall (R) field questions from the audience.

On June 27th, the Columbia Water Center (CWC) held an international conference with participants from all of its PepsiCo Foundation partnership global projects. The conference, titled “Water Scarcity: A Shared Problem With a World of Solutions,” brought together Columbia scientists, practitioners and partners from four continents to discuss global water scarcity, present field-tested solutions from their own countries, transfer knowledge and discuss next steps to scale up current projects. More than 100 people attended the conference, including non-profit professionals, business and finance executives, students and teachers from throughout New York, and concerned members of the public.

Upmanu Lall, director of the Columbia Water Center, opened the conference by providing an overview of the global water crisis. Vijay Modi, professor of mechanical engineering at Columbia University, followed with a discussion of the energy-water-food nexus, highlighting the interconnectedness of these complex global challenges. While Modi emphasized the value of information technology in increasing water efficiency and conservation, Tanya Heikkila, associate professor at the School of Public Affairs at University of Colorado-Denver, stressed the importance of water policy and governance.

Staff from field projects in Brazil, India and Mali presented an overview of the local water and livelihood issues they are addressing through innovative, scalable solutions. Rajinder Sidhu, professor and dean of Punjab Agricultural University, spoke via Skype from India about the work being done to prevent groundwater depletion in Punjab. Raman Ahuja, vice president and business head of Field Fresh Foods in India—a highly engaged project partner—spoke about agriculture and food in India.



Modi talked about using an innovative rebate scheme to reduce pumping of water for irrigation in Gujarat, India. Shama Perveen, associate research scientist at CWC, discussed the India Water Stress Index project, which aims to promote the most water-efficient and productive cropping patterns throughout India. Finally, Dan Bena, senior director of sustainable development, and Claire Lyons, manager of foundation strategy and partnerships—

both of PepsiCo Inc.—discussed Pepsi's interest in and commitment to global water issues.

One of the recurring messages of the conference was that while the water crisis is global, the diversity of climate throughout the world requires solutions that are developed on a local scale, utilizing locally-appropriate technologies, social science and community engagement methodologies. In order to have a significant impact, however, methodologies proven effective at the local level must be replicable for use across regions and nations. This is the broader contribution of Columbia Water Center's global projects.

“We originally expected a few people to attend our conference, and were amazed at the large turnout,” said Julia Apland Hitz, CWC communications manager, who organized the event. “It shows how important the issue of water sustainability is to people in a lot of different sectors—corporate, academic, non-profit, government. There is a good understanding that we are all in this together, and have to find solutions together.” The public event was followed by two days of meetings with representatives from the PepsiCo Foundation and the communications firm GOOD.

Links to all [conference presentations](#) can be found on the Columbia Water Center website.

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