

China and India warned their water is running out

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The Ganges, India's most famous river, is now stagnant, according to Jeffrey Sachs.
Photograph: Getty Images

The world is running out of water and needs a radical plan to tackle shortages that threaten humanity's ability to feed itself, according to Jeffrey Sachs, director of the UN's Millennium Project.

Professor Sachs, the renowned American economist who is credited with prompting pop star Bono's crusade for African development, told an environment conference in Delhi that the world had "no more rivers to take water from".

India and China were facing severe water shortages and neither could use the same strategies for raising food output which has fed millions in recent times. "In 2050 we will have 9 billion people and average income will be four times what it is today," he said. "India and China have been able to feed their populations because they use water in an unsustainable way. That is no longer possible."

Since Asia's agricultural revolution, the amount of land under irrigation has tripled. But many parts of the continent have reached the limits of water supplies. "The Ganges [in India] and the Yellow river [in China] no longer flow. There is so much silting up and water extraction upstream they are pretty stagnant."

The academic said the mechanisms of shrinking water resources are not well understood. "We need to do for water what we did for climate change. How do we recharge aquifers? ... There's no policy anywhere in place at the moment."

Prof Sachs said that the rise of Asia was altering the world's resources in an unprecedented way; that for the first time humans, rather than nature, were shaping the environment.

"China is on course to be the biggest emitter of carbon dioxide by 2010 in the world. India is building eight 4,000Mw power plants. Are they ready for carbon capture? I don't think so."

The UK has been trying to persuade India to embrace green technology. But New Delhi still talks about the need for accelerating growth and views tackling climate change as a brake on the economy.

David Miliband, the British environment secretary said he was confident India would join a scheme for managing greenhouse gas emissions after the present Kyoto protocol runs out in 2012.

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