Sikh Human Rights Group  
UN 2023 Water Conference Written Submission

In the current environment of climate change, continuing industrialisation and increasing use of pesticides and fertilisers, the UN and its agencies have to play a greater role in ensuring clean water and adequate water. The water table is going down in many places where agriculture is water intensive. Some international agencies such as WTO and some States eager to achieve food autonomy have unwittingly led to excessive use of groundwater in farming. This is leading to the water table going down and possibility of desertification in the future. It is important that international institutions and States take cognisance of this and support policies that will encourage crop rotation and change to crops that require lesser water. Farming methods need to change with greater financial and knowledge support especially in areas where water table is getting deeper.

Regions such as Punjab in India and Pakistan are facing water issues. In a region where five rivers flowed, hence the name Punjab, meaning five rivers, water table has gone down to 100 meters in some regions and going deeper. This is extremely concerning. Farmers are caught in a web of complex circumstances, having to grow crops that consume a lot of water, in order to make any profit.

Governments can promote crops that are less water intensive through appropriate subsidies that ignore market principles but concentrate on preserving water accessibility. But international institutions also need to change their policies that seem to favour the market rather than take environmental issues into consideration. Things have to change. The theory and principles of market economics have to change and take broader issues than profits into consideration. These theories now need to factor in the monetary costs of environmental damage and collateral costs of people migrating of becoming dependent on other State subsidies for subsistence.

We are also concerned at the increasing pollution of groundwater as a result of increasing dependency on fertilisers and pesticides. Both are now found in groundwater and consequently in drinking water. There are increasing health risks as a result of this. There are also consequences on biodiversity which in turn has knock on effect on climate, insects, birds and nature of soil itself. The power of earth to sustain healthy crops and biodiversity is greatly affected. Pesticides kill more than unwanted insects.

Big corporations continue to push both fertilisers and pesticides. It seems that with every year the fertiliser itself has to be stronger.

There is a need to go back to organic farming. The UN, especially UNEP can offer support through education programmes to promote organic farming that is both sustainable and can lead to enough produce for a regional population. Knowledge and technology exists now to make both possible.

There is further need to develop affordable technology to make polluted groundwater drinkable. There are other causes of pollution of ground and drinking water. Technology exists to make water safer. The UN needs to take a lead to make this technology widely available.