



# If water is life...

*why do agricultural workers die every year from  
lack of access to potable water?*



***An IUF report to mark World Food Day, Oct 16, 2015***

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Further reading on the general situation of plantation workers and how their working conditions, including lack of access to potable water, lead to widespread violations of the right to food can be found in [Harvesting Hunger](#) – a joint publication by FIAN, Misereor and the IUF.

## Background to the report

At its 42<sup>nd</sup> session, October 12-15, 2105 the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) considered a report published by its High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) on [Water for food security and nutrition](#).

The HLPE report main findings begin with the statement:

*“Water is life. Water is essential to food security and nutrition. It is the lifeblood of ecosystems, including forests, lakes and wetlands, on which depend the food security and nutrition of present and future generations. Water of appropriate quality and quantity is essential for drinking and sanitation, for food production (fisheries, crops and livestock), food processing, transformation and preparation. Water is also important for the energy, industry and other economic sectors.*

*Water streams and bodies are often key ways for transport (including inputs, food and feed). All in all, water supports economic growth, and income generation, and thus economic access to food.”*

The HLPE report continues (page 18):

*“The human right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation were recognized in 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly.*

*It entitles everyone, without discrimination, to access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable drinking water and to physical and affordable access to sanitation for personal and domestic use.*

*It was incorporated in several constitutions and national legal orders.”*

“The human right to safe drinking water and sanitation and the human right to food have close ties because safe drinking water and sanitation are crucial for health and good nutrition, and because access to water is indispensable for food producers, and the right to food of producers. There are ongoing reflexions, warranting further exploration and research, on the consequences of these two rights for water governance, and how they can promote a human rights based approach to water governance for FSN. “

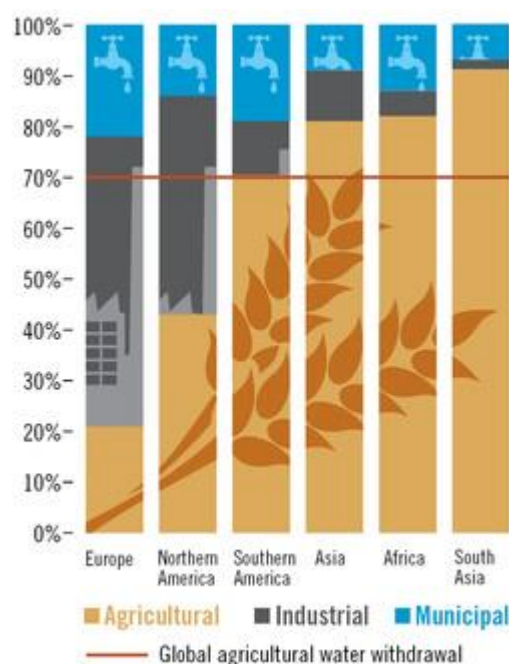
**The IUF asks:  
why then do agricultural workers  
die every year from dehydration  
and water-borne diseases?**

## The fundamental contradiction that must be addressed

According to the World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP)

- Agriculture is the largest consumer of freshwater by far and accounts for 70% of freshwater withdrawals from rivers, lakes and aquifers – up to more than 90% in some developing countries.
- Rainfed agriculture covers 80% of the world's cultivated land, and is responsible for about 60% of crop production. Today, irrigated agriculture covers 275 million hectares – about 20% of cultivated land – and accounts for 40% of global food production.

A graphic from the [Global agriculture – Agriculture at a crossroads](#) website illustrates this well:



## **The International legal framework (ILO) on agricultural workers' access to potable water**

**The ILO Plantations Convention, 110, 1958**, requires the establishment of minimum standards for plantation housing that cover water supply and sanitary facilities (Article 86).

**The ILO Convention on Safety and Health in Agriculture, 184, 2001**, calls for the provision of adequate welfare facilities at no cost to the worker (Article 19).

**The ILO Safety and Health in Agriculture Recommendation 192, 2001**, Paragraph 10 (a) calls for employers to provide “an adequate supply of safe drinking water.

**The ILO's Code of Practice on Safety and Health in Agriculture (2011)** contains important recommendations on the provision of safe water and sanitary facilities and makes the link between accessible potable water, dehydration and productivity:

*18.1.1 Dehydration quickly reduces physical and mental ability, thus reducing productivity and increasing the risk of accidents. For this reason, the employer must provide an adequate supply of potable water placed in locations readily accessible to workers. The water should be provided in sufficient amounts to meet the needs of all workers at the worksite, taking into account the air temperature, humidity and the nature of the work performed. [p.259]*

**But what is the  
reality?**

## IUF case studies from India and Pakistan

- i. In Matiari village in Sindh, Pakistan, sugarcane workers do not have access to clean drinking water at the workplace. They have to travel 5 – 10 Km to obtain potable water. Due to the poverty wages paid to them, they can't afford to spend money on travel to get water. They are left with no option but to drink the salty bore-hole water provided to them by the landlords.



- ii. In the same village (Maitari, Sindh, Pakistan), people use this canal water for bathing and bathing animals. The same canal is used by the sugarcane workers for drinking water as they work and at home for cooking food and for drinking water. Sugarcane workers suffer from various diseases including diarrhoea and other diseases of the digestive system and hepatitis.





- iii. In Sahiwal village in Pakistan, agricultural drink bore-hole water but the hand-pump is located 5-10 kms away from their workplaces. If they don't have to time to walk to the pump their only source of water is the canal.



- iv. In Renala village in Pakistan, agricultural workers have to travel 5 – 8 km to access the hand pump water to drink. The water is slightly salty.





- v. At tea plantations in West Bengal, India drinking water is only supplied to workers three times a day in rusted, reused tin containers. Workers work on the plantation for 9 hours in a day and the temperature in summer goes up to 35 degrees centigrade. The maximum amount they can drink at any one time is 250 – 300 ml. Workers reported that they experienced dizziness, breathing difficulties and palpitations, especially during summer.

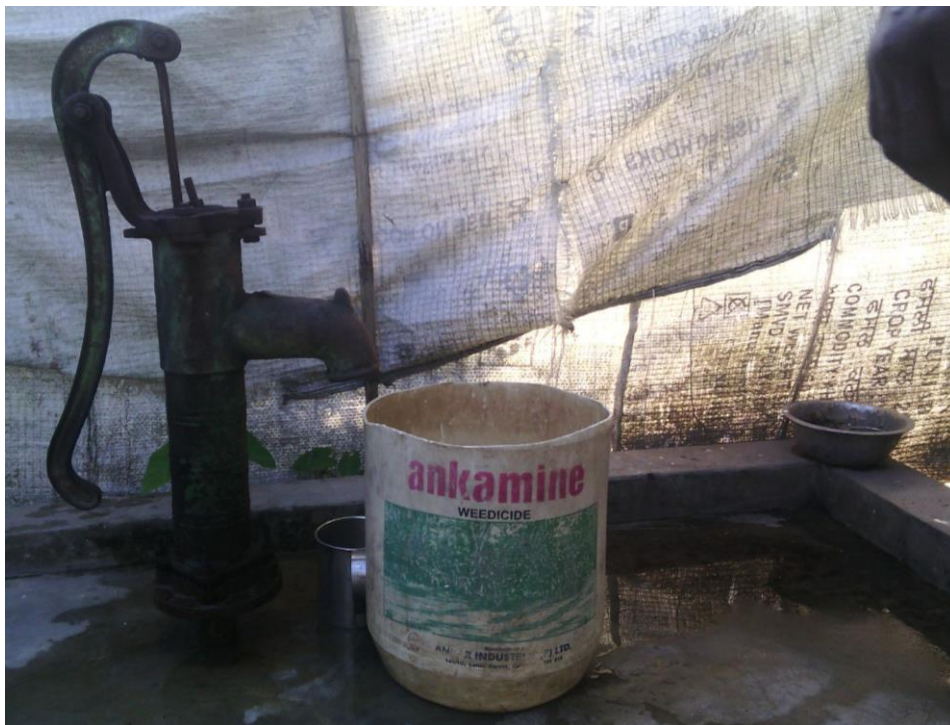




- vi. At a tea plantation in Assam the water supply is not in regular. Water is generally supplied twice a week. Workers have to wait in a queue. Sometimes water is distributed while workers are at work, so children collect the water.



- vii. At another tea plantation in Assam, workers use pesticide containers to store drinking water. The management doesn't dispose of the pesticide containers safely after using them.





- viii. Source of drinking water for plantation workers at the housing quarter on a tea plantation in West Bengal. The well and surroundings are covered by mosquitoes and other insects, a major cause of vector-borne diseases among workers.



- ix. At another tea plantation in Assam, workers get drinking water twice a day, at 9 am and then 12 pm and one serving of black tea. Workers carry water in plastic bags to drink after lunch. The containers carrying drinking water and black tea are open and unclean. They drink less than 3 litres of water in a working day of 9 hours in a hot climate.







- x. At another tea plantation in Assam, workers are given black tea instead of drinking water by the plantation management. Workers get drinking water only three times a day and each worker gets 250 – 300 ml of water at a time. The container supplying drinking water is rusted, open and unclean.





- xi. At all the tea plantations in Assam, workers do not have separate areas to eat meals during working hours. They eat at the plantations near tea bushes which are constantly being sprayed with harmful pesticides. Workers applying pesticides do not have proper facilities to clean themselves after spraying. There is a very high risk of workers consuming pesticides as they get mixed with the food and drinking water.



- xii. In Patlawala village in Bihar, India the agriculture and plantation workers have to dig up to 20 feet into the ground to get water. The region is hot, it is expensive to dig and the water contains excess iron. The surroundings of the drinking water source are filled with mosquitoes as the dirty water collects around it. The same water is used for drinking and bathing. The lack of access to clean drinking water has led to diseases among workers such as kidney stones, stomach problems, bronchitis and high blood pressure





- xiii. In Madhya Pradesh, India the agricultural workers use pond water for drinking which is dirty and unhygienic. There is no other source of drinking water for workers while they are at work.



- xiv. In another village in Madhya Pradesh, India the agricultural workers drink water from the hand pump around which the dirty water gets collected. It is a breeding ground for mosquitoes and insects. They use this water for drinking and cooking purpose.



- xv. The source of drinking water for animals and cane cutters of Dalmia Bharat Sugar mill in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India is the same. It is provided by the mill, smells bad and is unsafe for drinking.





- xvi. Sugar cane cutters working for Dalmia Bharat Sugar Mill in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India have to carry water from home in plastic containers as they don't have any source of drinking water at the workplace. They work in extremely hot weather and the quantity of water is not sufficient for the entire day of work, as a result workers suffer from dehydration. Their children help them by supplying water as they can't afford to lose time during work.



## Conclusions

- Agriculture is by far the biggest user of water. ILO Conventions affirm the obligation of states and employers to ensure that agricultural workers have adequate access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Five years ago, in 2010, The United Nations General Assembly recognized the universal right to safe drinking water and sanitation and linked it to the human right to food.
- Despite this, millions of agricultural workers lack access to safe water at work and in their homes.
- Based on their international obligations, all governments must act to ensure that this right is specifically transposed into national law. Where, as in India, there is legislation like the Plantations Labour Act obliging employers to provide potable water, breaches of the law must be addressed and rigorously enforced. Labour inspection in agriculture is a tool to ensure this.



**The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) is an international federation of trade unions representing workers employed in agriculture and plantations; the preparation and manufacture of food and beverages; hotels, restaurants and catering services; all stages of tobacco processing. The IUF is composed of 410 affiliated organizations in 126 countries representing a combined membership of around 2,6 million.**

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