



# WATER AND CEREALS IN DRYLANDS



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# CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. DRYLANDS, PEOPLE AND LAND USE</b>	<b>5</b>
Characteristics of drylands	5
Dryland people	9
Land use systems in drylands	9
Land degradation in drylands	11
Effects of livestock on the resource base	14
Effects of climate change on drylands	15
<b>2. CEREAL PRODUCTION IN DRYLANDS</b>	<b>17</b>
Recent trends in worldwide cereal production	17
The role of livestock in cereal production	20
The role of irrigation in cereal production	21
Expansion of cereal production	23
<b>3. ENHANCING CEREAL PRODUCTION IN DRYLANDS</b>	<b>25</b>
Water-use efficiency	26
<i>In situ</i> water conservation	28
Terraces	30
Conservation bench terraces	31
Contour furrows	31
Contour bunds	31
Land levelling with laser and mini benches	32
Tied ridges	32
Water harvesting	34
Micro catchments	36
Macro catchments	36
Floodwater harvesting	37
Rooftop water harvesting	37
Factors affecting runoff	37
Reducing evaporation	39
Increasing soil organic matter content and fertility	42
The importance of crop and cultivar selection	46
Role of indigenous and introduced practices	47
Combining modern with traditional technologies	49
Supplementary irrigation in semi-arid regions	50

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<b>4. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF DRYLAND INVESTMENT</b>	<b>53</b>
Investment constraints	53
Investment potential	55
Opportunities and risks of growing feedstocks for biofuels in drylands	56
Payments for environmental services	58
Carbon trading	58
Economics of water harvesting	58
Economics of water-conservation practices	61
Current scenario in dryland regions	62
<b>5. WIDER ISSUES OF WATER IN DRYLANDS</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>ANNEXES</b>	
1. DEFINITIONS OF DRYLANDS AND DRYLAND FARMING	83
2. DEVELOPMENT OF DRYLAND FARMING IN VARIOUS REGIONS	85
3. BACKGROUND TABLES	93
4. CEREALS PRODUCTION MAPS	97
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>105</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

1. Regional extent of drylands	6
2. Human populations of the world's drylands	10
3. Trends in world production of cereals	19
4. Factors governing the amount of runoff from water-harvesting catchments	40
5. Water-harvesting efficiencies of surface treatments for enhancing runoff	40
6. Estimated runoff coefficients and cost of runoff-inducement techniques	41
7. Characteristics of indigenous and introduced conservation practices	48
8. Costs of water from water harvesting used for crop production	59
9. Development costs of water from irrigation systems used for crop production	59
10. Development and total costs of water used from shallow and moderately deep small tube wells	60

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Distribution of drylands in the world	7
2. Major soil types of drylands	8
3. Land use systems	12
4. Conceptual model of the effects of temperature and precipitation on the difficulty of developing sustainable agro-ecosystems in semi-arid regions	14
5. Evapotranspiration and grain yield for maize, sorghum and wheat	27
6. Wheat yield and seasonal evapotranspiration for two semi-arid regions	27
7. Effects of increased evapotranspiration on the water-use efficiency of cereal production	28
8. General overview of rainfall partitioning in semi-arid regions	28
9. Development of indigenous soil and water technologies as affected by soil fertility and soil moisture	48
10. Relationship between cumulative transpiration and biomass, and between cumulative evapotranspiration and grain yield	50
11. Relationship between yield of grain sorghum and seasonal evapotranspiration	50

## LIST OF BOXES

1. Land levelling with laser in Morocco	32
2. Experiences with tied ridging	33
3. Water harvesting schemes in the desert and semi-desert areas of Africa	35
4. Assessing the feasibility of water-harvesting techniques in Tunisia	36
5. Some examples of water harvesting using micro catchments	37
6. Water spreading in eastern Sudan	38
7. Rooftop water collection for food security	39
8. Growing sorghum plants in clumps to increase grain yield	42
9. Effects of tillage on soil	45
10. Early sowing of chickpea	46
11. Using traditional water conservation and harvesting techniques	49

## LIST OF PLATES

1. A view of dryland (with village in the background) in the Sahel, southern Niger.	6
2. Bedouin families use the meagre vegetation of the steppes for cooking and heating. The deterioration of the fragile dryland ecosystem has also led to their impoverishment.	11
3. An example of dryland agriculture in the Asia-Pacific region.	11
4. Desertification in the Sudan. Goats feed on a solitary Acacia shrub.	13
5. Salinization in Iran	13
6. The result of overgrazing on the outskirts of Amman city.	15
7. Terracing on an arid hillside.	30
8. The construction of terraces assists in soil and water conservation in the Syrian Arab Republic.	30
9. Cabbage planted near contour furrows.	31
10. Farmers working on the construction of contour bunds.	32
11. Laser-levelled basin irrigation in the Tadla region, Morocco.	32
12. Upstream works enable subsequent action in the valleys. This newly recovered seasonal pond irrigated 80 ha in the 1993 rainy season.	38
13. A farmer clears a canal on the Nile River.	38
14. This simple rainwater-storage system ensures that clean water is readily available to the household.	39
15. Smallholder coffee farmers cover the ground with straw to preserve humidity, Malawi.	42
16. Smallholder farmers incorporate crop residues in the soil to improve soil fertility, Malawi.	44
17. As a farmer ploughs, serious erosion eats away the land.	45
18. A farmer clears a canal to ensure water flow through a falaj system in Oman. The falaj system in the Al-Jauf region dates back 2 500 years.	47

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>CA</b>	Conservation agriculture
<b>CBT</b>	Conservation bench terrace
<b>CRP</b>	Conservation Reserve Program
<b>GHG</b>	Greenhouse gas
<b>GIS</b>	Geographical information system
<b>HYV</b>	High-yielding variety
<b>IFPRI</b>	International Food Policy Research Institute
<b>LAI</b>	Leaf area index
<b>LGP</b>	Length of growing period
<b>PET</b>	Potential evapotranspiration
<b>PES</b>	Payment for Environmental Services
<b>SOM</b>	Soil organic matter
<b>SWC</b>	Soil Water Conservation
<b>UNCCD</b>	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
<b>WH</b>	Water harvesting

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## PREFACE

The world's food supply is obtained either directly or indirectly from the abundance of plant species, but fewer than 100 are used for food. Worldwide, about 50 species are cultivated actively, and as few as 17 species provide 90 percent of human food supply and occupy about 75 percent of the total tilled land on earth. Eight cereal grains –wheat, barley, oat, rye, rice, maize, sorghum and millet– provide 56 percent of the food energy and 50 percent of the protein consumed on earth (Stoskopf, 1985). Cereals continue as the most important source of total food consumption in the developing countries where direct consumption of grains provides 54 percent of total calories and 50 percent for the world as a whole (FAO, 2006). Wheat and rice are by far the most widely consumed cereals in the world. Maize is a major crop for both direct and indirect human consumption because it is a major energy feed for animals. Wheat, rice, and maize make up approximately 85 percent of the world's production of cereals.

As food and water needs continue to rise, it is becoming increasingly difficult to supply more water to farmers. The supply of easily accessible freshwater resources is limited both locally and globally. In arid and semiarid regions, in densely populated countries and in most of the industrialized world, competition for water resources has set in. In major food-producing regions, scarcity of water is spreading due to climate change and increased climate variability. In light of demographic and economic projections, the freshwater resources not yet committed are a strategic asset for development, food security, the health of the aquatic environment and, in some cases, national security. In large parts of the drylands, no irrigation water is available – rainfed crop and pasture yields are both low and uncertain. Runoff, evaporation and deep percolation from the soil surface drastically reduce the proportion of rainfall available for plant growth. However, even small amounts of additional water would significantly increase yields in drylands at very high water-use efficiencies, if other factors – including plant nutrient availability – were adequate. Several approaches can make such additional water available to crops and pasture from the local rainfall with low-cost low-risk land and water management techniques. Runoff can be used more productively and infiltration increased in arid areas by pitting or tied ridges, and by increasing surface roughness. In semi-arid and dry subhumid areas, maintaining a cover of crops or crop residues on the soil throughout the year in a zero- or minimum-tillage system can be even more effective. Recent experiences of conservation agriculture bring about multiple benefits for farmers while addressing local and global environmental concerns (Pretty & Koohafkan, 2002). Where such measures still do not provide the crop with adequate moisture throughout the growing period, water-harvesting approaches such as “runoff farming” to supplement rainfall on a smaller area may be viable options.

Where rainfall is distributed sparsely throughout the year, dry farming may be an option. This approach entails capturing rainfall during a fallow period and storing it in the soil for use during the subsequent cropping period. Storage efficiency can be increased by reduced tillage or no-tillage where crop residues can be maintained on the soil surface as mulch.

This volume discusses the drylands and their land uses, with an emphasis on cereal production. It includes an outline on the recent development of competing use of cereals for the production of ethanol biofuel. This paradigm shift could have far-reaching consequences (social, environmental and for food security), potentially encouraging production in even more marginal lands. The volume touches on the roles of livestock, placing the various technologies and practises that enhance water availability to crops in drylands in their technical, agro-ecological and socio-economic perspective. The predicted future impacts of human-induced climate change on dryland systems are briefly noted.

I therefore appeal to the international community to join FAO in its continuing efforts towards alleviating poverty and hunger through the promotion of agricultural development, the improvement of nutrition and the pursuit of food security throughout the world. With your help, success is at the end of our efforts, perseverance and commitment.



**Jacques Diouf**  
FAO DIRECTOR-GENERAL

# INTRODUCTION

World food crop production has more than kept pace with the rapid growth in population in the past four decades. World population increased from 3 billion to 6.6 billion between 1960 and 2006 (UNFPA, 2008), food consumption measured in kcals per capita increased from 2 358 to 2 803 between 1964 and 1999 (WHO, 2008), and food prices fell between 1961 and 1997 by 40 percent in real terms (FAOSTAT, 2007). However, these global statistics do not fully reflect the wide range of differences between and within individual countries.

Cereals are by far the most important source of total food consumption in the developing countries. Direct food consumption of cereals in these countries provides 54 percent of total calories and 50 percent for the world as a whole (FAO, 2006). There are, however, wide variations among countries. Only 15-30 percent of total calories are derived from cereals in countries where roots and tubers are dominant (e.g. Rwanda, Burundi, the two Congos, Uganda, Ghana, etc.) and in high-income countries with predominantly livestock-based diets (e.g. U.S., Canada, Australia, etc.). These latter countries, however, consume large amounts of cereals indirectly in the form of animal feed for the livestock products consumed as food. Approximately 37 percent of the world's cereals are used for feed (FAOSTAT, 2007). Production of cereals increased 2.6 times between 1961 and 2005 compared to an increase in population of 2.1 times. This increase in per capita cereal production alleviated hunger problems in several countries and contributed to an increase in meat consumption in developing countries from about 9 kg per capita in 1961 to more than 30 kg per capita in 2005 (FAOSTAT, 2007).

The growth rate of cereal production has slowed in recent years. Production of cereals grew at a rate of 3.7 percent per annum during the 1960s, but slowed to 2.5 percent, 1.4 percent, and 1.1 percent per annum during the subsequent three decades to 2001 (FAO, 2006). Per capita food use of cereals seems to have peaked in the early 1990s, and this is true for the world as a whole. World consumption per capita fell from 171 kg/person/year in 1989/91 to 165 kg in 1999/01; in the developing countries, from 174 kg to 166 kg (FAO, 2006). It is not clear why cereal consumption had decreased in developing countries when so many of them are far from having reached adequate levels of food consumption. The use of cereals for all uses reached 329 kg/person/year in 1989/91 and fell to 309 kg in 1999/01. FAO (2006) projects that total usage in 2050 will be 339 kg. Even though per capita cereal usage has declined slightly, and world population growth has slowed somewhat from earlier forecasts, FAO forecasts that cereal production will need to increase from 1.9 billion tonnes in 2001 to 3 billion tonnes by 2050. This is a challenge that should not be taken lightly in view of the increasing pressures and competition for soil and water resources.

Recently, the future of cereal production and consumption has changed dramatically since the rising cost of fossil fuels and the need for greener energy use has resulted in some cereals (principally maize – also sorghum and wheat) being used to produce ethanol for fuel. Although it is too early to determine the long-term impact that this development will have on the supply and cost of food, the fact that both food and fuel systems are competing for cereals is likely a profound development that could have unintended environmental, social and food security consequences of major importance. Although energy prices tend to influence the food and agriculture sector because of the effect on the price of fertilizer, fuel, transportation, etc., it is only recently that the price of grain has been directly linked to the

price of oil. Brown (2008) states that in this new situation the world price of grain is drifting up toward its energy-equivalent value, since when the fuel value of a crop exceeds its food value, the crop will enter bio-fuel production.

Wheat, rice and maize make up about 85 percent of the world's cereal production (FAOSTAT, 2007). Wheat and rice are by far the most widely consumed cereals in the world in the direct form, while maize is important for both direct and indirect human consumption as a major feed ingredient for animals. Cereals are grown on 49 percent of the world's harvested area, with 65 percent being grown in developing countries in 2005 (FAO, 2006). World population, currently 6 700 million, is projected to reach 8 000 million by 2025, with more than 97 percent of the growth occurring in developing countries (FAO, 2003c). Cereals will continue to be an important food source, particularly in developing countries and consequently, it is vital that production continues at a pace to match consumption. If significant volumes of cereals produced in developed countries are used for ethanol production, the price of cereals is likely to increase and the amounts available for export and for reserve are likely to decrease. Brown (2008) estimated that one fifth of the entire U.S. grain harvest in 2007 will be used to produce ethanol. This will likely increase the necessity for developing countries to become more self-sufficient in cereals.

The agronomic technologies that have allowed steady increases in world food production to date have largely been based on high-yielding varieties (HYVs), fertilizers, pest control and irrigation. Irrigation has been particularly important in developing countries, where the total irrigated area increased from 102 million ha in 1961 to 208.7 million ha in 2002. This compares with 37 million ha in the developed countries in 1961 and 68 million ha in 2002 (Molden *et al.*, 2007; Svendsen and Turrall, 2007). Worldwide, 19.7 percent of arable land is irrigated, and it contributes 40 percent of total agricultural production (Svendsen and Turrall, 2007). Irrigated agriculture is responsible for approximately 70 percent of all the freshwater withdrawn in the world (Molden and Oweis, 2007). In most developing countries, agriculture accounts for 80 percent of water use (UNDP, 2006). The amount varies widely among countries, however, ranging from more than 90 percent in agricultural economies in the arid and semi-arid tropics to less than 40 percent in industrial economies in the humid temperate regions (FAO, 1996a).

In 1996, 48 percent of cereal production in developing countries (excluding China) came from irrigated lands (FAO, 1996a). Ringler *et al.* (2003) reported that 38 percent of the cereals grown in developing countries in 1995 were on irrigated lands and accounted for 60 percent of cereal production. This is in contrast to many developed countries where cereals are largely grown without irrigation. An estimated 60 percent of the wheat produced in developing countries is irrigated, while only 7 percent of the wheat and 15 percent of the maize are irrigated in the United States of America (USDA, 1997). Brown (2008) estimated that one fifth of U.S. grain harvest comes from irrigated land compared to three fifths for India and four fifths for China. The other major cereal-producing areas of developed countries (in Canada, Australia and Europe) are also predominantly non-irrigated systems.

The development of additional irrigated land in developing countries will need to continue in order for food production to keep pace with population growth and to ensure regional food security. This should be coupled with increased water productivity from improved irrigation and water management. However, there are also effective alternatives to irrigation, even in less humid areas, through the development of dryland farming systems.

With the cost of developing additional irrigated lands often ranging from US\$2 000 to more than 17 000/ha (AQUASTAT, 2008), it is imperative that alternative water-management and

production systems be considered for at least a part of the anticipated future food demand. Huge capital sums have already been invested to develop irrigation. In comparison, there has been very limited investment focused on raising the overall productivity of drylands. This is understandable because the benefits of irrigated agriculture are significant, immediate, predictable and dependable. In contrast, cereal yields in dryland regions where irrigation is not an option typically range from zero to three or more times the average yield. This high variability limits the effectiveness of inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides, resulting in a high economic risk associated with their use.

However, several soil- and water-management options, such as conservation agriculture, run-off farming and dry farming using fallow storage can increase soil moisture in dryland areas, increasing yields and reducing their variability. Some preliminary estimates show that the average yield of rainfed cereals in drylands could be increased by 30–60 percent by making available an additional 25–35 mm of water to crops during critical growth periods through water conservation and harvesting. These benefits are attainable in most dryland areas of the world and justify investment in water conservation and water harvesting. There are also social and environmental benefits which support the investment costs in water conservation and harvesting far beyond those strictly related to increased grain production.

The objectives of this study were to:

- Emphasize the importance of dryland development for future food production (particularly cereals), food security and poverty alleviation;
- Present water-conservation and water-harvesting approaches and investment options that can increase cereal production in dryland regions;
- Suggest policies for more efficient use of existing natural resources in order to lessen the dependence of agriculture on further irrigation development.

Chapter 1 characterizes and discusses drylands and their land uses, highlighting their importance to the growing populations who occupy them. Chapter 2 reviews global trends in cereal production and considers the constraints on the further expansion of irrigation. Chapter 3 reviews water-conserving technologies and practices for enhancing cereal production in drylands by more integrated and efficient use of existing land and water resources. Chapter 4 reviews some wider environmental issues relating to water harvesting and soil water conservation in drylands. Chapter 5 considers some of the social and economic benefits that result from investing in water-conservation and water-harvesting systems in dryland areas as well as investment constraints and potential. The study concludes with policy considerations and recommendations for future actions.