

What will be done with WUR's 7.7 million

The UN Water Conference in New York in March ended on a positive note, and with an allocation of 7.7 million euros to WUR for two years of food and water research. Petra Hellegers, head of the Water Resources Management Group, explains what the plans are.

From desertification to flooding, water-related problems are increasingly putting food security at risk. With the 7.7 million in research funding, Hellegers and her colleagues are collaborating with 20 partners who want to contribute to the changes needed. They include Dutch ministries, UN departments and the World Bank, as well as the avocado importer Nature's Pride, Van der Hoeven horticulture projects and SeedNL. This Global Working Group on Water and Food is working on four action points:

#1 Increasing the resilience of water and food systems. As rainfall becomes increasingly variable and the world becomes more unstable, how do you make water and food systems more robust? Hellegers: 'By choosing different crops and drought-resistant seeds, for example, and by looking at the role of trade policy and food stocks.'

#2 Making the local impacts of global trade visible. When most people think of saving water, they still think of shorter showers, and not the impact of their food consumption on water systems. Too few people know that globally 70 per cent of the water we use goes into food production.

#3 Distributing and valuing water differently. When water scarcity occurs, the farming of staple foods is often the first sector to lose access to water. 'That is purely based on money, but we need to include other values besides financial ones when we prioritize who can claim what water and when. Like the social value of stability.'

#4 Changing our diet. And: food waste is water waste. 'About 40 per cent of all food is wasted somewhere in the food supply chain. In consumers' homes, through harvest losses, and losses in transport, storage and retail outlets.' A thorny issue is the ever-growing livestock industry. Livestock eat food grown using lots of water. RL