Overcoming Obstacles in river Interlinking

What is the issue?

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Disagreement between States, absence of a legal framework for Central intervention and environmental issues are obstacles in river interlinking.

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What is the importance of rivers in India?

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- A river is the lifeline of the masses and supports wild life.
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- The river system is a major source of irrigation, provides potable water and cheap transportation, helps in electricity generation, and is a source of livelihood for the people.
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- Out of total utilisable surface water resources of 690 billion cubic meter (BCM), only 65% is currently utilised in India, the rest falls into the sea.
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- This maintains the ecological balance of land and oceans and freshwater and sea.
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- However, there is spatial and temporal variation of water availability.
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- Due to this, droughts and floods often coexist in India.
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What are the measures taken so far?

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- In 1980, the Central government prepared a National Perspective on Water Development.
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- It envisaged inter-basin water transfer comprising 30 water-link projects and

about 3,000 storages connecting 37 Himalayan and Peninsular rivers.
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- Though the scheme is likely to cost $123 billion, it will help create 35 gigawatt of hydropower, irrigate 35 million hectares, and usher in navigation and fishery benefits.
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- Of the 30 water-link projects, Ken-Betwa Link project involving Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, is at an advanced stage of preparation.
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- This project aims to transfer surplus water from the Ken river to Betwa basin through canals to irrigate land, supply drinking water to drought-prone Bundelkhand region, and generate hydro power.
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- Though this project been accorded all statutory clearances, a water-sharing arrangement between the two States is pending.
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- However, in the case of Renuka dam project in the Upper Yamuna basin, five States recently entered into a water-sharing pact.
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- Thus, there are clearly many challenges in implementation of inter-basin water transfer projects.
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What should be done?

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- **Evolving consensus** - The States with surplus water resources do not generally agree that there is such surplus.
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- It is difficult for donor and donee States to come to an agreement as the latter often demand more water.
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- The States are also apprehensive about disturbing the existing allocation of water as per awards.
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- There is thus a need to evolve consensus among the States concerned.
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- Further, to mitigate the likely adverse impact of climate change, long- and short-term measures, including inter-basin water transfer, is the need of the hour.
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- **Need for Legislation** - At present, there is no legislative framework through

which the Central government can intervene in this regard.
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- Most of the river basins are inter-State.
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- The Constitution allows the Centre to regulate and develop inter-State rivers and river valleys as per Entry 56 of the Union List.
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- Thus, one or more Central legislation should be passed using this Entry for facilitating inter-basin transfer.
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- **Environmental concerns** - The inter-basin water transfer (IBWT) projects are like other water resources projects and hence the environmental concerns of IBWT projects are similar.
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- Thus, all environmental issues and concerns such as submergence of forest areas and biodiversity loss need to be addressed in a holistic manner if benefits are to outweigh costs.
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- **Rehabilitation and resettlement**- The IBWT projects require construction of reservoirs and link canals and these involve substantial submergence.
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- Further, canal construction also requires land acquisitions.
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- Thus rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) is an important issue.
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- There is a need to have diverse innovative and attractive R&R packages for project-affected persons so that they support the project on their own.
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- **International co-operation**- Many of the link rivers flow through the neighbouring countries and hence require international co-operation.
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- For example, main components of six Himalayan link projects fall in Nepal and Bhutan.
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- There is a need of hydro diplomacy with these two neighbours to evolve a consensus.
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- Similarly, the Sankosh project (Manas-Sankosh-Teesta-Ganga Link) also requires interaction with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, calling for consensus among these countries with India.
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- On the whole, India needs to constitute a National Water Mission on river linkingto address various issues, that are macro as well as project-specific in a time-bound manner.
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Source: Business Line

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