

The future of water today

By TOMMY KOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

WATER is more precious than gold. Without water, there would be no life on earth. The irony is that we take water for granted. In some countries, water is treated as a public good and given away for free. This invariably leads to overconsumption and wastage.

The first Asia-Pacific Water Summit in Beppu, Japan, in 2007, declared that safe drinking water was a human right and a fundamental aspect of human security. The leaders attending also agreed to halve the number of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015, and to reduce that number to zero by 2025. Today, about 700 million Asians and a fifth of the world's population do not have access to safe drinking water.

As global demand for water rises, the supply has become more uncertain. According to the United Nations, by 2025, half the countries of the world will face water stress or shortage.

As many as three-quarters of the world could be affected by water scarcity by 2050. This could become particularly acute in Asia because of high population growth, rapid urbanisation and poor water endowment.

Water will become a security issue this century. The Asia Society's seminal 2009 report on 'Water Security in Asia' drew attention to water-related challenges such as water disputes between unfriendly neighbours, conflicts resulting from agricultural and industrial pollution, and the alarming increase in waterborne diseases due to inadequate wastewater facilities.

Five years ago, Singapore hosted the first Singapore International Water Week (SIWW). The event was highly successful because it brought together all the stakeholders on water to share and co-create innovative water solutions.

With each passing year, the SIWW has grown bigger and better and has become an important event on the world's water calendar. The fifth edition of

SIWW starts tomorrow. Having chaired the Water Leaders Summit for the past four years, here is what I have learnt:

Lesson One: Treasuring water

There is a need to change mindsets about water. In many countries, especially where water is free or heavily subsidised, attitudes towards water are wasteful. Water should be priced for the full costs involved in producing it. We should also promote a culture of conserving water and of using water efficiently. In Singapore, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said, 'conserving water is like a religion'.

Lesson Two: Safe drinking water as a human right

The time has come for Asians to demand that safe drinking water be regarded by their governments as a human right and a fundamental aspect of human security. The fact that 700 million Asians do not have access to safe drinking water while their governments spend billions on wasteful and ego-boosting projects is unacceptable. It is reprehensible that the poor in some Asian cities have to buy water from vendors at several times the price paid by the rich. There is no country in Asia which is too poor to provide a few litres a day of safe drinking water to all its citizens, if there is a political will to do so.

Lesson Three: Good water governance

In most of Asia, the problem is not water scarcity but poor water governance. Examples include antiquated water infrastructure, high leakage, theft, corruption and incompetence. The solution is good water governance. As in other sectors, what we need is good policy and competent management. Transparency, integrity and accountability are the three core values of good governance.

Lesson Four: Public sector and private sector

We should be agnostic about the choice between using the public or private sectors in delivering water to consumers. In Cambodia, the public sector's Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority solved the city's water problem and is recognised as one of the best in the world.

In the Philippines, the privatised Manila Water Company has also solved the city's water problem and is often cited as a role model. In some situations, if government is incompetent or corrupt, we may have to rely on the market to solve the water problem.

Water is a viable business. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have recommended corporatising entities responsible for water services into autonomous bodies.

Lesson Five: Need for a water minister

Water is an issue which cuts across the work of several ministries. The ideal situation is to have a minister in charge of water.

If this is not possible, there should be a high-level coordinating mechanism, at Cabinet level, to deal with water, sanitation and wastewater. Water should be treated holistically and not with a silo approach.

Lesson Six: Harnessing science and technology

Four winners of the Lee Kuan Yew Water Prize - Dr Andrew Benedek (2008), Professor Gatze Lettinga (2009), Dr James Barnard (2011) and Professor Mark van Loosdrecht (2012) - are scientists and inventors who have made enormous contributions with innovative solutions.

The SIWW brings together leaders and professionals from government, industry, international organisations and academia to share ideas and co-create innovative water solutions. With support from the World Bank and the ADB, we are developing sustainable solutions to the world's water challenges.

The writer is chairman of the Water Leaders Summit at the SIWW.

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