

Water: How to manage a vital resource

A source of co-operation

- MODERATOR : **DAVID EADES**, PRESENTER, BBC WORLD
- **ASIT K. BISWAS**, PRESIDENT, THIRD WORLD CENTRE FOR WATER MANAGEMENT
- **PETER BRABECK-LETMATHE**, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD AND CEO, NESTLÉ S.A.
- **ANGEL GURRÍA**, SECRETARY-GENERAL, OECD



Asit K. Biswas on the screen

Poor management, rather than scarcity, will be the cause of a possible water crisis – this was the main message from this Forum session. Scientific breakthroughs would help, but so would innovative policy thinking. Panellists agreed that water pricing could help avert a crisis, for instance.

The public attention devoted to water over the next 20 years will be greater than in the last 2000, according to **Asit K. Biswas**. We consume water as if the supply were inexhaustible, but while “there are substitutes for coal and petroleum”, said **Peter Brabeck-Letmathe**, “there is no substitute for water”.

Both agreed that if water problems are not solved, we are to blame for poor management. Most people worry about supplies of clean drinking water, but agriculture and industry claim a far larger share of water consumption worldwide. Agriculture accounts for most water use, but in the OECD area we consume thousands of litres of water a day without even realising it – the water used in food production, for instance.

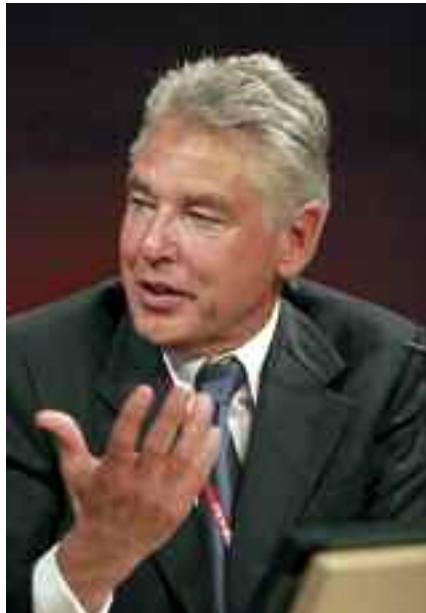
Water is critical for development, and **Angel Gurría** launched a simple challenge: “Follow the water, and you will be able to solve the problem of poverty and other problems”.

Angel Gurría said that resolving water problems could serve as a benchmark for determining the success of other policies such as poverty reduction.

Water is also a fantastic opportunity for economic growth through co-operation. In Bhutan, GDP per capita soared following a

government decision to work with India on water-related technologies. The idea that competition for water will be a future ground for conflict is unjustified. Rather, it should prove to be the means for closer collaboration.

New institutional global arrangements might also be explored, to focus action on improving drinking water and sanitation.



Peter Brabeck-Letmathe

However, placing the problem in the hands of NGOs and governments may not be enough, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe said; education and individuals are important too. He cited a case in India, where a project for digging wells failed because the wells were spoiled after a few months. A new programme placed wells near schools where children were being taught about the importance of water. The children became the custodians of the well, drawing the water, carrying it home, and making sure it remained clean.

Water is too precious to waste but the average city may see as much as 15% of its water supply leak away because of decaying infrastructure and lax management, Asit K. Biswas said. But it need not be so. He described Singapore as an example of best practice in successful water management, losing only 5% of its water. One important



(Left to right): Peter Brabeck-Letmathe and Angel Gurría

factor is a willingness to recycle waste water. This poses a huge psychological barrier for many in the OECD area, but in Singapore the recycling plant is the country's third largest tourist attraction.

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe agreed that there is much room for improvement in water management, but to reduce water loss, innovation has to be introduced across the board from suppliers to consumers. This includes water distribution: on average, 25% to 30% of water in developed countries and up to 70% in developing countries was lost because of leakages.

The panel agreed that water should have a price, and that the assumption that most people would refuse to pay for water is unfounded. Free water, in fact, hurts the poorest, Asit K. Biswas said, because having a price facilitates distribution. At the same time, "water is a human right", Peter Brabeck-Letmathe said. He proposed giving 25 litres per person without charge, but said further consumption needed to be charged to solve the management problem.

"The reality is that water is a global challenge", Angel Gurría said. Access to water is one of the key development factors and provides a good overview of the development process. Although some forecast that three billion people would lack access to water

within 30 years, he said this situation was "unacceptable, but also avoidable". The major challenge is to forge public-private partnerships to develop the right infrastructure and pricing to encourage responsible use.

The panel saw the main challenge for water-stressed developing countries as getting rid of bad governance and changing ageing institutional structures so that effective policies could be implemented.

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe agreed with a suggestion from the floor that users needed to be more closely involved in water

management. "Most of the solutions are there, most of them demand grass-roots' involvement", he said, citing educational programmes in water management for children financed by Nestlé.

Another questioner raised the issue of co-ordinating public intervention to improve water management. Angel Gurría agreed with this and wanted to see a greater water-oriented focus in global institutions. He said we did not need another bureaucratic institution but co-operation could improve public management and the effectiveness of foreign aid dramatically. ■



(Left to right): David Eades and Asit K. Biswas