

Fundamental changes needed in water governance

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There is no single way forward for Asian countries to ensure their future water security. Because of differing climatic, physical, social, economic, environmental, and institutional conditions, and because countries, and even parts of countries, are at different stages of development, there are simply no universal solutions. In addition, because the national, regional, and global conditions that affect water are changing rapidly, there is also a time dimension to the solutions—what may have been a viable solution a decade ago may not be so a decade from now. This means that water policies need to be updated periodically so that they reflect the changing requirements.

We can confidently predict on the basis of current assessments of water resources, expected water demands, available technology, knowledge, and experience, that Asian countries should not experience, or expect, a crisis in the future because of physical scarcity of water. What is important is to realize that, irrespective of the high level of rhetoric on the looming global water crisis and likely water wars due to increasing water scarcity, the fact is that there is now enough knowledge, technology, and expertise available in Asia to solve all its existing and future water problems. Nevertheless, some Asian countries will find it more difficult than others to ensure their future water security.

If some of the Asian countries

face a water crisis in the future, it will not be because of physical scarcity of water, but because of inadequate or inappropriate water governance, including management practices, institutional arrangements, and sociopolitical conditions, which now leave much to be desired. Continuation of the present state of affairs will ensure that the water situations in Asian countries can only improve slowly. Considering the expected population growth, continuing urbanization, and increasing economic activities, this may mean, at least for the water sector, having to run faster to stay in the same place. This cannot be the preferred or acceptable solution.

Major and fundamental changes in water governance practices are needed in nearly all the Asian countries. There are many success stories in Asia of very significant improvements in water governance. For example, during the past 30 years, Singapore has made remarkable breakthroughs in its governance practices as a result of which it now has one of the best, if not the best, water supply, wastewater management, and overall catchment management in the world. In the process, Singapore has gained full confidence of the public in the level of services it provides consistently. Most of this transition has taken place within about two decades.

Similarly, the Phnom Penh Water Authority has managed to reduce

its unaccounted-for water from about 90% in 1993 to about 9% at present, which is far better than New York or London. The utility now provides drinkable water supply continuously, and is fully autonomous and financially independent. It uses absolutely no outsourcing to the private sector, and within a decade has shown what can be achieved given good leadership—which has radically transformed its governance—and full political weight behind that enlightened leadership.

It is now important for improving the performance of the water sector that a comprehensive search be made to identify similar success stories from all over Asia in areas like water supply, wastewater management, irrigation, and hydropower development. These successes need to be reviewed independently by knowledgeable and experienced water experts in terms of their veracity, long-term sustainability, and potential replicability in other parts of Asia. It will also be essential to analyse the enabling environment of each success story to see how and why it managed to make remarkable progress, whereas most other Asian urban centres did not. We need to understand what conditions were instrumental in catalyzing the process, which, in turn, ensured their success.

A set of successful Asian good practice models is essential for south-south knowledge and experience transfer in the context of the special monsoon climatic conditions of the region. A major reason that European and North American models have often not been successful in Asia is not only differences in climatic conditions, but also in social, economic, and environmental conditions and institutional and legal frameworks. Thus, successful models from Asian monsoon areas are likely to be more replicable to other Asian countries than are models directly imported from Europe or North America. However, the Asian models should only be applied after appropriate modifications for site-specific conditions.

Based on our analysis of the Asian conditions, we are cautiously optimistic for the region's water future. **AW**

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