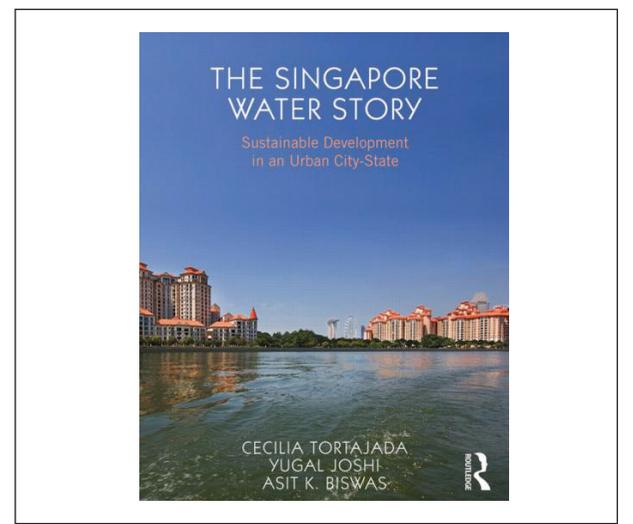


# TODAY

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## THE SINGAPORE WATER STORY

# When political vision flows clear

It wasn't until 2006 that the story of the Singapore water miracle was brought to the world's attention, by two experts on the other side of the world.

Professor Asit Biswas and Dr Cecilia Tortajada of the Third World Centre for Water Management in Mexico were preparing 20 case studies on water management for the United Nations Development Programme.

As they were deciding which to short-list, they pored over the data they had requested from the PUB's Chief Executive. And what they learnt astounded them — the tiny island-state of Singapore had one of the best urban water and wastewater management records in the world.

Not only did their published study make known widely Singapore's achievements, the pair also nominated the PUB for the sector's equivalent of the Nobel Prize — the Stockholm Water Industry Award — which it won in 2007.

Thus began the close collaboration of Dr Tortajada and Prof Biswas — one of the world's leading authorities on water and environmental management and recipient of the 2006 Stockholm Water Prize — with Singapore.

Their research culminates in the book, *The Singapore Water Story*, being launched today.

A recurrent key theme of the book is the political leadership, will and system behind the success of the story. Indeed, the authors interviewed former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew over two sessions.

Prof Biswas, Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Dr Tortajada, President of the Third World Centre for Water Management, tell TODAY more.

### SINGAPORE'S FORMULA

We came across outstanding achievements accomplished under every possible imaginable hardship. We found that, key to the development of the city-state has been the consistent support of the political leadership at the highest level, long-term vision and pragmatic decision-making.

Singapore's move from being "vulnerable" because of its natural scarcity of water, to making remarkable progress towards self-sufficiency, is the result of decades of efficient and effective institutions like the PUB;



The authors of *The Singapore Water Story*, Professor Asit Biswas (left) and Dr Cecilia Tortajada with former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

hard work; good planning and prompt implementation, all carried out within an overall framework of development where targets have been set at the national level rather than at the sectoral level.

But more importantly, plans and policies, management and governance practices, infrastructure and technological development, all had been thought of, discussed, twisted — and, if not found adequate for the goals pursued, twisted and modified again until found appropriate.

That is to say, Singapore has not been wedded to one alternative, but to the alternative or sets of alternatives that prove to be the most suitable ones.

The city-state also made the management of its water resources essential elements for overall development, economic growth and national security. In fact, Singapore is one of the very few countries — if not the only one — that has developed its water policies as part of the overall development goals of the city-state.

### MR LEE KUAN YEW'S KEY ROLE

Singapore was fortunate to have an extraordinary and visionary leader who always looked for what was best for the country in the long term, disregarding what could be considered as "short-term fixes".

Mr Lee Kuan Yew realised, very early in the history of Singapore, that water was vital for the survival and economic and social development of

the city-state, and decided to make it a national priority. While the world is only recently discovering the essential role of water resources in terms of growth and development, Singapore has been aware of it for decades.

What makes Singapore different from the rest of the world was the Prime Minister's personal interest in water issues; he gave his personal strong support to every decision that was directly or indirectly related to the management of this resource.

In 1963, the urban planning concept was launched. It was Mr Lee who launched the tree planting campaign, which was not only a far-sighted action but also planted the seeds of the "Garden City".

It was also Mr Lee who, in 1968, with the Environmental Public Health Act, set the foundations of a cleaner environment in Singapore. There has never been a Prime Minister anywhere else who has had so much interest in the environment in general, and water in particular.

As a visionary, Mr Lee realised in the late '60s that on a long-term basis, it is much more expensive for a society to live in a polluted environment compared to a clean one. Nearly half a century later, most of the political leaders around the world are yet to recognise this fundamental fact.

In March 1969, Mr Lee intervened in the matter of the highly polluted waterways and the sources that pollute it. He wanted the engineers to work out a plan to prevent polluted or sewer water flowing into the water-

ways, and dredging rivers so that the rivers were kept clean and aquatic life could grow.

He also directed the Ministry of National Development to make real effort to clean up three principal waterways in Singapore. It was only after Mr Lee insisted repeatedly, that a whole series of activities began by related ministries and departments to clean up Kallang Basin, Stamford Canal and Singapore River.

Mr Lee also observed that river pollution was the end result of all other pollution problems in the city-state. In March 1969, he called on the drainage engineers in the Public Works Department and water engineers in PUB to work together on a solution.

Years later, Mr Lee envisioned the Marina Barrage and reservoir as a fundamental source of clean water resources. The ultimate goal was, as it was in 1965 and throughout his stay as Prime Minister, that the city-state achieved self-sufficiency.

### WHAT SINGAPORE HAS TO TEACH THE WORLD

Technological development is thought to be the strength of Singapore and the PUB. We dare to differ, and say that the strength of the water utility is its policymaking, planning and management expertise.

Singapore's approach to holistic long-term multisectoral planning can be adopted in many cities (not countries) of the developed and developing world. Even when the same technology is available for other cities and countries to use, they have not been able to excel as the PUB has done.

The reason is because other cities and countries do not have the policy making, planning and management expertise of the same level, and this is not done under the overall umbrella of development, economic growth, improvement in the quality of life of the population and protection of the environment, as Singapore has done.

Therefore, since technology can be implemented only to the extent that policy planning, management and governance have been set properly, it is on policymaking, planning and management issues that the PUB could make great contributions to the world.

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