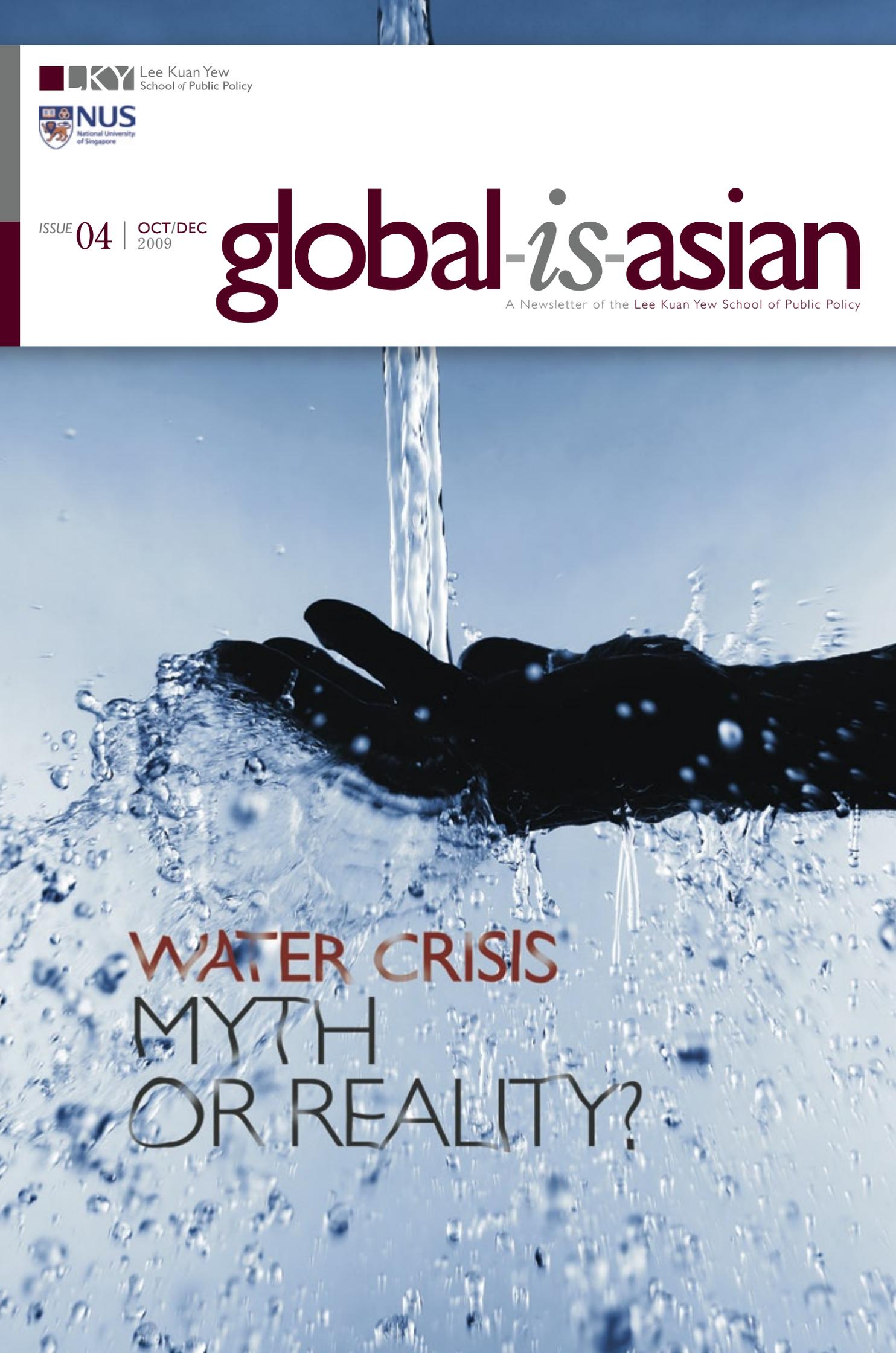


# global-*is*-asian

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A close-up photograph of a hand holding a stream of water. The hand is dark, and the water is clear and splashing. The background is a light blue sky.

WATER CRISIS  
MYTH  
OR REALITY?



# WATER CRISIS: Myth or Reality?

TEXT | ASIT K. BISWAS AND CECILIA TORTAJADA

*After a long life I have come to the conclusion that when all the establishment is united, it is always wrong.*

Harold Macmillan, the former British Prime Minister, in his final speech to the House of Lords.

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THIS SENTIMENT IS VERY TRUE NOW for the water establishment and the common related paradigms that are being vigorously promoted by most international organisations and some national institutions.

A few examples will illustrate this. First, it is common wisdom that the world will shortly be facing an unprecedented water crisis because of physical scarcities of water. However, what we are facing is NOT a crisis in terms of physical water availability but a continuing crisis in water governance. Water is being used very inefficiently in most countries of the world, and for nearly all purposes.

Second, there are regular reports in the media that countries are likely to go to war because of water shortages. This is sheer nonsense! No two countries have ever gone to war because of water in human history, and this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. If there will be a war between two or more

**“The water problems of the world are management-related and not supply-related. There is no question that the current and future water problems can be solved with existing knowledge, technology and adoption of good practices. We need ‘business unusual’ approaches.”**

countries, the fifteenth reason may be water but most certainly not the first fourteen.

Third, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) stipulate that the number of people without access to clean drinking water should be reduced by half between 1990 and 2015. However, from Delhi to Cairo, and Lagos to Mexico City, the water supplied is neither safe, nor drinkable, and yet these cities are assumed to have satisfied the MDG requirements. In many cities, citizens are forced to use membranes, a process used for desalination, to purify their water before it can be drunk. Sadly, the statistics are being manipulated only to meet the MDG targets.

Fourth, a global target has also been to reduce the number of people without access to sanitation by half between 1990 and 2015. Sanitation currently means that wastewater is taken out from cities and dumped untreated, or partially treated, into rivers, lakes and oceans. Delhi dumps its untreated wastewater to River Yamuna, and Mexico City transfers its untreated wastewater to Mezquital Valley, where it is used for agricultural production. These practices mean that people of cities like Delhi or Mexico are assumed to have proper sanitation. In fact, the problem has not been solved at all: it is simply being transferred from one location to another.

Because of the current practices, the world is facing a crisis in terms of water quality. All water bodies in or near urban centres of developing countries are now

highly contaminated. If we frame the question differently in terms of what percentage of people in a region like Latin America have access to proper wastewater treatment, the research carried out at the Third World Centre for Water Management shows that it is less than 10 percent. We suspect the situation is somewhat similar in developing Asian countries, but probably worse in Africa. Yet, by looking at the issue in a politically correct manner in terms of simple sanitation, this percentage figure of population having access to sanitation in Latin America increases by at least 300% to 400%.

The fact is, the world is NOT running out of water, but we have to manage our water resources much better than in the past. We have a serious governance problem. Take the case of Cherrapunji, India, one of the rainiest places in the world. The average annual rainfall is 11,433 mm. Even with this heavy annual rainfall, Cherrapunji now has a water problem during the dry season.

The water problems of the world are management-related and not supply-related. There is no question that current and future water problems can be solved with existing knowledge, technology and adoption of good practices. We need “business unusual” approaches.

Let us consider one example: Phnom Penh. In 1996, the Phnom Penh Water Supply Association (PPWSA) was nearly bankrupt, lost about 75 percent of its water due to leakages, and only the rich and the powerful had sporadic access to water. A decade later, everyone, rich or poor, has access to clean, drinkable water, and losses have been cut to about 8 percent, significantly better than London where losses are around 28 percent, or Paris, New York, and Los Angeles. This public sector institution is now financially independent, profits are increasing every year, and donors are fighting with each other to have the privilege of lending money to PPWSA. All it needed was one capable and committed individual, Ek Sonn Chan, who cleaned up the old corrupt and inefficient practices, built a dedicated team, and is constantly improving its management. The world needs to follow Phnom Penh’s “can do” approach.

If Phnom Penh can solve its water problems, so can Delhi, Dhaka, Cairo, Lagos, and Sao Paulo. They all have significantly better technical and administrative expertise than Cambodia, and also a thriving private sector that Phnom Penh does not have. It is criminal that cities of more than 500,000 people in the developing world still cannot provide 24-hour, uninterrupted supply





of clean and drinkable water. The fact that most cities in developing countries do not have this access is an indictment of their poor governance. Instead of tackling the real problem, many excuses are offered: there is not enough water, there is not enough money, etc.

Agriculture, which accounts for about 70 percent of total water use, is the biggest user of water. However, nearly all over the world, agricultural water use is highly inefficient. There are no signs that concerted attempts are being made to encourage efficient use of water in this sector, where high water and energy subsidies are endemic. In major agricultural countries such as China and India, energy for pumping water for farmers is either free or heavily subsidised. As a result of overpumping and extravagant water abstractions, facilitated by free or highly subsidised electricity, groundwater levels in many farming areas are declining very rapidly. Most Indian state electricity boards are now almost bankrupt because of the subsidies provided for water pumping. This is no way to manage water and

energy resources to maximise food production. It is basically a “lose-lose” situation for all the sectors and is not sustainable.

Water is an important cross-cutting issue to assure food, energy, and environmental security. And yet, it is probably the most neglected or ignored resource issue of the world. The World Health Organization estimates that 6 percent of global diseases are related to water, and about 3.4 million people die each year because of water-related diseases. With such high sustained human costs over the years, one would logically expect that water issues receive, at the very least, a similar level of interest as other popular issues such as climate change. However, water is not receiving even 5 percent of the global interest given to climate change at present. Therein lies a global conundrum, especially as world water problems are now solvable. Unlike climate change, we have the knowledge, technology and know-how to solve the world’s water problems. We now need determined global interest and appropriate policies and governance practices to solve them. **gisa**