



# Farewell to general solutions

The new InWEnt programme for the water sector in the Middle East and North Africa is unique: it focuses on countries with similar social, economic, legal and cultural conditions, brings together stakeholders from government, academia, private sector and NGOs, and will constitute a mutual learning endeavour for all concerned.

[By Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada]

A problem with the water profession in the past has been its policy of “business as usual”. Changes have continued to be slow and at best incremental. Discussions often are dogmatic (public sector or private sector, large or small infrastructure). Prescriptions for management practices frequently are simplistic and universal and irrespective of the social, economic, climatic, institutional, legal and environmental conditions of the countries concerned.

Much has been written on the looming water crisis which the world is supposed to face in the coming years. However, most often the predictions are based on non-existent or unreliable data, simplistic concepts, partial analyses, faulty or incorrect understanding and interpretation of the conditions in different parts of the world, and dogmatic beliefs.

## Current priorities

Based on the research carried out by the Third World Centre for Water Management, one can conclude the following:

**1.** The world is not facing a water crisis: what it is facing is a crisis in water management. While some parts of the world will find it more difficult to manage its water resources efficiently compared to others, the fact remains that the future water problems of the world are manageable and solvable. We have the

knowledge, experience and technology to manage our water resources much more efficiently than is the case at present. Thus, capacity building in the water sector in terms of modern and most appropriate management practices must receive priority attention.

**2.** If resources are managed efficiently, the water problems in different parts of the world will become manageable. If there is going to be a water crisis, it is unlikely to be precipitated by water scarcities, but in terms of water quality. From Latin America to Africa and developing Asia, there has been continued neglect of water quality management in the past. Our analyses indicate that less than ten percent of wastewater generated in Latin America is properly treated and disposed of in an environmentally-safe way at present. The situation is likely to be no different in Asia, but perhaps worse in Africa. Surface water bodies near urban centres in these continents are often very seriously contaminated. Groundwater, which is an important source of drinking water, is being progressively contaminated as well.

**3.** The solutions to the water problems of different parts of the world cannot be the same: each must be based on the prevailing local conditions. The current practice, where a solution is already prescribed and people are looking for problems to which it could be applied, is part of the problem. There is simply no universal solution. What works in Germany may not work in Jordan and vice versa. What works in Morocco may

not work in Egypt, even though both countries have many common attributes. There is also a time dimension: what worked well in Yemen in the 1970s may not be the most appropriate solution at present. These considerations are widely ignored at present.

4. There is no single paradigm for water management that is equally valid for all the countries of the world. There is no room for dogmatic solutions or polemical debates. It should be realised that small could be beautiful, but it could also be downright ugly. Big could be magnificent but could also be a disaster. Each solution must be judged in its overall context. For example, it is now evident that paradigms like integrated water resources management are not implementable in most South and Southeastern Asian countries. Instead of forcing water problems to fit a specific paradigm, what is needed is to start with the problems and then decide which paradigm(s) may be most appropriate for their solution.

### **Appropriate solutions**

Water is a critical requirement for human and ecosystem survival, economic development and assurance for a better quality of life for all the inhabitants of the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. Because of climatic conditions, the MENA countries are located in one of the most water-stressed regions of the world. Therefore, it is imperative that the local and regional water resources be managed efficiently, rationally and equitably on a long-term basis. The future of most MENA countries will depend to a very significant extent on how properly water resources are managed. This process will include not only traditional sources of water from rivers, lakes and aquifers, but also collection, treatment, and reuse of wastewater, use of marginal quality water, desalination of brackish and seawater, and other alternatives.

As “one size does not fit all,” what is essential is to consider specific problems in specific regions and explore possible alternatives that may be available for their timely and cost-effective solutions. The InWEnt programme on “Capacity Building for the Water Sector in the MENA region” is unique for several reasons, among which are:

- The focus is on a region, where many of the prevailing social, economic, legal and cultural conditions are somewhat similar, which increases the probabilities of using local knowledge to solve certain problems through south-south knowledge, technology and experience transfer.
- The programme will bring together leading experts and stakeholders from the region from various levels of government, academic and research institutions, private sector and NGOs, to assess the current status of water governance in the region and consider ways to how best improve the various practices and processes in the coming years.
- The programme will be supported by water experts from different parts of the world who will inject their knowledge and experiences to the deliberations of the regional participants.
- Stretching over four years, it will carry out four annual Partners’ Fora, which have been planned carefully and meticulously to ensure the process is logical, continuous and will constitute a mutual learning endeavour for all concerned.

The first Partners’ Forum will be held in Amman (Jordan) in November and focus on “Water Governance in the MENA Region.” Further fora will be held in 2006, in 2007, and in conjunction with Expo 2008 in Zaragoza, Spain. There will

be approximately 65 participants for each Forum. A core group will take part in all the four forums to ensure continuity and coherence to the process. The programme is expected to strengthen regional cooperation, develop future-oriented management strategies in selected countries in order to formulate and implement appropriate water sector reforms, and promote public and political awareness of water related issues.

The most remarkable part of the programme is the fact that all has been planned with explicit consideration that the world is heterogeneous, being composed of different cultures, social norms, physical attributes, skewed availability of natural resources and investment funds, management capacities and institutional arrangements. The systems of governance, legal frameworks, decision

making processes, and types and effectiveness of institutions often differ significantly from one country to another, even within the same region.

That means: there is not one single solution which can be equally applicable to an economic giant like the United States, technological powerhouses like Germany and Japan, emerging economic powers like China and India, and countries as diverse as Brazil, Bahrain, Bhutan and Burkina Faso. No single water management approach can be equally valid for Asian values, African traditions, Islamic customs, Japanese culture and Western civilisation. InWent's programme breaks this current mould by taking a region-specific approach, by considering diversity of conditions and plurality of solutions, in an objective, impartial and undogmatic manner.

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