

Editorial

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During the past five years at the several global fora, critical water issues facing humankind have been discussed in some depth. Among these have been the extent of water scarcity and its impacts on the developing world; the implications of wider acceptance of the fact that water is a human right; the roles public and private sector institutions have played, and can play, in providing clean water and sanitation to hundreds of millions of people in the developing world who still do not have access to clean water, sanitation and storm-water disposal; the roles of large dams in water management; and the implications of continuing water quality deterioration for the health of the people and the environment.

The discussions of some of these issues have often been inflexible and dogmatic, as was noted during the Second World Water Forum in The Hague, in 2000, and the Third World Water Forum in Japan, in 2003. At both these events, people for or against controversial issues such as private sector participation or water as a human right seldom listened to each other. In fact, they mostly did not attend the sessions of the opposing groups. There simply was no dialogue between the interested parties whose views were diametrically opposite. It also never occurred to the opposing groups that there could not be a single solution for all parts of a very heterogeneous world, having different physical, climatic, social, economic, environmental and institutional conditions. Thus, a single policy prescription, no matter what, is simply not equally applicable and implementable in all parts of the world at any specific point of history. In this thematic issue, some of the above-mentioned controversial issues are discussed.

Water, for the most part, was neglected at the major international development dialogues that took place in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. For example, the issue of water was conspicuous by its absence during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that was held in Rio de Janeiro, in June 1992, in the sense that not even a single head of state, with the exception of the prime minister of Bangladesh, uttered the word 'water' in their plenary statements. Even the concern of the Bangladeshi prime minister was not with the water crisis but with its conflict with India on sharing the water of the River Ganga.

The situation has changed radically during the past 10 years. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were agreed to by the General Assembly of the United

Nations, and subsequently re-endorsed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, contained many water-related targets, which are to be achieved by 2015. One of these goals is to halve the number of people who do not have access to clean water within the target period. While the MDGs specifically did not provide a target for the sanitation issue, it was agreed during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 that the number of people that do not have access to sanitation should also be reduced by half by the MDG target date of 2015.

While these targets are a step in the right direction, setting them is not enough: they must be implemented. It should be noted that the United Nations General Assembly had unanimously approved similar targets when it proclaimed the decade of the 1980s as the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. The goal was that by the end of the Decade, in 1990, every person should have access to clean water and sanitation. While the Decade made commendable progress, the goals were not achieved by a wide margin, thus making necessary setting the new targets a decade later through the MDGs.

Some five years have passed since the MDGs were proclaimed. Based on the progress made thus far, it appears that the water-related goals are unlikely to be achieved by 2015. The current trends indicate that these targets may be met in several Asian countries, but they are unlikely to be met in many African and South and Central American countries. Thus, accelerated and determined attempts must be made by the countries concerned, as well as the global community as a whole, if the water-related MDGs are to be met by 2015.

The United Nations General Assembly has adopted a resolution to proclaim the period 2005–15 as another water decade, officially known as the International Decade for Action, 'Water for Life'. This Decade reaffirms the earlier targets of reducing the number of people not having access to water supply and sanitation by half by 2015. Whether this second decade will have more success than the first decade, only time can tell. However, no sane person can argue with the targets, and the sooner we can provide access to clean water and sanitation services to all human beings, the better a place the world will be to live in because of countless direct and indirect benefits due to such positive developments.

A major issue confronting the world at present is how to provide clean water and sanitation to every living human being in a cost-effective, socially equitable and environmentally friendly way. There is no one solution that is likely to be appropriate for all countries and for all times. The physical and climatic conditions of various developing countries are different; they are at different levels of developments; social, economic and environmental conditions are not similar; technical and management capacities often vary widely; and legal and institutional frameworks are not identical. Thus, each developing country must formulate its own plan and strategy as to how best to assure that all its citizens can have access to clean water and sanitation as quickly as possible, and subsequently implement them in a cost-effective manner within as short a time as possible. The overall process may be somewhat similar for a specific group of countries, but equally it could be different for others. In the area of water development, it has to be realized that 'one size does not fit all'. No dogmatic solution should be imposed on the developing countries by donor governments, international institutions, multinational corporations or international non-governmental organizations. Once a country develops a feasible water strategy, all external institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, should support it to make that strategy a reality.

The provision of safe water and sanitation to every person in the world will not be an easy goal to achieve in the foreseeable future, but it is a goal that must be reached as quickly as possible. The present issue has been put together to encourage objective, comprehensive and constructive discussions as to how best to achieve these goals as efficiently as possible.

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