



## EDITORIAL

# Why water is not in the international political agenda

John F. Kennedy once said that the person who can solve the world's water problems should receive two Nobel Prizes: one for peace, the other for science. Some 55 years after his death, the world is slowly appreciating the appropriateness of his remarks and the difficulties and complexities of solving the world's water problems that are now facing humanity, in terms of both quantity and quality, on a long-term sustainable basis.

Policy-makers in many developed countries feel that their water problems were solved over half a century ago, and thus they are relevant now only for developing countries. This is a misconception (Biswas & Tortajada, 2008). Developed countries still have major water problems, but they are different from those faced by developing countries. It may also be one reason as to why only a very few developed countries have a dedicated water ministry. Often, water issues of the developed world are the responsibilities of the environment ministry.

It is now accepted that billions of dollars will be needed in many developed countries each year to keep their water and wastewater infrastructure functional, safe, and compliant with the current and likely future regulations. For example, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), in its latest Infrastructure Report card (2017), gave America's dams, inland waterways and drinking water a grade of D, and wastewater a D<sup>+</sup>. In 2019, some of these low grades may even fall farther because of the current US administration's lack of interest in water infrastructure and attempts to dilute the country's well-regarded Clean Water Act.

In most developing countries, very significant percentages of the population are engaged in agriculture-related activities, which now account for nearly 70% of total global water use. In countries such as India, agriculture and livestock account for some 90% of total national water use. Corresponding figures for Egypt are 86% and for China are 65%.

Since agriculture depends on a reliable supply of water, unsurprisingly, in nearly all developing countries, there is a dedicated water ministry because of its importance to the countries concerned. However, just because they have a dedicated water ministry, it does not mean that water in such countries is managed efficiently and equitably. Decades of neglect of proper and efficient water management have meant that water continues to be planned, used and managed inefficiently. Accordingly, signs of water stress, in terms of both quantity and quality, are now visible in all developing countries, water scarce or water abundant. This means that even in one of the world's most rainiest cities, Cherrapunji in India, where average annual rainfall is 11,777 mm, the city has been facing water shortages in the summer months.

In developing countries, even though water is realized to be an important consideration for national development, water ministries are seldom strong and important personalities. Capable and ambitious persons do not often want to be a water minister. They would prefer to be ministers of what are perceived to be important ministries such as finance, planning or foreign affairs. Thus, often, it has been difficult to select and retain good and capable experts

as the water minister for a reasonable period of time, say three to five years. Equally, prime ministers mostly do not want to 'waste' a good and competent person as a water minister!

Consider a major country such as India. From the year 2000, the country has had 10 water ministers, one of whom lasted just one day! At least for a total of five years during this 18-year period, a minister for another important department was given the additional responsibility of running the water ministry. The current Indian water minister, Nitin Gadkari, is primarily responsible for transportation. He was given the additional responsibility of the water ministry in May 2017 because the previous water minister proved not to be effective. Thus, and unsurprisingly, no water minister over the past 18 years has managed to make any perceptible difference in managing water in the country. Accordingly, very few Indians can even name a water minister, either present or during the past two decades, because water ministers have not been effective.

In contrast to political considerations, most water professionals, either explicitly or implicitly, consider water to be one of the most, if not the most, important issues of their country. While no one will argue that water is not an important issue, the fact remains that at the political level water is very rarely considered to be a priority issue in the national political agenda on a sustained basis.

Accordingly there is a fundamental dichotomy on the importance politicians give to water and the views of water professionals. An analysis of the last 50 years would indicate that, except for Lee Kuan Yew, who was Prime Minister of Singapore between 1959 and 1990, no other prime minister of any another country around the world, either developed or developing, had shown a sustained interest in water in normal times. They are interested in water only when there are serious droughts or heavy floods. As soon as the extreme hydrological events are over and the situation become normal, their interests in water basically disappears!

History shows water can only be managed properly if it is high up on the political agenda for a reasonable period of, say, 10–15 years, so that proper long-term policies and plans can be formulated and then implemented. Short- to medium-term high-level political interests, say for a few weeks to even 2–3 years, generally are not conducive for good and sustainable water policy formulation and its implementation.

Dr Cecilia Tortajada, Editor-in-Chief of this journal, and I had several personal discussions with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew. He was convinced that good water management was not only an absolute prerequisite for Singapore's social and economic development but also an essential strategic requirement for the country. Accordingly in 1965, Prime Minister Lee put three senior officers in his office whose task was to analyze the potential impacts of all the nation's policies through the lens of water. The results of this high level and sustained political interest for some three decades are there for everyone to see. In 1965, Singapore's water management was similar to that of India's Delhi or Mumbai. However, with the continuous interest of the prime minister, in about two decades, its water management become one of the best in the world. During this period, with the prime minister's strong personal support, Singapore completely cleaned up the highly polluted Singapore River and Kallang Basin as well as their sources of pollution. This clean-up was completed within the planned decade, and also within the initial budget (Joshi, Tortajada & Biswas, 2012).

The current prime minister of Singapore, son of the former Prime Minister Lee, has said that his father was 'obsessed' with water. However, this magnificent obsession ensured

Singapore's social and economic development progressed as planned, and Lee Kuan Yew bequeathed Singapore with one of the best water management systems in the world.

To a significant extent, the water profession has failed to convince senior policy-makers about the potential of water to assure their countries' economic and social development. They have failed to put water high up in the political agenda by not realizing or appreciating what influences the political views and priorities of prime ministers or presidents.

Let me give a personal example. One of my early mentors was Mrs Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India. In early 1973, when I was the Director of Environment Canada, as was my practice, I went to see her when I was in India. She gently chided me and said as a water professional I thought 'the sun and the moon' revolved around water. She told me bluntly that as a prime minister she had not much interest in water per se. She explained that issues such as water or energy are a means to an end. As a prime minister, she was interested mostly in the ends. The ends are how could India's economic growth be increased, how could poverty be alleviated or how could a significant number of good and well-paid employments be generated.

After this discussion with Prime Minister Gandhi, and some further serious reflections, I realized that it is not difficult to frame water discussions differently so that it would attract the personal attention of prime ministers. For the agrarian economies of developing countries such as India, water can act as an engine for economic and social development, generate new employments, and improve the standard of living and quality of life of millions of people. In 1975, agriculture accounted for nearly 35% of India's gross domestic product (GDP). Both irrigated and rainfed agriculture invariably depends on good and reliable water availability. A good monsoon invariably increases the GDP of the country, even now when India is becoming more and more urbanized and industrialized. Unsurprisingly, Pranab Mukherjee, former finance minister of India and who later became its president, once said the monsoon was the real finance minister of the country.

Even for industrial economies, a very good case can be made that water can be a catalyst, or an important facilitator, for their social and economic development, and could contribute to a better quality of life and standard of living.

Thus, the messaging of the water profession to attract the attention of the senior-most policy-makers has to change significantly. Focusing exclusively on good water planning and management, as has been the case in recent decades, will ensure the senior-most national policy-makers will have long-term and sustained interest in water. The messaging has to change if water is to be pushed higher up the political agenda of any county, developed or developing, over longer timeframes. This is an important issue for the water profession to ponder. Sadly this has not received much attention in the past or receiving adequate attention at present.

The March 2019 issue of the *International Journal of Water Resources Development* covers a wide range of topical subjects. They include a comprehensive state-of-the-art review of global water infrastructure (Grigg, 2017), the role of economic instruments in water allocation reform from Europe (Rey, Pérez-Blanco, Escrivá-Bou, Girard, & Veldkamp, 2018), historical and emerging policies for urban water supply in Sub-Saharan Africa (Adams, Sambu, & Smiley, 2018), national groundwater policy implementation in north-west China (Aarnoudse, Bluemling, Qu, & Herzfeld, 2018), groundwater depletion in Copiapó, Chile (Rinaudo & Donoso, 2018), civil society, gender and hydropower development in the Mekong (Lebel, Lebel, Singphonphrai, Duangsuwan, & Zhou, 2018), the interface between flood management

and adoptive management in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta (Tran, Pittock, & Tuan, 2018), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency's policies experiences and lessons learnt on impacts of urban floods in Asia (Inaoka, Takeya, & Akiyama, 2018).

The papers not only discuss diverse and topical water-related subjects but also cover wide geographical regions of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the world as a whole. There is much knowledge and food for thought in all these papers.

## References

- Aarnoudse, E., Bluemling, B., Qu, W., & Herzfeld, T. (2018). Groundwater regulation in case of overdraft: National groundwater policy implementation in north-west China. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 264–282. doi:10.1080/07900627.2017.1417115
- Adams, E. A., Sambu, D., & Smiley, S. L. (2018). Urban water supply in Sub-Saharan Africa: Historical and emerging policies and institutional arrangements. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 240–263. doi:10.1080/07900627.2017.1423282
- American Society Civil Engineers (ASCE). (2017). *Infrastructure report card*. New York. Retrieved from <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org>
- Biswas, A. K., & Tortajada, C. (2008). Water and OECD: Towards a symbiotic relationship. *OECD Observer*, 267 (May-June), 36–37.
- Grigg, N. S. (2017). Global water infrastructure: State of the art review. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 181–205. doi:10.1080/07900627.2017.1401919
- Inaoka, M., Takeya, K., & Akiyama, S. (2018). JICA's policies, experiences and lessons learned on impacts of urban floods in Asia. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 342–362. doi:10.1080/07900627.2018.1444980
- Joshi, Y.K., Tortajada, C., & Biswas, A.K. (2012). Cleaning of the Singapore River and Kallang Basin: Economic, social and environmental dimensions. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 28 (4), 647–658. doi:10.1080/07900627.2012.669034
- Lebel, P., Lebel, L., Singphonphrai, D., Duangsuwan, C., & Zhou, Y. (2018). Making space for women: Civil society organizations, gender and hydropower development in the Mekong region. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 304–324. doi:10.1080/07900627.2018.1425133
- Rey, D., Pérez-Blanco, C. D., Escrivá-Bou, A., Girard, C., & Veldkamp, T. I. E. (2018). Role of economic instruments in water allocation reform: Lessons from Europe. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 206–239. doi:10.1080/07900627.2017.1422702
- Rinaudo, J.-D., & Donoso, G. (2018). State, market or community failure? Untangling the determinants of groundwater depletion in Copiapó (Chile). *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 283–303. doi:10.1080/07900627.2017.1417116
- Tran, T. A., Pittock, J., & Tuan, L. A. (2018). Adaptive comanagement in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta: Examining the interface between flood management and adaptation. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 325–341. doi:10.1080/07900627.2018.1437713

Asit K. Biswas  
Editor

 [Prof.asit.k.biswas@gmail.com](mailto:Prof.asit.k.biswas@gmail.com)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9332-4298>