

crisis water The

Needed, a paradigm shift

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Water is a part of the global commons. Only new initiatives between the State and the citizen, based on transparency, can ensure fair access to water for everyone.

Photo:

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Water: A community resource, not a commodity.

What we do to water, we do to ourselves and the ones we love.

Popol Vuh, ancient Mayan Book

For 5,000 years of recorded history, water was seen as a gift of nature, held in trust for future generations. Water was considered a resource, not a commodity, part of the global commons, accessible and available to all. But today, the world is facing an acute water crisis; water poverty is so severe that the next world war is predicted to be over water!

What went wrong?

It is tempting to blame nature, population explosion, farmers, the poor, slum dwellers and everybody and everything except ourselves for the way we have managed water, especially in the last 25 years.

The resultant crisis is staggering. The World Health Organisation says 1.1 billion people, or 18 per cent of the world's population, lack access to safe drinking water; 2.6 billion people, or 42 percent, lack access to basic sanitation. Water-related diseases account for 80 per cent of illnesses and deaths in developing countries. By 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will lack clean and safe drinking water. Thirty-one countries, including India, face water stress and scarcity. There is now little chance of achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), despite the investment of millions of dollars in water and sanitation in the last three decades.

How did this happen?

The last five decades show major global shifts in approaches to water management. The first, in the 1950s and 1960s, saw increasing reliance on technology, accompanied by increased investment in infrastructure. Water was still considered a State responsibility.

The second shift, initiated in the 1970s, was corporatisation. Around the world, water departments were turned into separate State-owned water companies and boards. The tap water in homes was irresistible and catchy symbols of progress made possible by “modern” science.

The uncritical celebration of science and technology, however, had its fall-out. It almost obliterated long-existing traditional knowledge and water-management practices. Communities, alienated from local water, ceased to own and take care of water systems; notions of shared responsibility were replaced by the idea that the environment was someone else’s responsibility.

The most definitive shift occurred in 1992, treating water as an economic good, enabling its commodification. The Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development (January 1992) spelt out a new definitional architecture: “water has an economic value in all its competing use and should be recognised as an economic good”. This principle was expanded in the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or the First Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro where it was declared that, “Water should be regarded as a finite resource having an economic value with equal social and economic implications regarding the importance of meeting the basic needs”.

The definitional shift had immediate consequences. Stopping free water supply, imposing user fees, promoting sale of water and re-engineering of water utilities were all advanced on the principle of water as an economic good. The economic view resulted in changing the thrust of water providers from service provision to revenue generation with reduced budgetary support, gradual withdrawal of subsidies and phasing out of public water utilities.

The World Water Council projected that \$1 trillion in new investment was required to ensure water supply to all. Since many governments could not raise this, the prescription was to privatise water. The private sector was projected to bring in latest technology, critical investments and essential management practices leading to greater economic efficiency, stabilised rates, reduced public debt and improved management.

Privatisation not an answer

Water utilities and departments were rapidly dismantled, particularly in Latin America, where many water MNCs won contracts. But the private sector both failed to deliver fresh investment, or improve efficiency, and caused acute water crises. Even the World Bank records that private financing accounts for under 10 per cent of total investment in water and sanitation over the last decade. Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) has also been only a minor source of funds for the water sector.

The report, “Pipe Dreams” (2006) of the UK-based World Development Movement records that in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and East Asia, only 6,00,000 new household connections, or 900 per day, have been provided by the private sector since 1997. But the MDG of reducing by half the number of people requiring water and sanitation by 2015 will require 30,000 new water connections and 4,50,000 new sanitation connections daily between 2005 and 2015.

The assumption that privatisation would increase efficiency was belied. A 2002 World Bank sponsored study by Estache and Rossi of 50 companies in 29 countries confirmed 1986 findings that there is no significant difference in the efficiency of private and public companies. Other studies by the IMF, the World Bank and universities support this conclusion.

In the meantime, resistance to privatisation intensified. The Water Wars in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2001 soon spread across Latin America. In South Africa, Ghana, the Philippines and Indonesia,

water struggles broke out against private firms and the commodification of water. Elsewhere, the Netherlands has outlawed water privatisation; in Uruguay a 2004 constitutional referendum confirmed that “access to private water and sanitation are fundamental human rights and that social considerations take priority over economic considerations in water policies”.

What is the alternative?

In 2006, the UN World Water Development report declared that the water crisis is not the result of nature's vagaries or financing but has been caused by “profound failures in water governance”. The International Water Management Institute's report, “Water for food, water for life” concurred; no one size fits all, and solutions have to be specific to location, culture and history. Furthermore, reform must address decades of citizens' alienation from managing their own natural resources, from taking responsibility for natural resources, and from traditional practices. Yet the responsibility for governance reform is not just of technocracy and bureaucracy but of all citizens too.

Essential dimensions

Governance reform has three dimensions: Inclusion, Sustainability and changes to Institutional Culture. Critically, it must be ensured that those currently without water and sanitation get them first. This requires sensitising people and institutions to “reaching the unreached” and is anchored in equity and justice. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the Change Management Group of TWAD (Tamil Nadu Water Supplies and Drainage Board) engineers in a “Democratisation” experiment between 2004-07 reduced capital costs per household by up to 60 per cent and made savings of up to 33 per cent in budgeted schemes. In addition, 65 per cent of Dalit and marginalised communities have received targeted water supply, and 84 per cent of women surveyed reported that the water engineer behaved as a community member, creating a sense of involvement and ownership; 51,000 households contributed towards capital investment of over Rs.1.5 crores, and water sustainability has been improved by the planting of 20,000 saplings, the revival of 200 water bodies and the installation of numerous water-harvesting structures. With equally impressive impact, TWAD engineers have carried forward the change process in the State level Agricultural Engineering Department; major exercises on change management and convergence in irrigation and agriculture are currently under way in several river basins which are part of the IAMWARM project too

The second principle, Sustainability, has three dimensions — Natural, Financial and Human Resources. The challenge is to change mindsets centred on “exploitation” with conservation consciousness.

The third, most difficult, principle is the transformation of institutional cultures. The values and perspectives of public systems are not just rigid and unbending “precedent” based rules and regulations but also suspicious of demands for accountability, transparency and openness. The bureaucratic attitude can only be changed by an approach which addresses the attitudes of the individuals, the perspectives and norms of the organisation and the nature of its interface with other stakeholders.

The key to reform is democratisation, which acknowledges the centrality of the citizen to governance and recognises water as a fundamental right. The need is to ensure citizen ownership of all natural resources and environmental systems, including the global water commons. The task is to create new partnerships between citizens and the State. The challenge is to infuse new meanings into participation, transparency and accountability, based on Inclusion, Sustainability and transforming Institutional Cultures. Is all this possible?

The world “water citizen” needs to wake up and demand water democratisation. That is the only way we can safeguard water and leave behind for future generations what our ancestors left us — clean, fresh water!

