

Urban water woes: Solutions urgently needed

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Next week marks the 10th anniversary of Singapore International Water Week (SIWW).

Within a short period of a decade, it has become the leading global platform for discussions on matters related to urban water management. As thousands of the world's top experts, officials and NGO representatives gather in Singapore, the SIWW's mission – and challenges – could not be more clear: Many cities around the world are facing water crises.

Solutions are urgently needed as urbanisation continues apace in Asia, Africa and Latin America. For the last 20 years, the world's urban water management has been on an unsustainable path.

The task of ensuring water security, in terms of both quantity and quality, has become ever more pressing with each passing year as increasing population, rapid urbanisation and industrialisation all contribute to rising demand.

Take a country like India. In 1960, its population was 450 million, 18 per cent of whom lived in urban areas. By last year, the population had increased to 1.35 billion, three times that of 1960, and the urbanisation rate had doubled. This, plus equally rapid industrialisation, has put immense pressure on its water resources amid soaring demand. And it is not just a matter of quantity.

Like many developing countries around the world, India has also consistently ignored water quality management. India's capital, Delhi, is expected to become the largest global agglomeration by 2035 with 43.3 million people. It now discharges nearly all its untreated wastewater into the Yamuna river. The waterway has become an open sewer.

Similar practices in and around urban centres of the developing world have led to the contamination of water resources with domestic and industrial pollutants, further constricting available supplies.

Just this month, Niti Aayog, the successor to India's Planning Commission, finally acknowledged that India's water crisis is significantly more severe than the government has ever admitted.

Its Composite Water Management Index report makes for grim reading: 200,000 people die each year because of a lack of clean water; 75 per cent of households do not receive any water at home; and 70 per cent of India's water is contaminated.

It warned that 21 major cities in India will run out of groundwater by 2020, affecting 100 million people.

The report includes 28 performance indicators in an effort to tackle the problem. They include urban water supply and sanitation, rural drinking water, irrigation and watershed development. The hope is that these would help the government to better track performance in the water sector and take corrective measures at different stages.

Sadly, Niti Aayog's recommendations are unlikely to be implemented in the short or long term. For that to happen would require a major change in governance and institutions, a main weakness in the Indian system and the reason why the water sector is so poorly managed.

Under the Indian Constitution, it is the states that are responsible for water, not the central government. Therefore, the state water

departments would have to agree with the recommendations of Niti Aayog and would have to develop strategies to execute its recommendations.

States lack the financial, managerial and manpower resources to do it. What's more, when the ruling parties in the central government and the states are different, there is little political incentive for the state authorities to carry out the recommendations. What the Niti Aayog report has done is to lay out the symptoms of an ailing water management system; at best, attempts will be made to deal with the symptoms but India will not overcome its water crisis unless it tackles the disease itself; and that is the lack of sustained political will and functional institutions that will seriously deal with the interlocking problems of limited supply and rising demand.

The fact is that India, like many other developing countries, is facing a water crisis not simply because of a physical scarcity but because of continuous poor resource management and an absence of sustained political will to solve this problem.

Indeed, since the 1980s, billions

of dollars have been spent to clean up the Ganga river, of which Yamuna is a tributary. However, the river is currently more polluted than ever, an outcome that resulted in the Supreme Court censuring the government for its abject failure.

The outlook is not good. Our prediction is that within the next 10 years, at least 10 major Indian cities will face an even worse water crisis than Cape Town. Since late last year, the drought-stricken South African city of 3.7 million people has lived under the shadow of Day Zero, when dam levels would fall so low that all taps would be forced to be turned off. Day Zero has been held at abeyance so far with severe restrictions and fines for breaching daily water quotas.

Perhaps a crisis on such a scale is what India needs to galvanise the necessary political will to resolve its water management issues.

Providing clean water to people in urban centres of more than 200,000 people is not rocket science. The policies to make this possible have been known for at least two decades and so has the technology. Business models have been available since at least 1990 on how to manage water supplies. In essence, consumers, both rich and

poor, paid for clean water. Only the poor should receive targeted subsidies. Investment needs can be solved. The missing ingredients have been sustained political will to take the right decisions and good governance practices.

In the early 1960s, Singapore faced similar water-related problems confronting many cities in developing countries. What made the difference was then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's decision to prioritise what he saw as a strategic matter vital to Singapore's survival.

"In Singapore, every policy bends in the knees for water," was how he put it in an interview with us in 2009. As a result, within 20 years, Singapore became a leader in water management.

To be sure, challenges remain for Singapore and the rest of the world, not least because of climate change. But there is no reason why urban water problems in Delhi, Jakarta, Mexico city or elsewhere cannot be solved; what is needed is leadership and the political will to sustain the hard decisions taken to preserve this most vital of resources.

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