



The 5th World Water Forum, to be held in Istanbul from 16-22 March 2009, brings the spotlight once again to water. There is growing insecurity linked to assuring enough water for everyone in the future. Already, more than 700 million people in 43 countries suffer from water shortages. This number is expected to jump to 3 billion by 2025. In addition to basic human consumption and sanitation needs, water demand for agriculture and for industry is rising faster than supply can cope with. The water bomb is ticking. If adequate measures are not taken to manage water resources well, a new age of water scarcity will catch us scrambling for short-term emergency measures.

Held every three years, the World Water Forum event in Istanbul, at the confluence of East and West, has as its main theme "Bridging Divides for Water" among actors, sectors and among the present and future generations. Within that ambit, it will examine several water-related issues like global changes and risk management, advancing development and the Millennium Development Goals, as well as governance, finance and capacity building. The Forum closes on 22 March - the World Water Day - whose focus this year is on "Shared Water - Shared Opportunities." It is the firm belief of the environmental community that nurturing the opportunities for cooperation in transboundary water management can be a vehicle of peace, understanding and trust among countries as well as of sustainable economic growth.

Yet the urgency, which is needed in terms of a new approach to water management, is lacking. 106 countries adopted the United Nations Watercourses Convention, which sets out the rights and obligations of countries sharing water resources, in 1997. Yet, as of now the Convention has only 16 Contracting States, being 19 short for it to enter into force. The announcement by France that it is going to ratify the Convention is certainly a positive development and likely to accelerate the process.

The world's 263 international watercourses, which cover almost half the earth's surface, hold freshwater supplies in 145 countries. They generate about 60 per cent of the global freshwater

flows. Immediate ratification and implementation of the Convention is essential to ensure that States properly utilise and protect those precious water supplies. Above all, as a global legal umbrella, the Convention seeks to reinforce international cooperation while weaving social, environmental and equity considerations into it. For Green Cross International, which was and still is, one of the principal organisations pushing for the UN Watercourses Convention, its ratification would dramatically reduce the water conflicts probability. One of the specific issues being presented by Green Cross at the Istanbul Forum is "Sustainable and Equitable Cooperation: Institutional tools and mechanisms."

Decades earlier when the World Water Forum initiative was launched, many warned of coming water wars. Conflicts over water are happening. We may not be seeing national armies fighting battles over water, but this does not mean that people are not dying, or that the security of whole regions is not in peril. The horrific conflict in Darfur, civil violence in Northern Uganda and continued instability in Somalia must be wake-up calls for us all.

The health consequences of inadequate access to water for consumption and sanitation needs are already catastrophic. According to a World Health Organization study conducted in 5 continents, 80 per cent of infectious diseases in the world are the result of the use of contaminated water. In the developing countries, about 95 per cent of all surface waters are polluted.

The prospect of a water crisis is reportedly looming over two major and populous developing countries - China and India. Even in the wealthier countries, the picture is far from perfect as significant leakages are reported in the water distribution systems. In Eastern Europe, adequate water and sanitation is not available to 16 per cent of households. In the Eurozone, 37 children die everyday as a result of diseases related to water.

It is obvious that despite numerous reports from experts and environmental organisations, the response from political leadership fails to measure up to what is already an emergency situation. All too often, it is the cost implications of addressing inequities in access to basic necessities that drives inaction. It is estimated, for instance, that if governments in the industrialised world were to allocate US\$50 per capita towards fighting the water crisis, it would take only 10 years to resolve it. At the same time, farmers' subsidies in the developed countries amount to US\$ 2 per day per cow. That comes to US\$ 700 per year per cow - compare that with the \$50 per year per capita needed to respond to a global human emergency. The fallacy of the dollar numbers are out in the open now as the rich world strives to pour billions of dollars into propping up fledgling banks and other financial institutions, with no end in sight as to when this life support is going to stop.

In addition to direct human needs, it is clear that a number of freshwater eco-systems, which

provide important source of food and livelihoods to people, are also being impacted in a big way. That means accelerating the loss of biodiversity or nature's wealth in the variety of flora and fauna - an important source of potential medicines for human ailments.

The failure to respond to the growing water crisis may in fact be deeper than just an accumulated political deficit. In essence, it reflects the bankruptcy of a model of development that is just so unsustainable. Unchecked release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, massive pollution of our fresh and marine water bodies and the soil, as well as rapid deforestation - have brought us to a point where reversing the effects of all this is no longer in the hands of a single country, institution or stakeholder. Forging a common response sooner means a smaller price tag for all nations.

But the political leaders of our planet - while trying to fix a broken financial system and an economy in distress - need to signal a new resolve to move on a more sustainable architecture that respects the purity of the air we breath and the water we drink. The entire economic edifice of production, distribution and consumption has to be made sustainable. A new push to green industries can be a veritable panacea not just for the current economic crisis but can be a structural correction for the world economy as such. But then it has to be a concerted global action. The G-20 meeting in London in April could signal such change. But global efforts will have to include real transfers of clean technologies to developing nations.

The lessons from the financial crisis that has gripped the global economy have to be borne in mind. Despite several warnings in the wake of financial turmoil that engulfed countries in Asia and Latin America, no moves were made to devise international mechanisms to prevent such meltdown. What is being sought now is an effective global response to redress damages that no nation alone appears capable of resolving unilaterally. Neither should the world wait as it did in the case of climate change. There is no safe haven from nature's polluted resources. The water time bomb must be defused. For starters, the politics has to transcend sovereignty.

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