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**WATER: CRISIS DUE TO SCARCITY OR POOR GOVERNANCE?**

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Harold Macmillan, the former British Prime Minister, in his final speech to the House of Lords said: “After a long life I have come to the conclusion that when all the establishment is united, it is always wrong”. This perceptive observation is very true now for the water establishment in terms of some of the common paradigms that are now being vigorously promoted by most international organizations, many national institutions, and numerous water professionals from different parts of the world.

A few examples will illustrate these facts. First, it is the common wisdom at present that the world will shortly be facing an unprecedented water crisis because of physical scarcities of water. However, what we are facing is NOT a crisis in terms of actual physical water availability but because of a continuing mismanagement in water governance in most developed and almost all developing countries. Unfortunately, water is being used very inefficiently in most countries of the world, and for nearly all purposes. If the past and the present practices continue in the future, there will be no other alternative but that most parts of the world will face a water crisis that would be unprecedented in the entire human history.

Second, there are regular reports in the media that countries are likely to go to war because of the acute water shortages facing them. This is absolute nonsense! No two countries have ever gone to war because of water in the entire human history, and are highly unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. If there will be a war between two or more countries, the 10th reason may be water but most certainly not the first ninth.

Third, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) stipulate that number of people not having access to clean drinking water should be reduced by half between 1990 and 2015. However, the fact is that every one in the world has access to water: otherwise they would have been long dead! The original philosophy behind the goals that was first formulated in the last 1970s, was that people should have access to clean drinking water which should have no adverse health implications. Unfortunately, from Delhi to Cairo, and Lagos to Mexico City, the water supplied at present is neither safe, nor generally drinkable without additional treatment, and yet these cities are assumed to have satisfied the MDG requirements! In many cities, citizens are being forced to use membranes, a

process used for desalination, to purify their water to make it drinkable. Even then, it is now considered that they have access to clean water. What nonsense! Sadly, many international organizations have conveniently forgotten the philosophy behind the MDG water target. At present, the statistics are being erroneously, but conveniently, used only to meet the MDG targets and to provide fig leaves to national water authorities to hide their continuing incompetence.

Fourth, another global target has also been to reduce by half the number of people who do not have access to sanitation, between 1990 and 2015. Sanitation currently means that wastewater is taken out from the cities and dumped untreated, or partially treated, to rivers, lakes and oceans. For example, Delhi dumps its untreated wastewater to River Yamuna, and Mexico City transfers its untreated wastewater to Mezquital Valley where it is used for agricultural production. In spite of these sad and unacceptable state of affairs, people in cities like Delhi or Mexico are assumed to have proper sanitation. In reality, the problem of wastewater management has not been solved in such cities at all: it simply has been transferred from one location to another.

Because of the current and past practices, the world is facing a crisis in terms of water quality. Nearly all water bodies in or near urban centres of developing countries are now highly contaminated. If we frame the question differently in terms of what percentage of the people in a region like Latin America have access to proper wastewater treatment (that is, wastewater collected from households, taken to a treatment plant where it is properly treated and then discharged to the environment in a safe way), the research carried out at the Third World Centre for Water Management shows that it is around 10 percent! We suspect the situation is somewhat similar in developing Asian countries, but probably worse in Africa. Yet, by looking at the issue of sanitation in a politically correct and very simplistic manner, the percentage of population having access to sanitation in Latin America is increased by some 300% to 400%! This, of course, at least on paper, makes the situation more acceptable!

The fact is that the world is NOT running out of water as many people would like to make us believe. However, the world is now facing a water quality problem that is more serious than commonly realized. There is no question that we have to manage our water resources much better than in the past. We do have a very serious water governance problem in most parts of the world. Let us take the case of Cherrapunji, India, one of the rainiest places of the world. The average annual rainfall is 11,433 mm. Even with this heavy annual rainfall, Cherrapunji now has a water problem during the dry seasons. This is only one example that shows that the water problems of the world are primarily management-related and not supply-related. There is no question that the current and future water problems can be solved with existing knowledge, technology and adoption of good practices. We need to consider and implement “business unusual” approaches.

Let me give you only one example: the case of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In 1993, the Phnom Penh Water Supply Association (PPWSA) was nearly bankrupt, and was losing nearly 75% of its water due to leakages and pilferages. Only the rich and the powerful had sporadic access to water. A decade later, everyone, rich or poor, has access to clean,

drinkable water, and losses have been cut to around 8%, significantly better than London where losses are around 28%, or even Paris, or Washington, or Los Angeles. This public sector institution is now financially independent, and its profits are increasing annually. Every year, it pays higher taxes to the Cambodian Government and the donors are fighting with each other to have the privilege of lending money to PPWSA! All it needed was one capable and committed individual, Ek Sonn Chan, who cleaned up the old corrupt and inefficient practices, built a dedicated team and is constantly improving its management. The world needs to follow the Phnom Penh's "can do" approach to resolve its water problems.

If Phnom Penh can solve its water problems, so should Delhi, Dhaka, Cairo, Lagos, Riyadh or Sao Paulo. They all have significantly better technical and administrative expertise than Cambodia, and also a thriving private sector which Phnom Penh does not have. It is criminal that cities of more than 200,000 people in the developing world still cannot provide 24-hour, uninterrupted supply of clean and drinkable water. The fact that most cities in developing countries do not have universal access to clean drinking water after some 30 years of national and international efforts is a terrible indictment of their current and past poor water governance practices. Instead of tackling the real problem of poor governance, many reasons for this failure are offered, such as 'there is not enough water', 'there is not enough money', and many others. These are only excuses and not the real reasons which are very seldom discussed in the various international fora.

Now, let me move to another issue: water use for agriculture. Globally, agriculture is the biggest user of water, which accounts for some 70% of total water use. In many developing countries, agriculture accounts for approximately 80% to 90% of all water use. However, nearly all over the world, agricultural water use is highly inefficient. Still, there are no signs of concerted attempts being made to encourage efficient water use in this sector, where high water and energy subsidies are endemic. For example, in major agricultural countries like China or India, energy for pumping water for the farmers is either free, or very heavily subsidized. As a result of this over-pumping and extravagant water abstractions, with free or highly subsidized electricity, groundwater levels in many of the farming areas are declining very rapidly. Most Indian State Electricity Boards are now almost bankrupt because of the heavy subsidies provided to the farmers for water pumping. This is no way to manage water and energy resources to maximize food production. It is basically a lose-lose situation for all the sectors, as well as for national economics, and is not sustainable over the medium- or long-term.

Water is an important cross-cutting issue to assure food, energy and environmental securities of the world at present. And yet, it is probably the most neglected or ignored resource issue of the world. WHO estimates that 6% of global diseases are related to water, and around 3.4 million people die each year because of water-related diseases. While I have serious doubts about the accuracy of such global statistics and the methods through which they were estimated, there is no question that the present water quality situation extracts high cost in terms of human welfare, poverty alleviation and economic development in most developing countries.

With such high sustained human and economic costs over the years, one would logically expect that water issues receive, at the very least, similar level of interest that other currently popular issues like climate change. However, water is not receiving even 5% of the global interest given to climate change at present. Therein lies a global conundrum, especially as world water problems are now solvable. Unlike climate change, we already have the knowledge, technology and know-how to solve the world's water problems. It needs determined global interest, social pressure from the people concerned and appropriate policies and good governance practices to solve the water problems of the world in a timely and cost-effective manner.