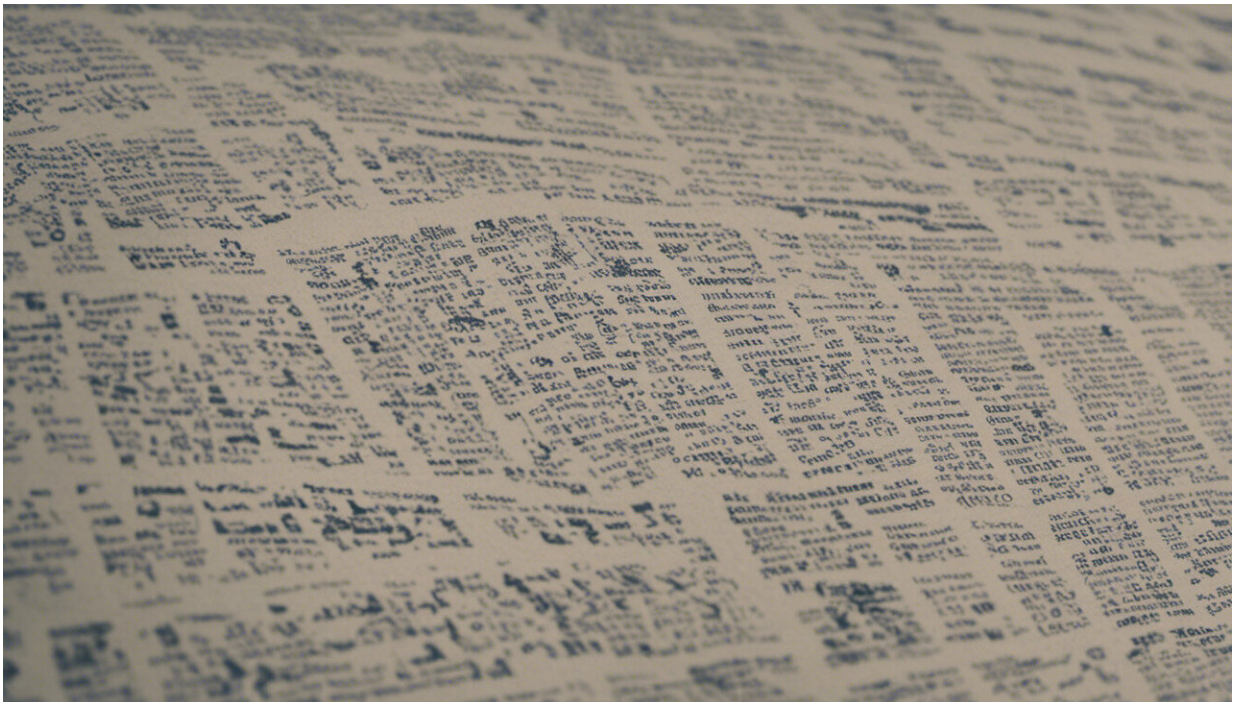


How to make water issues matter to world leaders

March 19 2019, by Asit K. Biswas And Cecilia Tortajada



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In December 1992, the UN General Assembly declared 22 March World Water Day, to be celebrated each year. With increasing populations and economic activities, many countries face water scarcity – which in turn limits their economic development.

Sadly, not a single World Water Day over the past 25 years has focused on how [water](#) could be put high up on the political agendas of countries on a long-term basis. Until this happens, probabilities of solving national, and then global, water problems are slim.

An analysis of the last 50 years would indicate that except for [Lee Kuan Yew](#), Singapore's prime minister from 1959 to 1990, no other leaders of any other country have shown sustained interest in water in normal times. They are interested in water only when there are severe droughts or heavy floods. Once these [extreme events](#) are over, and situations return to normal, their interests in water promptly evaporate.

In contrast to national political leaders, most water professionals from all over the world, from academia, public and private sectors and NGOs, explicitly or implicitly consider water to be one of the most, if not the most, important issue facing their countries.

If this gulf in perception between national policymakers and the water profession is to be bridged, the latter must change their current messaging.

In recent decades, the focus of the water profession has been exclusively on good planning and management. However, this has not got national political leaders interested in water on a long-term and sustained basis.

This is because they are elected or judged primarily on the basis of improvements in the economic and social conditions of their countries. Thus, to attract their attention on water issues, the message to them should focus on how good water management can contribute to a country's social and economic development, poverty alleviation, job creation and improved quality of life for citizens.

Everyone's problem

Water problems are a global issue and leaders in both developed and developing countries should focus on them.

There's a misconception among most policymakers in developed countries who feel their water problems were solved over half a century ago. Developed countries still have major water problems to solve. However, these are different from the problems in developing countries.

In most developed countries billions of dollars are needed annually to keep their water and wastewater infrastructure functional, safe and in compliance with current and future regulations. For example, every four years the American Society of Civil Engineers grades America's infrastructure using a simple [A to F report card](#). The latest 2017 report gives America's dams, inland waterways and drinking water a D, and wastewater a D+.

[According to the American Water Works Association](#), the US needs to invest more than US\$1 trillion over the next 25 years to replace its ageing drinking water pipes. This does not include costs of updating sewer and stormwater pipes and water supply and wastewater treatment plants.

In developing countries, a large proportion of the population are engaged in agriculture-related activities, which accounts for nearly [70% of total global water use](#). In India, agriculture accounts for some 90% of national water use. Corresponding figures for Egypt are 86% and for China 65%.

Agriculture depends on a reliable supply of water. So, nearly all developing countries have a dedicated water ministry because of its economic and social importance. Even then, water in such countries is not being managed efficiently and equitably.

India, for example, has had ten water ministers between 2000 and 2018.

But not a single water minister in that time has managed to make any perceptible difference to how water is managed in India.

It has been difficult for India to find and retain good and capable persons as water ministers. For a total of five years at least, ministers holding another important portfolio were given the additional responsibility of running the water ministry. This includes the current minister.

Convincing policymakers

Water professionals have failed to convince senior policymakers of the potential of water to assure their countries' economic and social development. They have been unable to put water high up on the political agenda by not realising or appreciating what influences the political views and priorities of prime ministers or presidents.

India's former prime minister, Indira Gandhi, was a mentor to one of us (Asit). In early 1973, she noted that a water professional often thinks the "sun and the moon" revolve around water. As a prime minister, she had not much interest in water. She explained that issues like water or energy are a means to an end. As a prime minister, she was interested mostly in the ends: how could India's economic growth be increased, how could poverty be alleviated, or how could a significant number of good and well-paid jobs be generated?

To attract the attention of state leaders, water professionals should make it clear that water can act as an engine for economic and social development, generate new employment and improve the standard of living and quality of life of the people.

Water professionals can also point out lessons from Singapore, whose leaders have consistently considered water to be a strategic issue for the

country's social and economic development.

During a series of private discussions with Lee Kuan Yew, we found out that he had three people in his office who examined all policies "through the lens of water" before they were approved.

He noted: "All policies had to bend at the knees for water survival."

With such an enlightened outlook, Singapore's water management, which in the early 1960s was similar to that of Delhi, became one of the best in the world only 25 years later. Water continues to receive high political priority in Singapore.

Even for advanced industrial economies, water can be an engine for their continuing social and economic development. Properly planned, water should contribute to a better quality of life and standard of living of their citizens. However, this is unlikely to happen without strong and sustained high-level political support.

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