The issue of pricing water is extremely sensitive as shortages blight more communities

It's arguably our most vital and precious natural resource, and one that is growing dangerously scarce from China to California, but no matter how much we value water, we're not that keen on paying for it.

The argument for raising the tariff is that it would make consumers less profligate and provide income for utility companies to invest in more efficient networks.

Outdated, decrepit distribution systems in many developed nations are astonishingly wasteful, with the US Geological Survey estimating drinking water losses in the US at 1.7 trillion gallons a year.

But upgrades and retrofits are expensive, and the utilities generally don't have the necessary funds.

Water bills are so low that they barely register with middle class consumers, but Ger Bergkamp, executive director of the International Water Association, warned against underestimating the "emotional value" people attach to water.

"You'd need to do a lot with the price to change behaviour. But anyone who says 'ok, let's whack it up 10 times and be done' is going to face a revolution," Bergkamp said.
It stopped short of a full-fledged rebellion, but tens of thousands of people took to the streets of the Irish capital Dublin last month to protest new water charges.

NGOs dedicated to getting drinking water and sanitation to the most needy are largely sceptical about the effectiveness of tariffs as a conservation tool, although they don't rule out the need for pricing.

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If water is too cheap, people tend to waste it, some experts say.

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In the cities of most developing countries, the majority of people connected to a mains network and paying subsidised rates for their water are the middle to upper class.

The rest have to find other sources, often unregulated secondary vendors who may have illegally tapped into the mains and who charge what they like.

"The net result is the poorest people who don't have connections end up paying significantly more for what they consume than those who are connected," said Tim Brewer, a policy analyst with WaterAid.

A key concept when debating the economics, or ethics, of water pricing is the consumer's "willingness to pay" which aims to determine the amount of money someone will fork out for the supply of water.

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must be carefully structured to allow continued water access for the poor.

Most experts also insist that pricing alone is ineffective in changing behaviour and consumer wastage can only be curbed by raising awareness of the scarcity and value of water.

Unfortunately, such awareness often only sinks in when water access is suddenly and dramatically lowered.

"Trying to make the case for water in good times should be easier," said Anthony Cox, a deputy OECD environment director.

"But there's nothing like a crisis to galvanise people."

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