

## Climate Change : Natural Disasters

### Is the Blue Planet Running Dry?

**Public attention is focused on climate change. But while we discuss greenhouse gas emissions and global warming, a more imminent global threat is emerging: the world's water resources are growing scarce. To reverse the trend, politicians and business propose contended solutions.**



#### Water Scarcity

A woman in Harbin, China receives water. According to the OECD one billion people lack access to clean drinking water worldwide (Photo: Reuters)

John F. Kennedy once said that whoever solved the world's water problem should receive two Nobel Prizes – one for science, one for peace. Kennedy's words still ring true today. According to figures from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), one billion people lack access to clean drinking water.

Experts say water will become even more scarce in the future. The UN Climate Report 2007 predicts that global warming will cause precipitation levels in many developing countries to drop further. Meanwhile, an OECD study expects demand for water to increase by 50 percent during the next 30 years, mostly in large developing countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China.

While climate change could aggravate the current water crisis, the basic problem is not a lack of water, but rather its mismanagement, the OECD says. At its annual Forum in Paris, the organization's Secretary-General, Angel Gurría, identified two problems that have to be solved to address current levels of waste and dissipation.

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One is that water is often too cheap or free. "This is particularly important in agriculture, where the use of water for irrigation, which accounts for the greatest use of water in the world, is generally underpriced or sometimes given away as a free good, and hence leads to wasteful use," said Gurría.

Because water is not appreciated as a limited resource, it is often poorly managed. In a global survey of urban water management conducted for the Third World Centre for Water Management (TWCWM), Western

European cities showed surprisingly bad results. With water losses of only about 5 percent, Singapore ranked first in the survey, while most Western cities and towns had loss rates of 15-25 percent. And in most African cities, over 50 percent of the water supply is wasted or unaccounted for, according to the OECD's African Economic Outlook 2007.

### **Minimizing water losses - at the expense of the poor?**

Phnom-Penh, the Cambodian capital, provides an interesting example for how much water can be saved if officials are willing to invest, says TWCWM founder Asit K. Biswas. After years of civil war, the city's water system had totally degraded. In 1993, a staggering 80 percent of all water transported was lost through leaks and corroded pipes. Fourteen years later, this figure has dropped to 8.5 percent. What did the trick in Singapore and Phnom Penh? Both cities turned water into a commodity with a real price. Singapore's water plants now recycle waste water at such a high quality that semi-conductor producers that need extremely clean water are willing to pay higher prices than for normal tap water.

Pricing water, however, has negative impacts, too. According to a paper on poverty reduction in Phnom Penh, drafted by the United Nation Development Program in 1999, only 22 percent of people living in poorer areas of Phnom Penh were connected to the city's water system. Most of them could simply not afford to pay for the water connection. The OECD, thus, lobbies for a two-way approach: cities and governments should provide water connection for free and only charge the water consumed.

NGOs like Food & Water Watch oppose the pricing and privatization of water resources, saying that poor people are increasingly cut-off from access to clean water due to unaffordable water prices. Huge players in the food industry, however, support the OECD's demand for water pricing.

Nestlé CEO Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, known for the statement that water should be priced like any other foodstuff given in the documentary film "We Feed the World," challenged what he called unsustainable demands on water. "Given population growth and increased demand for water, it is estimated that if we do not change our water management, in 20 years there will be about 30 percent less water per person on the planet," Brabeck-Letmathe said at the OECD Forum in Paris.

### **4,000 liters of water for one liter of ethanol**

The agricultural sector, which uses over 90 percent of all fresh water consumed, has to be reformed, said Brabeck-Letmathe. "It takes a liter of water to produce a calorie of food. This means that each of us 'eats' around 3,000 liters of 'virtual' water every day."

How closely the question of viable water supplies is linked to the fight against climate change becomes obvious when looking at a popular renewable energy source, fuel from biomass. Brabeck-Letmathe claims that it takes 4,000 liters of water to produce enough corn for one liter of ethanol, one of the most talked-about biofuels "So, clearly if water would have a price, there is no way we could produce ethanol at a reasonable price."

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