

Ensuring Asia's taps flow safely and steadily

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IN 2000, the UN convened a summit that adopted a set of ambitious Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Millennium Development Targets (MDT). One of those targets was to reduce by half the number of people in the world without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015.

To help advance this aim, the Asia-Pacific Water Forum (APWF) was launched in September last year. It has two aims: to provide regional countries and organisations with a common platform to articulate strategies and promote achievements in solving water problems; and to showcase the best practices in governance and innovation, and success stories that have had an impact on the lives of people, especially the poor.

The APWF convened the region's first Water Summit, in Beppu, Japan, last week. It focused on three priority themes and five result areas.

The three priority themes are: water financing and capacity development, water-related disaster management, and water for development and ecosystems.

The key result areas include developing knowledge and lessons learnt. Singapore's Public Utilities Board, the Asian Development Bank and Unesco have set up such a knowledge hub in Singapore, which has already trained more than 500 individuals.

Another area is to develop local capacity. A third is to increase outreach by the APWF to the public. The fourth area is to monitor investments and results. The fifth is to support the work of the APWF and the Water Summit.

Real impact

WHEN I was invited to join the steering committee of the Water Summit, I accepted with the hope that it would not be another photo opportunity or festival of speech-making. I exhorted the committee to be ambitious and to make this an action-oriented meeting with a real impact on the lives of the 700 million people in this region who do not have access to safe drinking water and the 1.9 billion people who do not have access to basic sanitation.

The summit was not well covered by the international media because of the attention focused on the Bali conference on climate change. This is a pity because the summit produced some very important deliverables. Let me highlight some of them.

We agreed that people's right to safe drinking water and basic sanitation is a human right and a fundamental aspect of human security. I think such a statement has never been made before.

We agreed to meet the Millennium Development Target on water and sanitation by 2015 and to aim to achieve by 2025 a situation in which every Asian has access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. I would note here that Asean leaders at their recent summit in Singapore said they would aspire to meet the MDT on water by 2010.

We agreed to accord the highest priority to water and sanitation in our economic and development plans. We also agreed to increase substantially our allocation of resources to the water and sanitation sectors. The sad reality today is that most governments in Asia do not accord a high priority to these sectors or fund them adequately.

We agreed to improve governance, efficiency, transparency and equity in all aspects related to the management of water, particularly as it impacts on poor communities. We recognised that while women are particularly vulnerable, they are also resilient and entrepreneurial, hence, should be empowered in all water-related activities. The biggest problem facing Asia today is not technology or hardware, but these soft issues.

We agreed to take urgent action to prevent and reduce the risks of flood, drought and other water-related disasters and to bring timely relief and assistance to their victims. More people in Asia lose their lives and homes to floods and other water-related disasters than those in the rest of the world.

We agreed to support the region's vulnerable small island states in their efforts to protect lives and livelihoods from the impact of climate change. We were moved by the poignant statements of leaders of South Pacific island states that some of their low-lying isles are already submerged.

We exhorted the Bali conference to take into account the relationship between water and climate change, such as the melting of snow caps and glaciers in the Himalayas and rising sea levels, which some countries in the region are already suffering from. It should be remembered that nine of Asia's great rivers begin in the Himalayas and that nearly one billion people could be adversely affected.

We requested that the next Group of Eight Summit commit to supporting developing countries achieve their MDG and MDT on water and sanitation, and to take immediate action to support 'adaptation to climate change' by developing countries.

We agreed to empower a high-level coordinating mechanism in our respective Cabinets and, where possible, to appoint a minister in charge of water to ensure that

all related issues are dealt with in a holistic manner. At the moment, only two countries, Australia and Singapore, have ministers in charge of water.

We agreed to put in place a system for monitoring investments, as well as policies and projects, to ensure accountability and to make adjustments to policies and projects, if necessary.

Basic sanitation

THE United Nations has designated 2008 the International Year of Sanitation. At the summit, we held a regional launch of this international year. All participants agreed that if the water situation is deplorable, then the sanitation situation is a disaster. Nearly two billion people in this region do not have access to basic sanitation.

The lack of basic sanitation is a threat to human health, a driver of poverty and an assault on human dignity and safety. We agreed that solving the sanitation problem is not only important in itself, but also to the achievement of the other MDGs.

Singapore's own Mr Jack Sim, the founder of the World Toilet Organisation, made an impressive presentation at the meeting. He spoke of his work in Indonesia's Aceh province, rural China, India and other parts of Asia, using low-tech, non-water reliant methods of sanitation.

He also showed photos of two six-year-old boys defecating in public. One was of a boy in present-day Bangalore. The other was of himself, taken 40 years ago. The moral of the story is that with economic growth, political will, good governance and social equity, Asia can solve its sanitation problem.

Thought leader

THERE is difficult work ahead. But the success of the Water Summit shows the way forward. Singapore has been asked to consider hosting the next summit in 2009.

I hope the Singapore Government will agree to do so because, like Japan, Singapore is recognised by the region and the international community as a thought leader in water and sanitation. But much work remains to be done.

The writer is the chairman of the APWF's governing council and a member of the Water Summit's steering committee.