

# Give water its due importance

Rethink the place of water management in policymaking and derive greater benefit from water events, especially SIWW

By ASIT K BISWAS and LEONG CHING

IN RECENT weeks, several disasters across the world – typhoons in Taiwan, floods in Manila, and life-threatening droughts as in America – have forced a humdrum, pedestrian piece of city infrastructure onto the policy table: water resource management.

In Manila, at least 12 people died and more than 120,000 were affected after floods in past weeks. Over the past month in the US, fears of rising food prices have accompanied the long dry season, that have parched corn and soybean fields. In Taiwan, fruit and vegetable prices have already soared since a typhoon destroyed farms and orchards.

Rains can be deadly, inasmuch as lack of rain can bring severe hardship. Yet, aside from when Nature forces it to our attention, water invariably lurks under the political radar all over the world. At the recent Rio+20 Conference, not a single head of government considered water to be an important issue.

Although essential to life, water is also mostly invisible, especially in cities when they flow in pipes and sewers. When you think of city landmarks and accomplishments, good urban water management is seldom a priority issue for politicians and city officials. Ditchwater never won any elections.

Clearly, there is a great need to re-think the nature of water and its place at the policy table. It can perhaps take the lead from business, where water is already occupying an increasingly key position.

## Water business

Large water events are becoming popular in the main cities of the world – stories of big business deals and new and expensive technology abound, promising the host country not inconsiderable economic and reputational benefits. More private companies too are interested in the business of water, since more people are living in cities and water services are an increasingly important component of the quality of urban life.

The Singapore International Water Week (SIWW), now in its fifth year, concluded last month with much fanfare.

It achieved a record \$S13.6 billion in business deals, saw more than 18,000 people and 750 companies. From ministers of countries to CEOs



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**Tougher to lead:** Singapore has ambitions of being an international water hub. Its good governance and success with NEWater (above) are now widely admired. Increasingly, however, other cities are catching up with and even surpassing Singapore, according to certain key performance indicators.

of multi-billion-dollar companies, they came and exchanged ideas and notes at the Marina Bay Convention Centre. The Lee Kuan Yew Water Prize was predictably awarded again to wastewater research.

But anyone who missed the excitement will not have long to wait. There is another one, equally filled with luminaries, in Stockholm this month, followed by another in Amsterdam later in the year. And if you like one with an Asian flavour, try India Water Week next April.

But it is unclear whether these water events actually provide essential new knowledge needed to improve water management. Often, water managers work under mostly mediocre to poor policy and governance re-

gimes which are mostly ignored by all the water weeks.

This disconnect provides food for thought.

Singapore has ambitions of being an international water hub. Its good governance and success with NEWater and extensive recycling practices are now widely admired in the world. Increasingly, however, other cities are catching up with and even surpassing Singapore, according to certain key performance indicators.

In a rapidly changing world, Singapore must run faster to keep its pre-eminent place. The annual SIWW has been held five times since it started in 2008. It will now be held every two years, with the next one in 2014. Given this, it is high time to reflect on

its role going forward and where it could make its mark on the water world.

Three ideas are offered here.

Fixing water pipes is not considered a career boost by most bureaucrats. Yet water can, and does, make a great deal of difference. For example, Bhutan is well known for prizing its gross national happiness over its gross national product. But a great deal of its happiness is derived from something basic: its water management, which incidentally adds not an insubstantial amount to its GDP too.

Twenty years ago, Bhutan had the lowest per capita GDP and energy consumption in South Asia. Now, its energy consumption (a sign of its economic health) is the highest in South Asia.

At the same time, it is “green” growth. Its dams generate electricity in a low-carbon manner, and its good water management means that there is sufficient “tail water” at the end of it for agriculture and homes, not only for Bhutan but also for India. Bhutan is galloping ahead of many of its South Asian neighbours.

Meanwhile, in another country, a global economic powerhouse, one-third of its wastewater plants are not working – for the simple reason that the sewer pipes have not yet been laid. This is not merely a waste of resources but creates a fundamental bottleneck for growth and good health.

These stories deserve to be noted. The first change suggested therefore

is to make room for low-glamour but high-impact stories. They may not result in large business deals, but they will change the way millions receive their drinking water, and reduce public healthcare costs.

Second, we have alluded to the many other water weeks in the world. What could be the distinguishing feature for Singapore? Aside from being in the cultural and developmental context of Asia, Singapore should bring to the attention of the world its unique experience in urban water governance. Contrary to widespread belief, long-term planning and implementation are the special features of Singapore’s success – not technology.

## No formula

It would be tempting to try and read off “lessons” from the Singapore water story, but this is not our intention. Rather, it is the broad principles of good long-term planning and continuous evolution, care for details and politicians’ respect for professionals that account for its good governance.

In a sense, Singapore’s formula for success is that there is no formula for success. It is simplistic and banal to ask for “rules”; rather, different models of good water governance should be explored, grounded with strong empirical and practical knowledge from different parts of the world.

Third, and perhaps most important, the SIWW needs new performance measures. Deal flows and statistics on attendance (number of people or countries) are useful but not the only indicators of success.

In the final analysis, water weeks in general, and the SIWW in particular, should strive to become the place where the world comes to gain knowledge of what works, what does not work, and why. In a world where more people are living in cities, and are more interlinked in their water needs, these water events have a rare chance of marrying business and policy.

Water cannot be conjured up in a drought, nor can it be wished away in floods. But through good engineering and judicious behavioural changes, we can ensure that the impact of these natural events can be minimised.

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