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The tap is running dry

WHAT is more vital for the future of humanity — and life in general — than water? Water abounds in nature, and humanity has lived more than 10 millennia without ever wondering about it.

We draw it, use it, throw it away, most often back into rivers or oceans. But we could very soon end up not having enough of the fresh water that accounts for just three per cent of all the water available on our planet. When one considers the fights we are capable of having over oil, one shudders to imagine where a lack of water could lead.

While Latin America seems well endowed, the situation is very different elsewhere. Europe is nearing its limits, and water scarcity is already a pressing issue in Africa, Central Asia and China.

Over the last 20 or 30 years we have begun to comprehend what is at stake, owing to initiatives like the World Water Forum, which held its fourth annual meeting last month. Unfortunately, the forum is not yet an official body and has no decision-making power.

But providing an arena for thought and debate has brought at least one huge benefit: greater awareness about water issues among the public and policymakers.

Water management is an inherently difficult challenge, and experience counts for a lot. Practice shows that local levels of government provide the most efficient water management, even if regulations

must necessarily be national in scope. But this is a division of labour few national governments are ready to accept.

Nor do most states seem prepared to start a real dialogue over water policy with civil society groups.

At one extreme of exclusion, for example, consider that decisions about water management are largely taken by men, though in most of the world it is women who use the water.

Moreover, interference is constant, and inevitable, between the public and the private sectors. A subtle mix of official regulation and private contracting is required. But not all jurisdictions respond in the same way.

The multiplicity of interlocutors inevitably creates a multiplicity of water systems with vastly unequal levels of

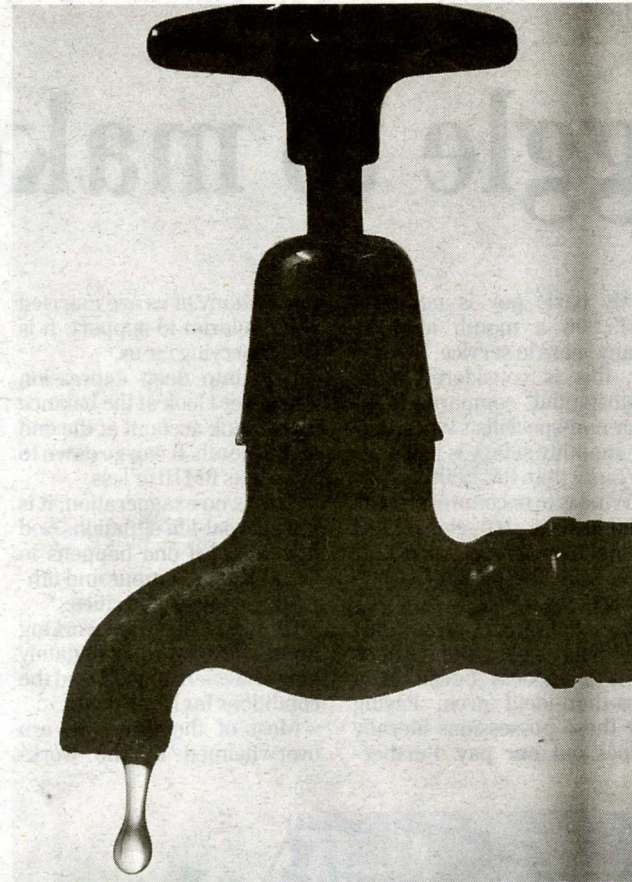
efficiency. Initiatives like the World Water Forums thus inevitably highlight debates about what constitutes good water management, as well as elaborating useful concepts.

One casualty of such debates has been the myth that water is free. Water has a cost, and someone, either end-users or taxpayers, has to pay it. It is possible, of course, to envision sharing the costs, but it is no longer possible not to charge for water.

The most recent World Water Forum debated two issues that will confront policymakers in the years ahead. The first concerns the so-called “right to water”. The urgency of the needs, with a billion people lacking access to drinking water and two billion without proper sewer systems, together with the vast number of diseases that re-

COMMENT

By Michel Rocard



Exploding populations and dwindling water supplies could lead to a situation worse than the wars over oil.

sult, underscore the need to recognise such a fundamental right. A consensus was reached at the forum that such a right makes sense only if it is formulated in such a way that particular policymaking entities, be they water companies or local governments, face an

affirmative duty to respect this right.

Only the state can be made responsible here. But the acknowledged responsibility of states in implementing the right to water cannot turn them into the sole paying authority. The state must be

charged with ensuring an effective water system that meets the basic needs of all, but the balance of this system remains to be defined. These uncertainties, indeed, led the forum to avoid acknowledging a formal right to water in its final resolution.

The second issue concerned the role of local authorities. Despite the political and administrative centralisation of most of the countries represented at the forum, there was widespread agreement that the most efficient water systems are managed as close as possible to the resource and its users. Agreement on this provided a real breakthrough for the future of water policy.

Naturally, conflicts among governments or local authorities and private enterprises resurfaced. Inevitably, the cruel lack of means was pointed out time and again. And, unsurprisingly, the lack of solidarity among water haves and have-nots was openly on display at the forum.

As we grapple with our joint water future, we will face a time of trial and error in finding solutions. But humanity seems to be making more progress on matters related to drinking water than other global threats, such as climate change. We should all drink to that. — Project Syndicate

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