

Lay public, civil society and faith leaders

Water is special. It makes a critical contribution to all aspects of our personal welfare and social and economic life. In many great religions of the world it is a symbol of spiritual wellbeing and cleansing. How we respect and manage it will make a crucial contribution to a responsible and ethical stewardship of the world's resources.

Global water resources are coming under increasing pressure from growing human demands and climate change. Protecting water resources, trying to make best use of water across all personal and economic activities, and ensuring that it is distributed justly between competing needs, are principles which should be at the heart of civil and religious society approaches. Otherwise, the future availability and sustainability of water resources could be jeopardized, and with them the economic, social and spiritual welfare of future generations.

Across many activities – production of energy, agriculture, industry and human consumption – global demand for water is growing. However, water is already distributed unequally across societies and over time and increasing global demand threatens to worsen shortages and inequities.

- In Africa, only one in four people has electricity, coverage of drinking water supply is barely 60% and only 3% of its renewable water resources are exploited for hydroelectricity. Most African countries do not take full advantage of available arable lands for agricultural production due to inadequate irrigation. Degradation of land quality is prevalent. Drought and desertification are dominant climate risks. They destroy economic livelihoods and increase food insecurity.
- In Latin America and the Caribbean there has been a massive shift from rural to urban habitation. Many countries depend on the production and export of water-intensive goods and services, including minerals, food and other agricultural products, as well as timber, fish and tourism.
- Two-thirds of the Middle East and North Africa region's available surface water originates from outside the region and water scarcity results in sizeable imports of foodstuffs, particularly grain.
- Rapid urbanization and industrialization in Asia and the Pacific region is causing serious pressure on water resources and aquatic ecosystems. Food security is an urgent issue since two-thirds of the world's hungry live in Asia.

Climate change is expected to have a big impact by increasing the variability of water supplies and the growing size and frequency of extreme events. Floods, droughts and other natural hazards are expected to become more common and more severe. These climatic risks will make it harder to achieve human security and sustainable socio-economic development. Water shortages cause conflict, locally and internationally, which can lead to wars, displacement of people, disruption of livelihoods, social breakdown and health risks.

Since water is becoming scarcer and the cause of tensions between conflicting users, it is important to have a sense of its social and economic value in its various states and uses. This does not imply that markets should have the last word in such decisions - the market is a good servant but a bad master. Public authorities need to ensure adequate supplies of water and sanitation services to satisfy basic needs, to safeguard public health, and to ensure enough water for natural environmental purposes.

Competing demands for water tend to be dealt with in isolation from each other. A more consensual approach would aim to make the best use of water throughout society and the economy. Individuals and communities need to play a larger role in allocating and managing water, and in conserving and protecting future water supplies.



This could be by:

- Adopting responsible patterns of behaviour.
- Through direct action in local communities.
- Through direct influence on public policy and regulation.
- By promoting the priority which is given to water management by central and local governments and other major stakeholders.

Where water is concerned, everyone is a stakeholder, with a responsibility through our own use and consumption habits, and through our influence on the way water is used and managed in our communities and national societies. Future generations will hold us to account for our actions.