

WATER WOES: WATER WARS

In the entire Caribbean, including Trinidad and Tobago, the approach to water management is focused more on revenue collection than on winning and distributing the resource efficiently. Beyond this preoccupation there is a much greater global problem that poses considerable negative consequences for humanity. The issue is not just the management of water resources or their distribution to the population, it is not how water is used or how much, it is whether water is a commodity to be sold to the citizenry by Governments or private agencies or whether it is a right of citizenship.

While the debate is taking place globally and getting increasingly vociferous and, in some places and cases, violent, countries that never had a problem with water are finding that their water resources are fast becoming inadequate and that they cannot guarantee a continuity of flow of potable water to their citizens in future.

What does this mean for Trinidad and Tobago?

There are many reasons, some both cause and effect of the poor state of our water resources.

A major concern is that Governments should not be involved in providing services or in owning or managing utilities. They should stick to developing, in conjunction with stakeholders, policies that take into account the needs of rural communities and the poor but should not yield to the temptation of simultaneously making policy, facilitating development, creating a supportive environment and implementing plans and programmes for which they have neither the time, expertise nor entrepreneurial spirit. Until the Government taps into the resources of the private sector the national water problem is not likely to be solved.

While there are historical problems with the management of water resources and inherited infrastructural deficiencies including leaking underground pipelines, the real culprit right now is climate change.

One example of this is the former sugar company Caroni Limited. Every year the company scheduled its harvest for January since, at that time, the country had

two distinct seasons. Then it became clear that from the 70s-90s the rainy season had started to extend into January and even early February.

Over the years, climate change also destroyed the expectations and then the livelihoods of many farmers. Subject to the vagaries of wind, weather and water, unexpected floods and droughts, freak storms and cyclones, victims of climate change - something which had no name at the time, only symptoms - many farmers had to find alternative sources of employment. While the nation's oil wealth has been blamed for leading to our food insecurity, it is more attributable to the nation's inability to come to terms with the downside of climate change and to treat the situation as urgent.

Currently, not even the weather experts can predict the seasons using historical data. Call it chaos theory or climate change, the weather in Trinidad consists of periods of short, sporadic, torrential rain interspersed by longer periods of drought. The annual rainfall statistics remain the same but the distribution or spread has changed.

The downside of climate change today means more hurricanes and cyclones and, in the case of Trinidad, increasing mosquito indices. It also means the intrusion of pesticides as well as salt water into the water table. Desalination, as the records show, is an option but has proven to be extremely expensive for Trinidad and Tobago.

Today, like the Ancient Mariner in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, there is an albatross hanging around our necks and it is getting heavier. With even with melting ice caps and rising sea levels, the threat of "water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink" still looms.

In 2013 CNN ran an article entitled "The Coming Water Wars" which made the point, "Conflicts over water are as old as the story of Noah – in 3,000 BC. The Pacific Institute lists 225 such conflicts through history. What's fascinating is that nearly half of those conflicts took place in the last two decades. Are we going to see a new era of wars fought over water?" The article continued, "Part of the problem is that the world's needs have changed. Look at the population boom. We've gone from 4 billion people in 1975, to around 7 billion today. The United Nations projects will hit 9 billion by 2050. Meanwhile, as India, China, and Africa

continue to add millions to their middle classes, global demand for all kinds of food and products will increase. All of those products cost money – except for water, which we like to think of as abundant and free. Yet water is the resource we need to worry most about. According to the World Health Organization, more than 780 million people – that’s two-and-a-half times the population of the United States – lack access to clean water. More than 3 million people die every year from this shortage. As our needs expand, so will the shortfall.”

There will be room for vision and entrepreneurship. There will be opportunities to leverage new technologies that will provide more water at possibly lower prices. Already there are innovations in agriculture that will help drought-ridden areas. Improved irrigation practices have reduced the quantities of water necessary for economically viable agriculture. Recycling of “grey” water and “black” water, improved sewage treatment and composting provide options to the use of potable water in toilets and additional organic materials for small-scale agriculture.

However, the prospect right now is ominous and increasingly the battles will not be between nations but within nations. The question that will be asked by everyone is, “Whose water is it, does it belong to the Government or private enterprise or does it belong to the citizens?”

The T&T Chamber thanks Tony Deyal his contribution of this article, a longer version of which appeared in Contact Magazine, Vol 13 No. 1.