

NTS Bulletin July 2015

Water Security in Southeast Asia: Moving beyond basic access

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Water security is a cross-cutting and multidimensional developmental issue which was nestled within Goal 7 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on environmental sustainability. Target 7c of *Goal 7: Ensure Environment Sustainability* aimed to halve the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015 and was met ahead of schedule in 2010.

Water from a Southeast Asian perspective

Since 1990, some 204 million people from the ASEAN region have improved access to safe water. There was also a 17 per cent increase in drinking water coverage between 1990 and 2010, which took the total coverage to 88 per cent of total population of the region. The progress made in Southeast Asia was above the global average.

Access to safe drinking water and sanitation are not the only concerns surrounding water for people in the region. Issues surrounding equity, utilisation, and rural-urban disparity continue. Increasingly climate and weather-related impacts are also adding to the pressures and challenges faced by countries for and access to freshwater resources.

Higher incidences of erratic rainfall, flooding, drier and longer dry spells, have all caught many people and governments off-guard in recent years. This comes with an ever growing demand for freshwater consumption as well as various other uses including irrigation to support agriculture and hydropower energy generation. Some of these concerns emanate as a result of competition over shared resources, which are becoming more pronounced and urgent. The concerns and protests over the planned building of dams by China and Laos on the Mekong River serve as perfect examples of how water can become a thorny international issue.

Towards greater sustainability

Moving forward, Southeast Asian countries continue to have numerous factors and dimensions over water access to investigate and address. Firstly, all national, municipal, and local agencies need to develop a comprehensive perspective which expands our understanding from just surface water to also include groundwater, catchment areas, watersheds, water in the atmosphere, and ecosystem storage as well. Secondly, there are always numerous competing objectives for water which are only likely to exacerbate existing contentions and increase over time.

Countries in Southeast Asia need to address the ever-growing demand for freshwater by focusing on conservation, recycling and reuse of water to generate greater utilisation. This will need to go hand-in-hand with developing new alternative sources through innovation and technology where necessary, like rain-

water harvesting and the use of natural membrane technology for filtration. Technology is an important tool to ease overall demand by designing effective ways to reuse and recycle water.

As part of the Post-2015 development agenda and the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), water and sanitation will likely form a dedicated goal. At present Goal 6 aims to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”. This is certainly an improvement from the MDGs as water issues now have greater emphasis. However, raising the status of water with a narrow focus on access to improved water sources alone is unlikely to abate the plethora of challenges that currently exist and others which are on the horizon. The likely effects of climate change on water resources are one of the more immediate threats. Only a concerted effort by governments and communities, working towards better management, would ensure that all human and environmental needs of freshwater water are met. Until and unless we manage to reach such a point, it is premature to consider the region as truly water secure.

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