

Meeting Report on Regional Journalist Workshop on Water Issues in Asia

***Menam Riverside Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand
5th - 8th February 2006***

Executive Summary

With 13 national workshops having taken place since the first regional workshop was held in February 2003 and with over 400 journalists now part of the media network, the regional workshop in Bangkok was an important tool in consolidating the awareness building work which has been done to date as well as opening up the opportunities for greater networking and sharing of experiences between different Asian countries and promoting the Asia Water Wire.

The hoped for results from the workshop will be an increase in the quality and quantity of media coverage on water issues from some of the best journalists from our previous workshops and a lobbying by journalists for a more effective enabling environment in which water sector reforms can take place.

With the greater focus on advocacy for future workshops, it was also interesting to hear the journalists would like to hear more about ADB projects at future workshops.

1. Background to the Workshop

A key component of the ADB Water Awareness Program has been the series of workshops that have been held in Asian cities to help journalists focus on water issues as important stories for their newspapers or broadcast outlets to cover.

The first regional workshop was held in Phnom Penh in February 2003 with its success leading to the decision to hold one or more national workshops per quarter – for the media of specific countries.

The first national workshop was held in November 2003 in Hanoi and was followed two days later by a Thai national workshop in Chiang Mai, immediately preceding the South East Asian Water Forum. In February 2004, two more workshops took place –in the Indian cities of Chennai and Delhi. In June 2004, a one-day workshop took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to coincide with Malaysian Water Week; in September 2004, a workshop for central Asian journalists took place in Kazakhstan; in December 2004, a workshop took place in Indonesia; in April 2005, a workshop took place in Pakistan; in June 2005, a workshop took place in Bangladesh; and in September 2005, three workshops in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

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To date, over 400 journalists have attended the ADB workshops. Results have included increased coverage of water issues, greater awareness of the need for sector reform and an increased understanding towards the ADB's innovative water policies and practices across Asia and the Pacific.

Following the workshops, measures have also been taken to consolidate the journalist network and create a journalist community. This has taken the form of the establishing of an Asian Water Wire with Inter Press Service (IPS) which was launched in June 2005. The purpose of Water Wire is to provide newspapers, other media users and interested individuals and policymakers a rich and regular news resource on a diverse range of water issues across Asia. As of January 2006, over 30 stories had been written for the Water Wire.

2. Why a Regional Workshop?

Having had over 400 journalists attend the national workshops and with the Water Wire now underway, it was decided to hold a regional journalist workshop in Bangkok. The objectives of such a workshop were:

- To provide journalists from across the region with examples of best practices in other countries.
- To further consolidate the ADB's Journalist Water Network by providing journalists with the opportunity to network with journalists from other countries.
- To consolidate and further develop the journalists' interest in water issues with the majority of them having already attended a national workshop.
- As a means of further progressing and promoting the Asia Water Wire.
- To promote the 4th World Water Forum.

Given its location as an airport hub and the Thai government's relative flexibility towards visas, thereby lightening the logistical load, it was decided to hold the workshop in Bangkok.

3. The Workshop Team and the Partners

The main team for the workshop were Tim Cullen, the workshop facilitator; Paul Fisher, who arranged all speakers, invited the journalists and designed the agenda; and Marivic dela Cruz from the ADB in Manila who handled logistics, correspondence with the hotel and all journalist and speaker reimbursements. In addition, Graham Dwyer from DER attended the workshop as an observer.

As well as the ADB, there were two key partners for the regional workshop: InterPress Service who provided very useful local input on the venue, field trip and agenda; and the World Water Council convenors of the 4th World Water Forum. With the 4th World Water Forum only six weeks away at the outset of the workshop, the World Water Council saw the workshop as useful platform for promoting the forum.

4. The Participants

24 journalists attended the workshop. Journalists were invited 'by invitation only' to avoid too many applications with the first 'tranche' of acceptance being journalists who had won prizes during the writing competition at each of the previous workshops.

To allow the numbers to reach 25, a number of other journalists were invited who had either i) written stories on the Asia Water Wire or ii) came from Asian countries where an ADB national workshop had not been previously held. In this way, the media network was further expanded. Another key criterion was that they speak good English as there would be no interpretation.

In all, 24 journalists from 11 different nationalities attended. They were:

- Rafiqul Islam Azad, The New Nation (Bangladesh)
- Ruhul Motin, United News of Bangladesh (UNB) (Bangladesh)
- Muhammed Shahidul Islam, APFEJ (Bangladesh)
- Seng Sophoan, Voice of America Khymer Service (Cambodia)
- Anita Rao Kashi, The Times of India (India)
- Vir Singh, Freelancer (India)
- Sushmita Malaviya, The Hindustan Times (India)
- Odeodata H. Julia, Sinar Harapan Daily (Indonesia)
- Satria Iman Pribadi, Untuk Lingkungan (Indonesia)
- Richel Dursin, Freelancer (Indonesia)
- Bouanin Louangphinit, KPL News (Laos)
- Bikash Sangraula, Kathmandu Post (Nepal)
- Irfan Shahzad, Freelancer (Pakistan)
- Munawar Hasan, The Daily News (Pakistan)
- Tahira Sarwar, UN News Service (Pakistan)
- Ren Bo, Caijing Magazine (People's Republic of China)
- Wang Yao, Beijing Youth Daily (People's Republic of China)
- Marites Raposas, Today Newspaper (The Philippines)
- Rocel Felix, The Philippine Star (The Philippines)
- Jessada Salathong, The Nation (Thailand)
- Wiroj Prakobpibul, Thai News Agency (Thailand)
- Frances Suselo, IPS (Thailand)
- Dang Bao Trung, People's Army Newspaper (Vietnam)
- Le Hung Vong, Vietnam News (Vietnam)

5. The Speakers & Agenda

The agenda tried to include as many different country speakers as possible. A number of successful speakers from previous national workshops were also invited back. The agenda is below:

Opening Session & Welcome
Speakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jim Leach, Deputy Country Director, Thailand Resident Mission, Asian Development Bank • Tim Cullen, Manager, Asian Development Bank Water Awareness Program
Session 1: Integrated Water Resources Management in Asia

Speakers

- **Apichart Anukularmphai**, Chairman, South East Asia Technical Committee/Global Water Partnership, Thailand
- **Ramon B. Alikpala**, Executive Director, National Water Resources Board (NWRB), The Philippines

Session 2: Water & Agriculture in Asia**Speakers**

- **Ganesh Pangare**, Chief Executive Officer, World Water Institute, India
- **Dr. Wasan Jompakdee**, Faculty of Engineering, Chiangmai University, Thailand

Session 3: Urban Water Supply - Meeting the Millennium Development Goal Targets**Speakers**

- **Dr Chea Visoth**, General Manager. The Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority, Cambodia
- **Sherisa Nuesa**, Chief Financial Officer, Manila Water, The Philippines

Session 4: Water & Floods**Speakers**

- **Dr. Ainun Nishat**, Bangladesh Country Representative, IUCN, Bangladesh
- **Ian Fox**, Asian Development Bank

Session 5: Rural Water Supply & Sanitation in Asia**Speaker**

- **Joe Madiath**, Executive Director, Gram Vikas, India

Session 6: The 4th World Water Forum and the Asia Water Wire**Speaker**

- **Tim Cullen**, Manager, Asian Development Bank Water Awareness Program
- **Johanna Son**, Head, InterPress Service, Asia Pacific

6. Analysis of the Workshop Content

With many of the journalists being previous competition winners and many of the speakers having a strong track record and having spoken at previous workshops, the quality of presentations and discussions was very high.

- The workshop started with a welcome dinner on Sunday February 5th when the Water Voices Film - '**Saving Cambodia's Great Lake**' was shown and received very positive feedback (journalists all received a copy to take away with them).
- The first morning of the workshop started with the **IWRM session** which saw two of the leading experts on the subject - **Apichart Anukularmphai** and **Ramon B. Alikpala** - provide a very clear overview on the subject. Apichart discussed how IWRM relates to the Millennium Development Goals, its key pillars and the path Thailand has taken to establish a National Water Policy, the development of a National Water Plan and the setting up of river basin committees. Ramon provided an overview of the Medium Term Philippine Plan (2004-2010) for managing water resources and its specific goals. He

also outlined the challenges of governance and the need to separate policy making and regulation.

- The **Water & Agriculture** session saw **Ganesh Pangare**, Chief Executive of the World Water Institute argue the need for reform in the irrigation sector and the need to create a system accountable to farmers. Ganesh advocated the importance of Participatory Irrigation Management and outlined some examples of Asian countries, where it is taking place, such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Dr. Wasan Jompakdee from Chiang Mai University provided a hydrological overview of the Ping Watershed in Northern Thailand, the competing demands on its watershed and how water conservation and effective irrigation techniques are making agricultural practices more efficient. He also pointed to an example in Maharashtra, India of the effective adoption of drip irrigation. He also advocated the importance of water harvesting for crop production, citing Chiang Dao district in Chiang Mai as an example.

- The afternoon session on the first day was on **'Urban Water Supply - Meeting the Millennium Development Goal Targets'** and was one of the workshop's outstanding session bringing together Manila Water and the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA), as had been the case at our first regional journalist workshop three years ago in Cambodia.

Sherisa Nuesa, Chief Financial Officer of Manila Water, provided an overview of the lessons the company had learned in its nine years of supplying water and sanitation to Metro Manila. This included the importance of an effective and transparent regulatory framework, the importance of operations flexibility and good governance and the need to engage with all stakeholders.

Dr. Chea Visoth provided an insight into operating a public water utility and how the PPWSA had expanded coverage in Phnom Penh from 25% to 95% and reduced non-revenue water from 72% to 11%. He put much of the credit down to good management, strong leadership and clear policies, roles and regulations.

It was interesting how much agreement there was between Ms. Nerisa and Dr. Visoth who both received the highest marks out of all the speakers. The session went a long way to dispelling some of the misinformation around private sector involvement in Asia's water utilities and outlined the importance of leadership, good governance and operational flexibility – not so much whether the utility was privately or publicly owned.

- The final session on the first day was on **'Water & Floods.'** **Ian Fox** of the ADB argued that much decision-making on floods over the past decade has been flawed and that engineering solutions have tended to introduce a false sense of security defined by an irrational approach to risk. Using a number of examples of floods, including the 2004 floods in Bangladesh, the Red River in Hanoi and flooding in the lower Mekong River region, Ian argued the need to get back to basics in flood management, recognize some of the benefits of flooding, involve the poor in decisions and transfer risk decisions to individuals.

The final speaker of the day was **Ainun Nishat**, Bangladesh Country Representative for the World Conservation Union (IUCN). Dr. Nishat is a world-renowned speaker and Bangladesh's leading expert on floods. Dr. Nishat started from the premise that total flood control is neither possible nor desirable and introduced the concept of flood management which is aimed at reducing the harmful effects of flooding while, at the same time, creating an environment for enhanced economic activity. He examined both structural and non-structural options for flood management, the importance of planning and the 11 guiding principles of a flood management strategy.

His final conclusions were that: Bangladesh needs to move from relief distribution to proper disaster management; urban and rural floods need to be treated differently; river training needs to be integrated with flood management activities; and there needs to be an integration of structural and non-structural options.

- The second morning saw three different speakers prior to the field trip. **Joe Madiath**, Executive Director, Gram Vikas, India, was the only speaker in the '**Rural Water Supply & Sanitation**' session. Joe outlined the success of Gram Vikas, one of the largest NGOs in the state of Orissa in India, who have managed to equip 211 villages with toilets, bath rooms, and three taps each for each household.

Following Joe's presentation, **Tim Cullen** provided journalists with an overview of the Fourth World Water Forum taking place in Mexico in March 2006 and **Johanna Son**, head of the Asia Pacific office of Inter Press Service, provided an overview of the Asia Water Wire, what has been achieved to date and requested more contributors. As there was extra time, journalists also had the opportunity to watch the latest ADB Water Voices film on China's water resources.

The two speakers with the equal highest evaluation marks in terms of being most informative were Sherisa Nuesa from Manila Water and Dr. Chea Visoth from Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA). They were followed by Ganesh Pangare from the World Water Institute and Dr. Ainun Nishat from IUCN with equal marks again, Wasan Jompakdee from Chiang Mai University and then Ramon B. Alikpala from the Philippines and the ADB's Ian Fox.

All sessions had at least 30-45 minutes question time giving journalists the chance to question the speakers and share some of their in-country experiences.

7. The Field Trip

The field trip was recommended by the ADB's Ian Makin and IWMI and consisted of a visit to the Bang Pakong River Basin Project in a neighboring province.

Special thanks for the arrangement of the field trip should go to Khun Chamroon, Head of the River Basin Committee and Sukontha Aekaraj from Thailand's Department of Water Resources. Although taking a little long to get there (three hours), the River Basin Committee had clearly made a great deal of effort in anticipation of our arrival and provided the opportunity to meet villagers in two separate locations to find out more about the project.

The feedback from the journalists was also encouraging with 56% saying that the field trip was very interesting with 37% saying it was 'a little' interesting.

The day ended with dinner at a restaurant close to the field trip location and owned by Khun Chamroon, head of the River Basin Committee.

8. Journalist Evaluation

A comprehensive evaluation form was handed out to all participants. 67% have responded to date.

Media Circulation

- Journalists were asked to cite the circulation of their media outlets. While some did not reply and others were freelancers, those answered pointed to a total circulation of readers/viewers of well over 1.5 million.

Ability to Write on Water Issues

- 31% of the journalists said that they had been writing about water issues prior to the workshop a lot, 69% a little.
- All journalist respondents said that they were likely to write more about water issues as a result of the workshop and 100% also said that they believed that the workshop had increased their understanding of water issues and ability to write about the subject a lot.

The Networking Aspect

- Over 80% of journalist respondents said that they benefited a lot from being able to discuss water issues with journalists from other countries. The remaining 20% said a little.

The Workshop Format

- Over 80% of journalists agreed with the statement that the workshops provided multiple points of view. 44% said that the case studies discussed at the workshop could be replicated in their own country a lot and 56% said a little.
- 62% of the journalist respondents said that the workshop was too short with the remainder (38%) saying it was about the right length.
- 62% said that they were satisfied with the format of the workshop with the remainder neutral.
- Over 87% said that they would welcome the adoption of a more interactive approach at the workshop with the example being cited of role plays on specific water case studies.

The Involvement of the ADB

- 75% of journalist respondents said that they would like to have heard from more ADB speakers with over 87% saying they would like to have discussed projects financed by the ADB.

The Speakers

- The two speakers with the equal highest evaluation marks in terms of being most informative were Sherisa Nuesa from Manila Water and Dr. Chea Visoth

from Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA). They were followed by Ganesh Pangare from the World Water Institute and Dr. Ainun Nishat from IUCN with equal marks again, Wasan Jompakdee from Chiang Mai University and then Ramon B. Alikpala from the Philippines and the ADB's Ian Fox. It is worth stressing that the marks were all very close reflecting the overall satisfaction with all the speakers which a number of journalists pointed out in the qualitative section of the form.

The Field Trip

- 56% of journalists respondents said the field trip was very interesting with 37% saying it was interesting and one respondent saying it was not interesting at all.

WAP Products

- Over 68% of journalists said that they were very satisfied with the written/multimedia products that were handed out at the workshop. The remainder said they were 'a little' satisfied.

The Organization

- 94% of journalists said that the administrative arrangements were very satisfactory for the workshop – Congratulations to Marivic!

9. Additional Feedback and Results from the Workshop

Although too early to provide a comprehensive assessment of the workshop, the initial results have been encouraging.

Media (or Expected) Coverage

Coverage has already resulted from the workshop (see appendix) on the Asia Water Wire and in the Jakarta Post and Vietnam News as well as a Thai Radio Station - FM100.5 MCOT.

Journalist & Speaker Feedback

There has also been very positive journalist feedback. Some comments:

- "Thank you so much for inviting me to attend the workshop. I learned a lot and it has motivated me to write more about water issues" – Richel Dursin, Freelancer (wrote Jakarta Post article) (Indonesia)
- "It was such a wonderful workshop. I learnt so much" - Bikash Sangraula, Kathmandu Post (Nepal)
- "Thank you for inviting me to join the workshop. I found it very useful. During the workshop, I filed a news report on water issues to our radio news program (FM100.5 MCOT 's radio) and in the same week I produced another radio program interviewing Dr. Wasan Jompakdee on the issue of "Ping river basin management" - Wiroj Prakobpibul, Thai News Agency (Thailand)

- “Many thanks indeed again for managing such a wonderful event” - Tahira Sarwar, UN News Service (Pakistan)
- “Thanks you for your kind consideraton to invite me to attend the workshop. It's very useful for me and I am now inspired to contribute to the Water Wire” - Jessada Salathong, The Nation (Thailand)

11. Conclusions & Lessons Learned

- Coming after 12 national workshops, the regional workshop in Bangkok has helped consolidate the media network and increased the ability of some of the best journalists from our previous workshops to write about water issues.
- It is hoped that a number of other outcomes will result from the regional workshop, including:
 - Greater pressure on governments to ensure that the necessary water sector reforms are made.
 - An increase in the quality and quantity of articles focusing on water issues.
 - An increase in journalists willing to contribute to the Asia Water Wire.
- The networking element was also seen as a key component of this workshop and it was very encouraging to see Indian and Bangladeshi journalists, for example, talking to each other about some of the transboundary issues affecting their countries.
- It is also important to stress that these workshops are both intended to be intensive and demanding bringing together the leading experts in the water field. While it would have been easy to lighten the agenda load a little and there were too many powerpoint slides, we felt that, in order to ensure that the journalists got the most out of their two days, it was necessary to have a demanding agenda – both in terms of the number of issues covered and the complexity of the content. With the majority of journalists having a very good knowledge of water issues, we felt that we got the balance right.
- The evaluation form also unveiled a number of interesting results:
 - For example, the interest from journalists in hearing more from ADB personnel and about ADB projects. This would fit in well with the greater ‘advocacy’ and ‘operational’ focus being planned.
 - The fact that 62% of journalists said the workshop was ‘too short’. A constant concern we have had is that to ask editors to allow their journalists to spend more than two to three days away from their office would not go down well. However, we remain open to examining other alternatives although this will also inevitably result in an increase in costs.
 - The interest in a more interactive approach to the workshops, such as role plays on case studies was also noted and we will look into how this could be incorporated into future workshops.
 - Finally, special thanks should go to Marivic dela Cruz who supported all journalists on their logistical needs in a highly professional and good-natured manner. The figure from the evaluation where 94% said the arrangements were highly satisfactory speaks for itself.

12. Next steps

Short Term Follow-Up Activities

Short term activities will consist of sourcing media coverage; supplying journalists with further information and photos in developing stories; sharing contact details between journalists who attended the workshops; and adding journalist contact details to the ADB 'Water for All' email newsletter.

Long Term Follow-Up Activities

It is hoped that, fitting in with the advocacy focus, media workshops with a more proactive and more operations oriented agenda take place in the few countries not already covered by the 14 WAP workshops. Gaps include the Pacific Islands, the Philippines and Sri-Lanka.

In addition, follow-up media workshops should be considered in large countries to engage with local language media directly related to projects (e.g. in India) and that more single-issued workshops, involving not just the media but other stakeholders, take place in the future.

Under the successor plans for the Water Awareness Program, it is proposed that journalists in the network and others should be taken to visit ADB projects.

Appendix - Coverage to Date

IPS Asia Water Wire (9/2/06) [Put A Price on Water to Ensure Access, Experts Say](#)
By Frances Suselo

BANGKOK (Asia Water Wire) – Apichart Anukularmphai would rather give the title "the world's rice exporter champion" to Vietnam than to his own country Thailand. This, he says, is because Thailand is actually giving away its water for free every time it sells its rice.

"Just to produce 10 tonnes of rice, Thai farmers would need 3,000 cubic metres of water," explained the chairman of the Southeast Asia Technical Committee of the Global Water Partnership, which groups together multilateral and government agencies, companies, institutions working on water management around the world. "This cost is not being taken into consideration when we export our rice."

Thailand is among the world's top exporters of rice, selling 8.5 million tonnes in 2005.

This sentiment is shared by Ramon Alikpala, executive director of the Manila-based National Water Resources (NWRB), a government agency. "If water is free, then it becomes a subsidy, which is actually a WTO (World Trader Organisation) issue," he said. "People would also take water for granted, so you get a situation when a pipe leaks, nobody feels responsible to fix it."

Participants at the Regional Journalist Workshop in Water Issues in Asia in Bangkok, which ended this week, agreed that while those who can afford do not mind paying for water services to get clean water delivered to their homes, no politician has even dared to suggest that raw water itself should also have a price.

"It's politically impossible to implement," said Apichart. "The majority of people everywhere still view having water as a birthright. No politician would even mention it because that will be political suicide."

Indeed, in an increasingly thirsty world, the issue of water pricing is a controversial one, especially when around 70 percent of all freshwater withdrawals worldwide are being used for agriculture. Farmers traditionally view water as a free commodity, and many residential users also believe that water, being a national resource, should come free.

There should be a middle ground, said Ganesh Pangare, chief executive officer of the World Water Institute in India. "I agree that farmers should pay for irrigation water, but remember, at the end of the day, it is water that decides whether the farmer can make profit and eat." He stated, "If you want more crops per drop, farmers should come first!" especially when 80 percent of Asia's food supply is produced from only 40 percent of the regions cultivated land that is being irrigated.

Pangare also agreed that strong political will is needed for water reforms to take place. "People need to stop thinking 'let the government take care of the water problem', and they need to stop believing politicians who promise that 'water would be free for all' in their election campaigns."

"Promising free water does not actually mean the politician would be obliged to do it. If water is already viewed as 'free', then what's the point?" stated Pangare. "That water promise is only to silence critics and get votes."

"Can't we at least get water fees from users for operation and management?" stressed Pangare.

Apichart agreed and added, "Water fees minimise water use because they hurt your pocket."

The challenge lies in finding the right price for raw water. Alikpala said, "If the price is too low, then it will be useless. On the other hand, if the price is too high, there will be massive outrage." He added that water companies should pay for the raw water themselves and not pass off the cost to their customers. "The customers should only pay for the companies' service, such as for cleaning and delivering the water."

Nevertheless, any water company, whether managed publicly or privately, needs to have a very efficient management system to ensure maximum water coverage and access.

Chea Visoth no longer believes that "public utilities cannot be managed by a public company", and he has the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority to prove it.

Visoth, the authority's general manager, explained that in less than 10 years, the Cambodian company has transformed from being an overstuffed, non service-oriented and badly maintained company relying heavily on government subsidy to a socially responsive, highly efficient water supply company that boasts a 95 percent coverage area, 100 percent connection ratio and 24 hours service.

"Nineteen ninety three to 1996 was our rehabilitation period," he said. "We upgraded our main power and pumped investments in. We changed our policy from government subsidy to full cost recovery. Of course, we also had to greatly alter Phnom Penh's population's consumer habit from believing that water is free, to

actually be willing to pay for water." But the population was not complaining because the water price now is actually "five to ten times cheaper than before," said Visoth.

"We learned three valuable lessons," added Visit. "One, we could not do it without political will. Two, an autonomy preparation period was also crucial; and three, in order to be a responsible company, strong leadership is needed."

The company also used the media to get its message across to the 1.3 million residents of the Cambodian capital. "We explained to the people why they need to pay for clean, safe, drinkable water," Visoth said, and added that the media was also useful in convincing "delinquents" to pay their water bills. "We simply told them, either pay your water bill, or see your face on the television."

Clearly, this method has worked, because the company now has computerised its customer management and billing system.

On the other hand, while public management of water has had its triumphs, "Private participation in water has always been bashed," lamented Sherisa Nuesa, chief financial officer of the privately-owned Manila Water in the Philippines.

The company, which used to a government agency called the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System, now takes care of part of the Philippine capital's water supply, sewerage, and sanitation and customer service.

"After massive rehabilitation, we now have 35.4 percent water loss, which is comparable to other Asia cities," said Nuesa. "We have a policy on insider trading and consistent rules," Nuesa explained. "We also hold public hearings and use arbitrations to settle disputes."

The debate about water pricing and cost of services around managing and distributing water is by no means finished. But no matter which methods a country uses to handle their water problems, one thing that all participants at the Bangkok meeting agreed on is that water is a finite resource and that one needs to be very careful in handling it.

Ian Fox from the Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) stressed that often times, so-called water solutions actually bring a crop of new problems. "When you tug on one thing of nature, you find out that it's attached to the rest of the world," he said. (END/AWW/ FS/JS/090206)

Jakarta Post (19/2/06)

Asia scrambles for drinking water as reserves dry up

Richel Langit-Dursin, Contributor, Bangkok

Asian countries are struggling to increase safe drinking water coverage amid the resource's rapid dwindling deposits due to excessive withdrawals by the agricultural sector.

"Countries in Asia are experiencing serious water shortages," said Apichart Anukularmphai, chairman of the Southeast Asia Technical Committee of the Global Water Partnership, which binds together multilateral and government agencies, companies and public institutions working on water management.

Worldwide, over 1 billion people lack access to safe water. In Indonesia, about 50 percent of the country's total 220 million population does not have access to potable water. Unsafe water is a leading cause of diarrhea, which is the second leading killer of children under five years old in Indonesia.

In Thailand, water shortages are exacerbated by increased water demand due to escalating rice exports. In order to produce one ton of rice, Thai farmers have to use 3,000 cubic meters of water.

"If we sell the 3,000 cubic meters as bottled water, we will earn 300,000 baht (US\$7,500)," Anukularmphai said at a recent regional journalists' workshop here on water issues sponsored by the Asian Development Bank.

By far, agriculture is the world's biggest consumer of water, using around 70 percent of all freshwater withdrawals worldwide.

New Scientist journal reported last year that farmers were driving Asian countries toward an environmental catastrophe as they shifted to tube wells to suck up groundwater reserves.

According to the journal, tens of millions of tube wells, whose technology has been adapted from the oil industry, had been drilled over the past decade in Asia and powerful electric pumps are being used to haul up the water at a rate that outstrips replenishment by rainfall, sinking water tables so dramatically that some landscapes may become arid or even turn into deserts within a short time.

Smallholder farmers in India, for example, have drilled some 21 million tube wells into their fields and the number is rising by a million per year, the journal said.

"Vietnam has quadrupled its number of tube wells in the past decade to one million, and water tables are plunging in the Pakistani state of Punjab, which produces 90 percent of the country's food," it said.

One of the world's top exporters of rice, Thailand, sold 8.5 million tons of rice in 2005. Indonesia is one of the countries that imports rice from Thailand.

For one ton of rice, Thailand, which is highly prone to drought because of limited rainfall, earns less than US\$200, according to Anukularmphai.

"Exporting rice is not a profitable business anymore, but now it's business as usual because many of our people are farmers," Anukularmphai said.

However, every time it exports rice, Thailand never takes into consideration the cost of using water for agriculture and increased water demand is leading to water scarcity across the country.

And due to water shortages, conflicts are growing among villagers. For instance, in Chiang Mai, farmers are fighting for artificial rain clouds.

Every year, Thailand receives limited rainfall, about 1,600 millimeters, and as an initiative introduced by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, small crystals are spread over clouds by planes to bring rain.

"When I was young, it was very easy to find water. Nowadays, it is very difficult to find it," said Wasan Jompakdee, chairman of the Coordinating Committee for the Protection of the Ping River Basin and Environment.

"We have to catch any drop of rain," Jompakdee added.

Only 77 percent of rural areas in Thailand have access to a water supply and the Thai government has set an ambitious target to provide access to safe drinking water and sanitation for all by 2009.

The Millennium Development Goal aims to halve the world's people who do not have access to safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015.

In 2002, 82 percent of the population in the region, according to ADB, had access to improved water supply, up from 74 percent in 1990, and yet 682 million people still remained without access to safe drinking water -- a third of Asia's population.

The picture is equally disturbing for improved sanitation with half of the region's population still lacking access to sanitation.

Each day, people consume between 2,000 and 5,000 liters of rainwater and irrigation water and as the global population is growing, the demand for food and water is increasing.

Water experts acknowledge that increased use of water for agriculture has damaging effects on the environment.

In Asia's countryside, salinization resulting from an overuse of water and poorly conceived irrigation, and aquifer depletion have rendered once-fertile lands in India, Pakistan and Central Asia futile, forcing small and marginal farmers into poverty.

In Thailand and in other Asian countries, asking the farmers to pay for the water they use is not easy.

"Imposing water fees is a sensitive issue in Thailand and it is politically impossible," Anukularmphai said.

"No politician would dare to mention putting a price on water because it would be political suicide," he added.

Most people regard water as a free commodity and as a birthright. In reality, however, the urban poor across Asia are already paying for water, 20 to 40 times more per liter than what connected users pay.

In Manila, where only 80 percent have access to potable water, the poor people pay US\$15 a month for non-connected water while connected users pay only \$5 a month. Small-scale private water vendors, mostly operating illegally, have taken full advantage of the urban poor market, selling as much as 25 percent of the total volume of water in the city and earning as much as 75 percent of total revenues.

Poor people, according to the ADB, are trapped in this expensive water trap because tariffs are too low for connected customers. As a result, utilities do not have the revenue to expand services to the poor.

Low tariffs, unfortunately, make it more affordable for informal water vendors to continue operating by reselling tap water to the poor at a much more costly rate.

In Asia, the average domestic tariff is 18 cents per cubic meter, which covers only 90 percent of average operating costs and excludes depreciation and expansion costs.

Low water tariffs also promote a low perceived value among connected users, leading to high water consumption rates that leave little to no supplies for remote customers. For instance, in India, where domestic tariffs are as low as two cents per cubic meter, a number of residents receive only one to two hours of piped water every other day.

In the remote hills of Nepal and parts of the mountainous areas of the Greater Mekong sub-region, scores of poor communities are forced to fetch water from

sources up to 15 kilometers away and tradition requires that young girls and women carry water over long distances.

"If the water tariff is too low, then it will be useless, but if the price is too high, there will be massive outrage," said Ramon Alikpala, executive director of the National Water Resources Board, which is based in the Philippines.

Alikpala stressed that if water was free, "people would take it for granted and you get a situation where when a pipe leaks, nobody feels responsible to fix it".

Water experts, however, believe that if consumers have to pay for something, they have the right to demand good service.

"I agree that farmers should pay for irrigation water, but remember, at the end of the day, it is water that decides whether the farmer can make a profit and eat," said Ganesh Pangare, chief of the World Water Institute in India.

In Asia, only 40 percent of cultivated areas are irrigated, but these irrigated areas produce about 80 percent of the region's food supply. However, the fact that irrigated areas continue to use water inefficiently makes it more difficult to manage demand.

Vietnam News (15/2/06)

Journalists Congregate to Learn of Water Management Policies

Twenty-five journalists from Asian countries, including Viet Nam, gathered for a two-day regional workshop on water management policies in Asia recently held by Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Bangkok. The workshop provided journalists across the region with examples of best practices from other countries.

One workshop session looked at how successfully the Integrated Water Resources Management was being implemented across Asia. According to the presenters, Asian countries are managing water in an integrated and participatory manner where the challenges of water supply, water scarcity, pollution and the degradation of watersheds and ecosystems are all part of the decision-making process.

The workshop also looked into measures and techniques to generate "more crop per drop" in Asia's agricultural sector. This would be achieved by close participation from a coalition comprised of policy makers, community groups, farmers, scientists and water management specialists. Figures from ADB show that agriculture uses around 70 per cent of freshwater withdrawal worldwide, and an individual consumes some 150 litres of water per day while 2,000 to 5,000 litres of water per day is required to produce food to feed one person.

The workshop discussed how farmers should share their resources with other constituencies, including those further downstream.

One session looked at urban water supply in Asia, noting that only 44 per cent of HCM City's population had piped water connections to their homes while piped water reached only half of Jakarta's 12 million population.

More success has been achieved in other countries, including dramatic movements in Phnom Penh over the past 15 years, leading to nearly 100 per cent of urban coverage while the Bangkok's Metropolitan Waterworks Authority has an efficient and financially stable operation and a level of tariffs that ensures a return on investment.

The workshop also examined the importance of developing sustainable and long-term flood management strategies.

“There are benefits to the floods as well, with many communities having developed indigenous mechanisms to not only cope with flooding but reap the benefits from them,” according to an ADB report.

For example, Vietnamese farmers in the Cöûu Long (Mekong) Delta provinces now plant their summer-autumn crop earlier to avoid floods and have developed new shrimp and fish techniques suitable for flooded areas. The Bangkok workshop followed 13 previous workshops attended by more than 400 journalists throughout Asia. — **VNS**