

BEYOND COP 15: BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH WATER SECURITY

Dr Letitia A. Obeng, Chair, The Global Water Partnership

No matter what climate change brings and to what extent mitigation efforts are successful, people will experience the impacts of climate change through water.

We need water for everything – food, energy, industry, transport, and, most importantly, for drinking and sanitation. With climate change there will be less water in some places and more in others, making the availability of water unpredictable. This increases the risks of both floods and droughts, resulting in economic losses and human suffering.

To mitigate the effects of climate change, the world needs to alter the way energy is produced and used. To adapt to climate change, the world must alter the way water is managed and used.

WATER MANAGEMENT - THE SITUATION TODAY

Many climate change threats are extreme cases of what is already happening every day across the world. We need to improve the way we manage and use water *today* to make it easier to address tomorrow's challenges.

Poorer countries face huge risks right now in managing water. To help their communities adapt to climate change and preserve ecosystems and environments, they need three things:

- better information about climate and water resources;
- better systems for managing water that involve all stakeholders;
- better funding for infrastructure and water management institutions.

BETTER INFORMATION

We need to improve the quality and availability of hydrological data and climate information. Hydrological information systems crumbled in some poorer countries when scarce resources were allocated to other pressing needs. Data for planning, developing and managing water resources are sorely lacking – a situation which cannot be reversed overnight.

Climate data are also not readily available in the right form for water managers and water users to plan their implementation strategies. Predictions are not yet accurate on a seasonal basis. Like hydrological



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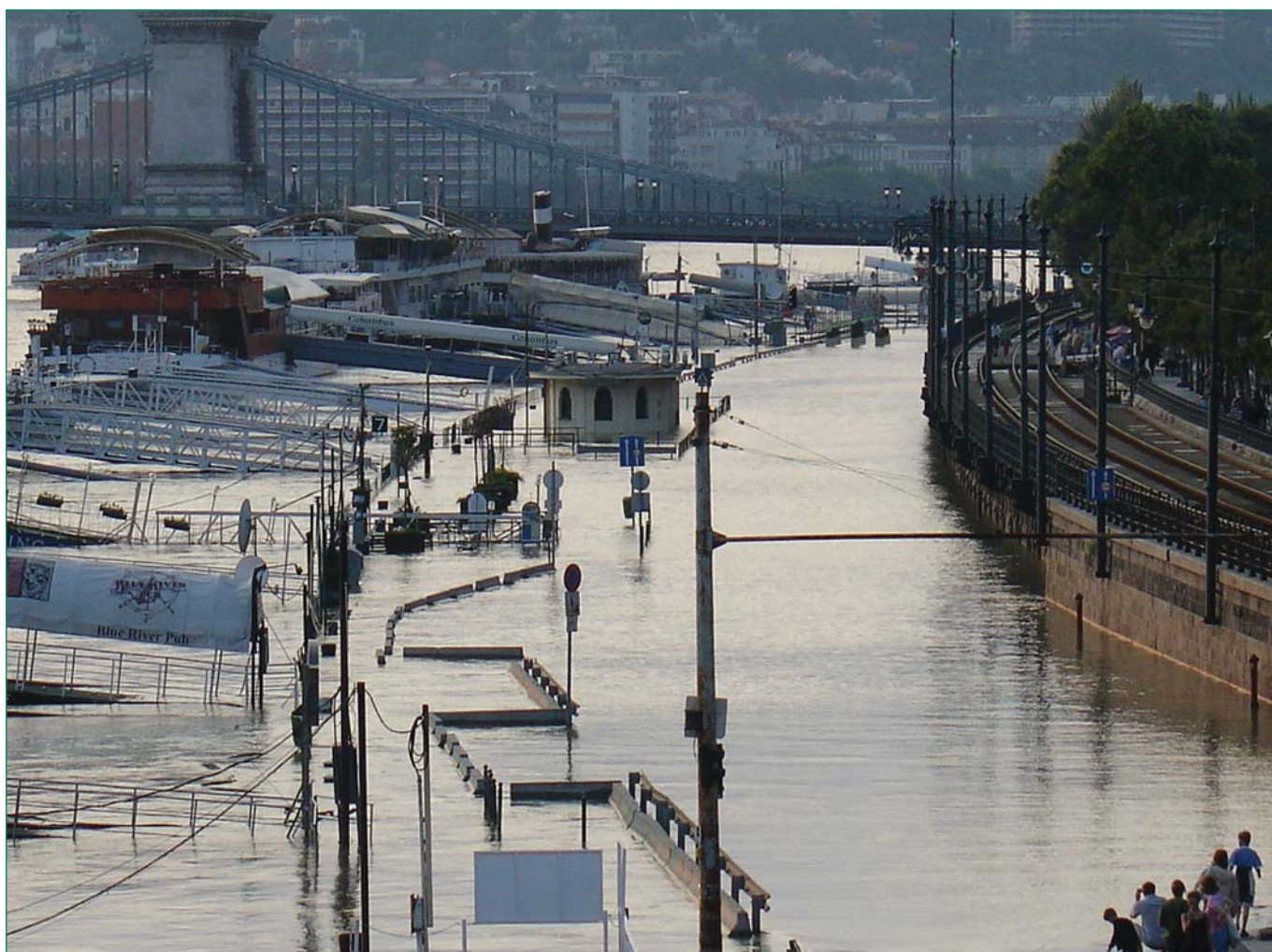
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information, little investment has been made to develop climate information for better decision making.

We need to collect and share information to help water managers and water users plan more effectively and inform decision makers accordingly.

BETTER SYSTEMS

Adapting to climate change means putting in place good systems – formal and informal institutions working together – to help communities and countries manage their water. Building resilience to climate change needs a sound mix of adequate institutions and well-designed infrastructure. In some countries, water management skills and capacity need to be renewed or rebuilt.



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Flood in Budapest

Managers and users alike need a common understanding of the challenges and an appreciation for the tradeoffs between competing water uses. This understanding can only be built through dialogue. In the case of shared river basins, such dialogue needs to take place within and between countries. In the Ganges River Basin, for example, one way to control floods and boost low-season flows in downstream India and Bangladesh could be to regulate river flow and store water upstream in Nepal.

We need to strengthen dialogue among water users and managers. Investing in sustainable water management is cost-effective: it delivers immediate benefits and long-term social, economic and environmental resilience.

BETTER FUNDING

Many countries are struggling with climate variability and its impact on their water resources today. They do not have infrastructure in place and cannot afford disaster risk management systems. In recent times they have not invested in infrastructure and systems because of other priorities. How can such countries prepare for tomorrow's climate change when they cannot deal with today's variability?

Already, some water supply systems cannot reliably deliver water to users, and hydropower plants generate less electricity than expected. For example, Uganda has suffered power shortages from hydropower plants because of falling water levels in Lake Victoria. The best way to help countries adapt to climate change is to help them cope with today's climate variability.

Today's investments in water security should be seen as an explicit part of a coherent longer-term strategy that will build a more resilient world while contributing to sustainable development.

CHANGING THE WAY WE USE WATER – TOWARDS WATER SECURITY

1. GLOBALLY

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development resolved that all countries should draw up integrated water resource management and water efficiency plans. Many countries have done this, although implementation remains weak. The time is ripe for these plans to be integrated into national climate change adaptation planning processes, as well as into national development plans.



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Dry river bed in Pakistan

Growing populations, rapid urbanisation, changing lifestyles and diets in countries like Brazil, China and India, are having a more immediate impact on water demand and availability than the impact of climate change. Better water management is therefore more important today than ever before.

We need to understand the interaction between climate change and water. Climate change strategies may aggravate the problems and increase the vulnerability of communities to both natural and manmade calamities.

2. REGIONALLY AND NATIONALLY

Countries which effectively manage water today are well placed to adapt to climate change. Singapore, for example, focuses on conservation, efficiency, innovation and reuse. Its water needs are securely met and Singapore is well prepared for adaptation to climate change. The same applies to the Netherlands which has adopted a long-term adaptation plan to cope with rising sea levels and increased



Björn Guterstam, Global Water Partnership

Boat in Aral Sea

storm activity, crucial for a country where 40 per cent of the population lives below the average sea level.

But there is no “one size fits all” fix. In river basins and aquifers shared within and across national boundaries, cooperation will be important to avoid conflict over shared resources and for cost-effective and equitable management of water. Building on existing processes that engage stakeholders will ensure a methodical approach to climate change.

We need “partnerships for adaptation” that empower local communities and all stakeholders to participate in water resources planning and to identify local coping strategies.

ACTION TO MANAGE WATER RESOURCES IS ACTION TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE

The Copenhagen Conference in December 2009 is an opportunity to make better water management the pivotal strategy in adapting to climate change.



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Ethiopian woman watering plant



Water is essential

Negotiators in Copenhagen face competing priorities. Actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change in one sector must not undermine those in another. For example, developing hydropower as a low-carbon energy source should be done in socially and environmentally responsible ways; using scarce land and water resources to produce bio-fuels should be balanced against other uses such as food production.

Support to core water resources management information systems, institutions and investments – rather than fragmented “climate proofing” – aligns with best practice for aid effectiveness and provides a durable and efficient framework for achieving water security.

Here is what the global development community must do:

- develop national Adaptation Plans with water resources management as the cross-cutting consideration;
- Invest in the collection and dissemination of improved hydrological and climate data;
- Strengthen water management institutions to deal with new and existing challenges;
- Invest in infrastructure that helps build climate resilience;
- Prioritise funding for water resources management within the UNFCCC Adaptation Fund.

Water does not hold all the answers to adaptation. But it is a good place to start. ■

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Melting ice

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