

Water is more valuable than oil in this region

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The water challenges in the Arab world are well known, well studied and well researched. Water security is disappearing. About half of people already live under conditions of water stress and with the population expected to grow from about 300 million today to about 500 million in 2025, per capita water availability is expected to be cut in half by 2050. Increasing affluence, economic growth and diversification will also place new demands on water.

Unsustainable and inefficient use means countries are using more water than their renewable supplied and man use water wastefully. The Gulf countries have the highest per capita consumption of domestic waste water in the world and leakages in urban systems are often at 50 per cent. More than half of the water is designated for agricultural use does not reach the plants as intended. Subsidy programmes provided by governments mask the real cost of water and can encourage waste.

There are growing new, complex connections between water, climate change and food security. Global projections for climate change actually indicate a drop in food security. Global projections for climate change actually indicate a drop in rainfall of between 20 to 40 per cent. But it is in agriculture that we will see the biggest impact. Eighty-five per cent of the water in the region is used for irrigation – often to grow crops that countries would be better off importing. While there is some potential for more efficient irrigation practices, there is not getting around the need to restrict the amounts of water used for agriculture. This will be institutionally and politically very difficult,.

More than in any other part of the planet, water is a development issue in the Arab world. It is time to stop assessing the problems and start resolving the issues. It is time to think of solutions to the water challenges in the Arab region. This is not a matter of just technology, but of innovation that must go hand in hand with political and policy changes. High-level leaders need to come together to devise the solutions and build the political will to implement them.

Too often, Arab countries have tried to resolve water issues within the confines of their own boundaries. But water knows no boundaries. Nearly 60 per cent of the region's water flows across international boundaries. A broader, more regional vision is needed. Already there are regional initiatives to develop and share common data sets on water availability and use. The Arab Water Council helps to provide coordination and an avenue for ministers to share experience and knowledge. My own organisation, The Arab Water Academy, is a forum where high-level policymakers can look to solutions and where senior water managers in the Arab World can learn about international best practice.

Fast running out

The Arab world carefully manages its "black gold" — the oil that forms a major part of the region's wealth. But how does it manage "blue gold" — its water resources, scarcer than oil and

running out much faster? We need to promote systems in "water accounting", which applies the principles of financial accounting to water, so that countries would need to look in the bank to see if resources are available for new programmes.

Solutions also require looking beyond water in isolation. Some of the most important factors that affect water outcomes are outside irrigation, water-resource management, water supply and sanitation. Policies that deal with agriculture, trade, energy, real estate, finance and social protection and that affect overall economic diversification may have more impact on water management than many policies championed by water-related ministries. For example, the choices farmers make about what to grow are far more affected by the price they can get for their crops than the prices of irrigation services.

As the 21st century starts, governments and populations are starting to see that efforts to secure water is reaching physical and financial limits, and that a switch to water management is needed to include the entire water cycle rather than its separate components. Water allocations will have to be made on principles of economic efficiency and developing systems that have a built-in flexibility to manage the variations in supply and demand.

Reaching the goal of water management that is financially, socially and environmentally sustainable also means recognising that decisions on reforms to the water system are inherently political. Rather than trying to separate the technical from the political process, they need to be looked at together. This means understanding what drives the political dynamics of reform, and reforms will need political as well as technical champions.

In order to meet the water challenges in the region we must begin today to bring together more people from different countries and sectors, to bring together water managers, engineers and social scientists to find the innovative solutions we need. We also need the forums that will allow political decision makers the freedom to speak out and to make commitments that they will live up to so as to help secure the blue gold of the Arab World.