

Coping With Water Scarcity – After the Celebrations What Next? **Ama Kudom-Agyemang**

It is about a month now since World Water Day was celebrated around the globe on the theme “Coping with Water Scarcity.” The focus for this year’s celebration was of particular significance due to the fact that currently, an estimated 700 million people in 43 countries suffer from water scarcity and the figure is expected to increase to more than 3 billion people in 2025.

In his message to mark World Water Day on Thursday March 22nd 2007, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon noted “the state of the world’s waters remains fragile and the need for integrated and sustainable approaches to water resources management is as pressing as ever.” He further noted “available water supplies are under great duress as a result of high population growth, unsustainable consumption patterns, poor management practices, pollution, inadequate investment in infrastructure, and low efficiency in water-use.”

An arm of the problem, which is of much concern to the Secretary-General, is the fact that ‘even more water will be needed in the future to grow food, provide clean drinking water and sanitation services, to operate industries and to support expanding cities.’ What is more, the predictions are that water supply-demand gap is likely to grow wider still, threatening economic and social development as well as environmental sustainability.

The situation in Ghana is not any different from what was highlighted in Mr. Moon’s message, which was delivered simultaneously across the globe, as countries celebrated World Water Day. The increasing number of people, searching for water daily all over the country and particularly in the Accra-Tema Metropolitan area, is an indication that the resource is becoming scarcer as the days go by.

At the national durbar held at Ho in the Volta region to climax the occasion, an issue that run throughout all the speeches and the placards mounted by school children as they went on a route march that preceded the durbar, was the “increasing availability of and the lack of access to safe water.”

The situation should be worrying for all concerned Ghanaians because it is gradually undermining national productivity in a very subtle way, which is not as noticeable as the havoc being created by the national energy crisis. And if the underlying factors are not properly identified and addressed, the increasing water scarcity for domestic, industrial and agricultural purposes would soon throw the whole economy into utter chaos.

What actually happened to the country’s numerous water bodies and what has caused the increasing irregular supply of and access to water even in areas, which once upon a time did not have to worry at all about getting adequate water.

To the Chairman of the Water Resources Commission, Professor Clement Adzobu the current water crisis could be attributed to the behaviour of the citizenry of Ghana. “This behaviour,” he said “is manifested in the lack of serious concern that we attach to our water resources – the way we pollute water bodies and agricultural practices resulting in the destruction of vegetation around water bodies.”

The Minister of Water Resources, Works and Housing, Hackman Owusu Agyemang has blamed the situation on the rapidly increasing population, haphazard development and the energy crisis.

While the President of Friends of Rivers and Water Bodies, Nana Dwomoh Sarpong has traced the major problem to the lack of perception in Ghanaians about the linkages that exist between “pipe-borne water and streams, rivers and other water bodies.” Pipe borne water is actually taken from sources such as underground water, stream or river and then treated, and distributed to communities through pipe lines. Therefore, any threats to these sources, obviously threatens pipe-borne water supply.

In an interview, Nana Dwomoh noted ‘it is obvious that Ghanaians generally, do not realise that there is a linkage between surface and underground waters and this is the reason why people continue to farm especially during the dry season in river beds and river valleys.’

He said such activities “actually facilitate the rate of soil erosion as well as siltation of water bodies,” adding “in some instances the sand that accumulates at the bottom of water bodies could be so massive, that it results in deceptive water levels.” In other words, when it rains and the level of water goes up, the interpretation is “now the river has accumulated so much water,” but in reality, it might not be the water which is in abundance, but rather the level of siltation that is high.

Nana Sarpong also explained that “it is due to this lack of perception that companies and individuals involved in water supply do not seem to bother about the current state of water bodies and how they are being depleted over all the country.”

Commenting on the recent announcement by Mr. Owusu Agyeman that his Ministry is importing special dredging equipment to de-silt major river bodies with that problem, Nana Sarpong said the measure is commendable, but added that “such measures should also tackle the real causes of siltation of water bodies.”

He called for a national crusade at all levels and involving all especially water suppliers, to protect water bodies. Nana said such protection should focus on conserving the vegetation and re-vegetating all devastated river banks, natural valleys and slopes. He stressed that when this is done with commitment “it would result in facilitating the natural rain harvesting process for the re-charging of the underground water reserves that would sustain surface water supplies.”

To further salvage the acute water situation in the country, WaterAid Ghana, has launched its End of Water Poverty campaign. The aim is to change policies and practices according to the principles of equity in the targeting of services.

It is specifically tasking the government, through the sector Ministry to accept the obligation to secure access to water and sanitation and sustainable water resources for all by doing the following:

1. ***Ensuring that all local government plans are fully funded, delivered and owned locally***
2. **Developing a framework for the sector that allocates responsibilities for financing, coordination, monitoring and evaluation.**
3. **Leading the extraordinary effort necessary to end the marginalisation and neglect of sanitation.**
4. **Ensuring that Donor technical assistance aims to build and strengthen in-country 'policy communities', but not undermine them.**
5. **Making the policy process target services at the poor and most marginalised groups.**
6. **Addressing the weak capacity of local government agencies to deliver services**
7. **Improving water and sanitation services for the urban poor as a matter of urgent priority.**

In a message to commemorate World Water Day in Ghana, the Country Representative Aissa Toure Sarr, said it was the hope of the organisation that through the campaign, “the most marginalised and vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the poorest of the poor, women and the physically challenged, have access to services.”

She described the water crisis as the area where the burden falls most heavily on women. “It is the girl child who is denied an education because they are tasked with hours of water fetching labour.” Additionally, “it is the girl child whose education is frequently interrupted on attaining the menstrual age because of inadequate sanitation facilities in schools. And when they grow up, women’s livelihoods are often constrained by water fetching labour – in some instances for several hours a day. Then it is women who look after the children who fall sick from diarrhoeal and other water borne diseases.”

For UN Secretary General Moon, the way forward is clear – “Strengthening institutional capacity and governance at all levels, promoting more technology transfer, mobilising more financial resources and scaling up good practices and lessons learnt.” He called on the UN system and all stakeholders to forge stronger partnerships and take more concerned action, not only for this year, but throughout the entire International Decade for Action on “Water for Life,” 2005-2015.