

Feature by **Ama Kudom-Agyemang**

Ghanaians are still celebrating their “year of jubilee,” and thanking God for his goodness and mercies to the country over the years. But in the midst of all the festivities, is a nagging issue that cannot just be pushed aside. It is no secret that the number of people searching for water in the Accra Metropolis and its surrounding areas in particular, has increased in the past months.

The non-availability of water has become so severe that areas like the Ministries, Labone, Ablempke and Dzowolu that previously enjoyed 24 hours supply of water, are now facing unusual water shortages. Residents testify that for over five months now, the flow of pipe water in these areas, has become so irregular that at times there will be no water flowing for almost one week running.

For residents in areas like Madina, Ashongman, and Taifa the non-availability of pipe-borne water is nothing “really strange or unusual,” truth is they are used to getting their own water from whatever sources they can identify. This is not to say they are content. However, residents who are so used to getting their water supplies from facilities installed by the Ghana Water Company Limited are simply baffled at the deteriorating state of affairs regarding formalized water supply in the country, even at 50. What has gone wrong?

To the Minister of Water Resources, Works and Housing, Hackman Owusu-Agyemang, “the country is running into major problems as far as water availability is concerned because the system is overwhelmed by the population explosion and unplanned settlements.” In an interview, he said his ministry is concerned about the apparent deterioration in water supply in the Accra Metropolis, which he blamed on multiple factors. They include the rapidly expanding population, which over the years has been depending on the same volume of water resulting in rationing of supply and the power shedding exercise that according to him “has caused distribution of water to suffer a major setback.”

As baffling as the situation maybe to residents, the growing scarcity of water, especially in urban areas across the globe, has come as no surprise to the world body United Nations (UN). Since the Earth Summit or United Nations Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, UN agencies have been monitoring the situation and warning the world about the need for urgent measures to tackle the problem.

Consequently, the UN designated March 22<sup>nd</sup> of every year as World Water Day. The theme for this year’s celebration “Coping with Water Scarcity” underscores the increasing significance of water scarcity worldwide and the need for increased integration and cooperation to ensure sustainable, efficient and equitable management of scarce water resources both at the international and local levels.

The UN’s concern has to do with the fact the “water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century and although there is no global water scarcity as such, an increasing number of regions are chronically short of water.”

According to the UN by 2025, 1,800 million people will be living in countries regions with absolute water scarcity and two-thirds of the world population could be under stress conditions. It says the situation will be exacerbated as rapidly growing urban areas place heavy pressure on neighboring water resources.

Unfortunately, it appears Ghana is nearing that point as indicated in the sector minister's statement. Mr. Owusu-Agyemang gave the assurance that all is being done to improve the situation and appealed for patience on the part of residents saying "unfortunately, it takes some time to see that the proper water systems are in place. He urged Ghanaians to use water wisely saying "if water is properly managed by users, availability will increase by 25 percent. Mr. Owusu-Agyemang expressed concern about the spate of illegal connections describing them as "anti-social and acts of sabotage" and said National Security is now investigating the situation.

Actions being implemented at the international level to address water scarcity include the launch in 2005 of the International Decade of Action with the theme "Water for Life". By proclaiming the period 2005-2015 as the Decade of Water, the United Nations and affiliated Governments are placing greater international focus on water and water issues. The decade also recommit countries to achieve the water-related targets of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, as well as the Millennium Development Goals(MDGs) set in 2000.

One of these targets is to halve the number of people that do not have access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015. The nations of the world have promised to meet this goal as part of their Millennium Goals commitment.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that water scarcity issues and the way they are addressed will affect the successful achievement of the other MDGs. For instance the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger is related to access to water for domestic and productive uses, which has direct impact on poverty and food security.

The goal for achieving universal primary is related to water in that incidence of catastrophic events such as droughts interrupt educational attainment and thus requires drought preparedness programmes. Access to water also affects the goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women. This is particularly so in conditions of scarce resources, with important gender-related implications, that affects the social and economic capital of women in terms of leadership, earnings and networking opportunities.

The goal of reducing child mortality and improving maternal health will depend on equitable reliable water resources, which invariably improves nutrition and food security. Access to water and improved water and waste management in human settlements that reduces transmission risks of mosquito-borne illness including malaria will result in the attainment of the goal to combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases.

Through adequate treatment of waste water, which contributes to less pressure on freshwater resources and improved water management including

pollution control and water conservation, as a key factor in maintaining ecosystem functions and services, the goal of attaining environmental sustainability will become a reality. The goal of promoting global partnerships will be attained as international cooperation is reinforced in the areas of technologies for enhanced water productivity and financing opportunities

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is the UN agency coordinating this year's World Water Day celebration. To commemorate the event, the Organisation's message to the global community is "we have the capacity to go beyond stop-gap responses to water scarcity and to develop sound, on-going management of our water resources. Turning that capacity into concrete results requires sustained political will, cooperation and funding."

The FAO is particularly concerned about the availability of water for agriculture and thus ensuring food security. It notes that the sector alone accounts for about 70 percent of the freshwater withdrawn worldwide and that 'improving agricultural practices and water productivity will go a long way to protect our water resources for all our needs.' In view of this, the FAO expects the agricultural sector to take the lead in addressing the rising global demand for water.