

The key for adaptation is development

Development in a sustainable way, governance and an outlook for international cooperation

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Water related problems are increasing in low-lying populated coastal areas. Witness the recent typhoon Ketsana, which battered South East Asia and took lives, affected several million people and caused large scale damage to properties in Thailand, Cambodia, Lao, Philippines and Vietnam. In many coastal areas sea level rise will contribute to increased vulnerability. However, mismanagement of local resources and their over-utilisation has in many cases already made them highly susceptible to change. Subsidence in deltaic areas caused by large-scale mining, extraction of oil, gas and groundwater, and intensified drainage, inevitably leads to soil compaction and is one indicator that there is a limit to resource utilisation. In many occupied deltas and other low-lying coastal areas, the rate of subsidence is far larger than the present rate of sea level rise. The ongoing uncontrolled encroachment of unprotected low-lying areas makes them even more susceptible.

The fifteenth Conference of the Parties of UNFCCC in Copenhagen (December 2009) failed to look at the issues of water management in an integrated manner during the discussions on adaptation to climate change.

Development

We are surrounded by uncertainties when dealing with climate change and we have to prepare measures that take account of this. Although there may not be an impending catastrophe, neglect of proper resource use will inevitably lead to hazards and hazards lead to hazard driven responses. If not managed, the burden will shift to the most susceptible individuals, groups, sectors and industries, such as shown in the poverty-stricken and cyclone prone coastal areas of the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh (see CCC II-3-4). If individuals, groups sectors and industries cannot adapt, the threat from exposure to these hazards will increase, leaving them increasingly vulnerable. This is a major problem for the sustainable development of coastal areas and requires urgent action now.

The answer lies in better resource management and better management of related infrastructure for service delivery. This is not about bigger governmental institutions, but better service by public or private providers. A prerequisite to good governance in service provision is an appropriate legal, institutional and financial framework. In many countries, the legal basis for development control is often present. Institutional reform is however still needed for effective implementation of policies to address the complex challenges associated with sustainable development and impacts of climate change. Good governance is the key!

Governance

Good governance is prerequisite for an attractive investment climate. An attractive investment climate is important for economic and social development. Sustainable development increases the resilience of society to future uncertainties, including climate change. Drainage, water supply, sanitation, flood protection, land use planning all require a competent and a public, service and user oriented organisation. As an example the Water Boards in The Netherlands are decentralised public service providers that have been at the grass roots of development for many centuries. In providing drainage, irrigation and flood protection and sanitation, they work in a legal and financial framework, where the user pays for the service and the users have a vote in electing the governing council of the Water Board. In many countries, the water services are centralised. As a result, these organisations tend to become unwieldy and solely oriented towards engineering solutions, with services that are disconnected from local needs and where there is no recovery of maintenance costs from the users. As a result, the growing bureaucracy becomes an obstacle to sustainable development.

There is a long way to go but step by step reform, is possible using experimental situations, pilot projects and improved knowledge. International financial cooperation is partly driven by infrastructure damage, leading to the transfer of financial resources for recovery after an event has taken place requiring rehabilitation, which is sometimes hastily undertaken. Sustainable international cooperation on the other hand should be focused on long term exchange of experience and best practice in organising services at all levels of governance and on professional cooperation between service providers. Coastal countries and deltas that succeed in improving the basic services, including water services, are in a better position to address future uncertainties, especially in relation to climate change. Looking only at the impacts of climate change in an isolated, non-integrated way may lead to inappropriate decisions.

From my professional position as Director of the National Water Service/Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment (Ministry of I&E) in The Netherlands, dealing with water quality and quantity, flooding and erosion – I can state that professional, international cooperation can have mutual benefits. To learn from each other's experience can hasten the process of reform. For instance South Africa, Ukraine, Indonesia, Egypt and Bangladesh have all developed first steps in decentralisation. The USA, Great Britain and France are rethinking the way they deal with protection from erosion and flooding, in order to reduce the loss of lives, property and economic damage given the recent increase in storm surges. Hazards such as typhoon Ketsana will continue to occur. However, it is possible to reform the way we work and protect both lives and property from natural hazards in a more effective manner. Can we do it without hazards? Yes we can.

Outlook for international cooperation

In December 2009, the Netherlands Cabinet adopted the National Water Plan 2009 – 2015 (see website) created by five Ministries. This plan outlines the policy the State will implement in order to achieve sustainable water management in the Netherlands. Long-term cooperation with other deltaic countries is also addressed. The Cabinet of Ministers wants the Netherlands to cooperate with countries in low-lying delta areas by assisting in protection against floods and in providing sufficient, clean water. The Cabinet is focusing its attention on five deltas: the Jakarta, the Mekong, the Ganges/ Brahmaputra, the Incomati and the Nile. The Netherlands will be entering into long-term water partnerships, firstly through the existing "Partners for Water" programme (extended to 2015), but aiming to last 10 - 20 years. The Netherlands is also using a number of other financial instruments to assist water management in other countries.

International cooperation will contribute to climate adaptation and to the millennium goals for creating and utilising mutually beneficial, economic opportunities.

Reference:

Ketsana : <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/10/02/typhoon-ketsana-batters-southeast-asia>

Netherlands National Water Plan 2009 – 2015:

http://www.verkeerenwaterstaat.nl/english/topics/water/water_and_the_future/national_water_plan