



COMMENTARY

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Water Makes Sense

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It is only fitting that on this thirteenth World Water Day and at the close of the fourth World Water Forum, we pause to consider the United States' track record in addressing global freshwater challenges. U.S. policymakers should assign central priority to meeting demand for water not because of humanitarian reasons, but because water underscores every strategic policy goal of the United States. Our current levels of commitment do not adequately reflect this strategic relationship.

Ignore for a moment the 1.1 billion people across the planet who today lack access to safe drinking water. Never mind that 50 percent of global population growth will occur in countries already experiencing or expecting to experience water shortages in the coming decades. Do not consider the nearly 5 million people who die each year as a result of waterborne diseases – the vast majority of them children under the age of five. These facts are compelling, but the reasons for U.S. engagement of water supply and sanitation are much more strategic.

Water scarcity, poor water quality, and a lack of access to water supply and sanitation are destabilizing in terms of human health, economic productivity, and security. Internal conflicts over water have already occurred from Venezuela to India to China. A lack of access to drinking water and sanitation perpetuates the cycle of poverty and instability. Women and children are forced to walk long distances to fetch water – in many countries an average three miles each day – or are confined to their beds with water-related illnesses. An estimated 40 billion working hours are lost in Africa each year to the simple act of fetching drinking water. On a grander scale, countries with inadequate water storage capacities are subject to economic losses linked to natural disasters, such as droughts and floods. In these ways, global water challenges represent a threat to our foreign policy objectives of maintaining peace and stability and promoting economic development across the world.

Interventions to address the many global water challenges can also be viewed as a potential tool for realizing U.S. foreign policy objectives, and often have multiple benefits. For instance, water is a historically proven unifying force to foster dialogue across otherwise unfriendly transnational borders. At the national and local level, poor governance and gender inequality often are associated with a lack of access to water and sanitation. Water programs are a manifestly beneficial way to promote the basic community decisionmaking structures that could act as the first steps toward democracy. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated in January, "We seek to use America's diplomatic power to help foreign citizens to better their own lives, and to build their own nations, and to transform their own future." Water is unique as a challenge universal to developing countries that offers the U.S. an opportunity to assist in building a better tomorrow by addressing immediate needs.

Despite the clear strategic advantages of elevating water as a higher priority, U.S. government policies have remained ambivalent in commitment. This trend is in no way unique among all donor nations; but it is clear that America must lead. In the newly released National Security Strategy, President Bush concludes his

introduction by expressing his belief that, “[H]istory has shown that only when we do our part will others do theirs. America must lead.” The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated the United States spent \$3 billion between 2000 and 2004 on all types of freshwater programs – from water management to water supply and sanitation. This amount is not insignificant, but the funds were concentrated in a very few countries – neglecting many others in dire need. A third of the \$3 billion went to Iraq and Afghanistan from 2002-2004 alone. In 2004, the majority of spending by the U.S. Agency for International Development went to just three countries – Egypt, Jordan, and the West Bank/Gaza. Meanwhile, sub-Saharan Africa – the only region not on track to reach the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation – received just 3 percent.

In late 2005, Congress highlighted the importance of water and attempted a more definitive strategy with the Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, which formally enshrined the provision of water and sanitation for developing countries as a U.S. foreign policy priority. With historic bi-partisan support and backed by a diverse group of organizations, the act appears to be a step in the right direction. However, without concerted White House support, the act likely will devolve into little more than an unfunded mandate for the State Department and USAID.

Devoting more energy and resources to alleviate water supply and sanitation challenges across the world just makes sense. Now, U.S. policies must make sense to reflect the clear links between global water challenges and U.S. foreign policy objectives.

Ongoing work at the CSIS Global Strategy Institute (GSI) seeks to inform the U.S. policymaking community on the most effective set of policies to address global water challenges. Over the past year, GSI examined the policy and governance challenges and innovative solutions that could significantly change the global outlook on water. Through a series of workshops held in consultation with Sandia National Laboratories and a host of other partners – including Coca-Cola, ITT Industries, Procter & Gamble, and a host of NGOs – it was confirmed time and again that freshwater is unique among the many global challenges we face. There exists a clear set of solutions that could be applied immediately and on a sweeping scale. The next phase of our work, to be conducted over the next two years, will focus on applying those solutions within the specific contexts of countries and regions of concern. We will seek to concentrate on solutions that rely on the U.S. government to set the tone of leadership, strongly supported by and in close consultation with the diverse and powerful set of actors who define today’s world. The end result will be a comprehensive analysis of global water challenges and a clear set of policy guidelines.

For more on our ongoing work, please visit <http://water.csis.org/>

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