

11-21-2003

Poor Management of Water Resources Hurts Latin America

Guest Author

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

Guest Author. "Poor Management of Water Resources Hurts Latin America." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13208>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Poor Management of Water Resources Hurts Latin America

by Guest

Category/Department: Latin America

Published: 2003-11-21

[The following article by Armando Chavez is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the November 5, 2003, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

Despite an enviable level of water resources, Latin America and the Caribbean is unable to provide potable water for 27% of its population, less than 10% of municipal sewage is treated, and coherent policies in the sector are scarce. In numbers, 80 million people in the region lack potable water, while 120 million have no sanitation services, statistics of international organizations show. The overall picture is one of mediocre services and inadequate infrastructure.

In the opinion of Argentine university professor Eduardo Mario Gelati, the management problems of the sector stem from a lack of long-term vision, ignorance, negligence, and the absence of controls. "Politicians and government officials at times have no interest in anything beyond their term in office. Policies change when governments change. Projects are begun and abandoned.

Water management has to involve foresight," said Gelati, who heads the hydraulics department of the Universidad de La Plata. Regional water resources deteriorate as a result of human activities, a decline in the efficient functioning of ecosystems, and a growing and concentrated population, a report this year by the UN Environment Program (UNEP) said.

Raul Antonio Lopardo, manager of programs and projects of Argentina's Instituto Nacional del Agua (INA), said one of the biggest problems is that responsibility for the management of the river basins and rivers is divided among different jurisdictions.

"They remain under the control of up to a dozen legal, administrative, and political institutions. It is enormously difficult to reconcile so many interests and points of view," said Lopardo, a former president of the International Association of Engineering and Hydraulic Research.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said some of the region's major problems related to water are pollution of residential water, industrial waste, mining tailings, and agricultural contamination. The Tribunal Centroamericano del Agua, a parallel court set up to settle water disputes and cases of pollution of waterways in the region, has said that important basins and waterways in Central America are polluted and/or destroyed. Rivers and subterranean waters are used as dumps for garbage as well as for agricultural and industrial waste.

Gaining a knowledge of the dimension of the problem is difficult. The FAO's System of Information on the Use of Water in Agriculture and Rural Areas said that figures on treated waste water are only available in a few countries but that, for the most part, the percentage of those treated in plants is very low.

Regarding investment, the World Conservation Union calculates that US\$50 billion would be needed annually to deal with the problem but say environmental organizations only some US\$30 billion to US\$35 billion is currently being spent. The litany of problems in the sector include the inability to prevent disasters, the reduced importance of management in the cross-border river basins, the scarcity of professionals with knowledge of integrated water management, and the regulation of public services.

Analysts of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) lament that establishing an adequate water-management system is not a high priority on the public agenda in most of the region, with the exception of Brazil and Mexico. Gelati said Latin America lacks a culture of foresight and prevention. This situation, he argues, is part of a generalized situation of disorder and a failure to observe the law.

Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru have already created regulatory entities, and other countries are in the process. But many of the organisms still lack sufficient independence and resources to protect society's interests, ensure efficient services, and attract investment to the sector.

On a regional level, private-sector entities provide potable water and sanitation services to 15% of the urban population. Nevertheless, the issue of privatization in the sector raises anger among those who argue that private companies manage the resource with a profit motive, and without considering universal, just, and equal access. Access to water is a human right, they say, but the problem lies in its efficient economic management.

One of the most notorious cases regarding water was the privatization in 2000 of the provision of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Irregularities in the bidding process and the contract and a 35% rise in rates set off protests known as the "water war" leading to the imposition of a nationwide state of siege and the abrogation of the contract (see NotiSur, 2000-10-20).

In the future, poor water management could generate problems between countries and provinces. International cooperation will be needed to resolve issues involving this finite and vulnerable resource, Lopardo says. If the matter continues to be postponed on the political agenda, the region will find it hard to meet the goal set out by the UN to reduce by half the number of people in the region without access to potable water by 2015.

-- End --