

Water – an ominously silent crisis

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One Pager

We talk about climate change, biodiversity loss, migration, natural resources, energy, epidemics, geostrategic shifts of power – but rarely do we talk about water. We all know about the water shortages faced by some regions of the world, such as North Africa and Spain, but that is just part of the problem. Water shortages have long been a global crisis, with serious consequences for the stability and survival of humanity. This is not exaggerated alarmism – it is simply an acknowledgement of a major challenge.

The facts are clear

The situation can be summed up very clearly with just a few figures: Around 3.5 billion people currently do not have sufficient access to adequate-quality water. That is 40% of the world's population. And the population is continuing to grow. And with a rising population come rising demands – including a demand for water. According to UNESCO estimates, the need for water will increase by around 1% per year, i.e. by 20–30% by 2050. At the same time, the availability of water resources is decreasing. In just a few years, the demand for fresh water will exceed supply by 40%. This will particularly affect cities that are already struggling to guarantee an adequate water supply. In recent years, more than 80 cities and metropolitan regions have run dry on at least a short-term basis – from Cape Town to Cairo, Mexico City to Sao Paulo, from Los Angeles to Chennai and Jakarta.

Climate change will exacerbate this trend even further and make water an increasingly precious asset. At the same time, it is creating a dangerous interplay between water shortages and destructive flooding, as we have seen most recently in Mozambique, for example, but also in Europe on the Danube. This unpleasant mix of droughts and floods is now also

particularly felt by people who depend on glacier water. These are melting more quickly than ever, losing 600 gigatonnes of water in 2023 alone, resulting in an uncertain water supply in many areas, such as India and Pakistan. That's why the motto of this year's World Water Day is "Save the Glaciers".

Despite all these crises, water is not focussed on in the world of international cooperation and politics as much as it should be, given the facts. We can only speculate as to why this could be: Perhaps we still take water for granted because it comes "from the sky"? Perhaps resources are simply still not under enough strain yet? But they will be, as all indicators clearly show.

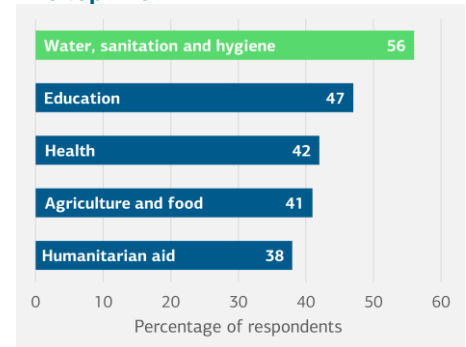
Consequences for nature and society

The consequences will leave their mark on the natural world as well as on societies and on a transnational level. Flood plains and marshes, for example, are important habitats for biodiversity, and their decline is also a cause for concern. If they shrink or dry out, this has further negative consequences for biodiversity – which in turn has an adverse impact on the water cycle. Water shortages can also trigger and intensify migration. According to UN calculations, it already accounts for 10% of global migration movements. And this proportion is set to rise. Water issues can also exacerbate conflicts. Although there have not been any wars over water in the recent past, the issue has often fuelled conflicts in various ways. This can currently be seen along the Nile, but also played a role in the Darfur conflict as well as the dispute between India and Pakistan over the waters of the Indus River.

Water shortages with the potential to create social chasms

Without countermeasures, water shortages will become an increasing problem in the future and have the potential to split societies and nations. However, there is a lot that can be done: from sewage treatment plants to the protection of water catchment areas, efficient irrigation methods to seawater desalination plants, to name just a few examples. There is no need for us to watch our water supplies dwindle away and do nothing about it. But in order for action to be taken, the issue must not be left to seep through political cracks. Rather, it must remain at the top of the international priority list, even in times of tighter budgets. This is because the need for investment is around one trillion US dollars per year.

The top five



Public opinion on DC issues – what is considered important.

Although the world of international policy might not think the same way, for the German general public, water, sanitation and hygiene are a top issue for development cooperation – an issue that is even more important than education and health, in fact (see chart). They believe that this is what efforts should focus on. And the experts agree: they consider the far too careless handling of water to be a major mistake and the crisis to still be grossly underestimated. ■