

**COMMENT****Tsunami disaster could trigger action on the global water crisis****By Ralph Daley**

In the aftermath of the horrific events in Asia, two interesting lines of thought have emerged in the public discourse. The first is whether the "phenomenal response" of the globe's citizenry to the tsunami tragedy reflects a newly acute sense of vulnerability, shared in the aftermath of 9/11 and other recent events of war and crisis. The second is the sober reminder that hidden behind the current disaster is the far greater tragedy of global poverty.

At the convergence of these two lines of thought is a critical question. Can our new sense of global vulnerability, our new "passion for compassion", prompt real and sustained action to address global poverty? The answer, I think, is a cautious, but

optimistic, "Yes."

This question is best examined through the lens of what is arguably the world's greatest humanitarian and developmental challenge - the global water crisis. Simply put, the lack of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation is one of the largest causes of death and illness on earth. As a consequence, more than 3 million people, mostly children, die every year. These solitary deaths, silent and unseen, together constitute a continuing global nightmare for the poor, the magnitude of which dwarfs the South Asian tsunami. Casualties from bad water equal 20 Asian tsunamis a year - one every three weeks! Over 1.1 billion people on earth lack access to safe drinking water and 2.6 billion lack access to adequate sanitation.

But beyond diagnosis, what is the solution? What will it take to eradicate water-related diseases from our world? Consensus is building in the international community that a feasible "roadmap" would involve three core elements.

First, we must build the human and institutional capacity for local action. Poor communities - their citizens, water agencies, government and stakeholders - need the capacity to help themselves. This is a doable task. We have what is needed in abundance - information, technology, education. No high-tech breakthroughs are needed. And with genuine commitment, a scaled-up networking process can be established to diffuse the needed knowledge to the grass-roots level, both from North to South and within the South.

Second, we must mobilize global public opinion. A groundswell of understanding and demand for action must be created to underpin all the other needed actions. The huge public reaction to the Asian tsunami has shown the remarkable power of modern media. Surely a similar reaction to the "creeping" catastrophe of water and sanitation can be elicited through advocacy and social marketing. As the events in Asia have also shown, the Internet has remarkable potential to inform and mobilize (not to mention raising funds).

Third, and most importantly, we must mobilize collective political will to act. Ineffective global institutions and fear of political failure at all levels have prolonged the global water crisis. The G8 lacks credibility as a multilateral forum because developing countries are not represented, while the UN is often unwieldy and indecisive. As one cynic put it, it sometimes seems that multilateralism is little more than countries that can't do anything getting together to decide that nothing can be done.

One way forward in the face of this international paralysis is Prime Minister Paul Martin's proposal to create a new forum - a Leaders' G20 (or L20), comprised of the most powerful nations from both the developed and developing world, working together to broker real solutions to intractable problems. The L20, working in concert with the UN and international donors, has great potential to address the water crisis. Chief among its advantages is the fact that the G20 itself contains over 70% of the world's population without adequate sanitation and 55% of those without safe drinking water.

Could G20 leaders, through personal commitment, overcome global procrastination and ineffectiveness and truly mobilize a "coalition of the caring"? The response to the Asian tsunami has shown on a smaller scale that this is possible in our new world.

Money will be needed, of course, but surprisingly the cost is comparatively small. Globally, about US \$10-12 billion is needed per year over the next 20 years to provide a minimum "lifeline of access to water and sanitation" for every person on earth. To put that in perspective, Canadians alone spend about the same amount every year on carbonated soft drinks and beer! And in less than two weeks, almost half that amount, over \$5 billion, has been pledged to aid the Asian tsunami victims. This is as it should be, but it has occurred with little apparent economic inconvenience, either for governments or their citizens.

The industrialized world, if it wished, could fund the total global water and sanitation bill for roughly 4 cents per person per day. But even that will not be necessary. For one thing, well over half of the \$3 billion currently spent for new water and sanitation services comes from the developing world itself. For another, there is new evidence that the remaining shortfall can be mobilized by innovative new financing mechanisms. Limited overseas aid dollars can be used as a lever to unlock private-sector capital in developing countries, where it is needed. Through partial loan guarantees and interest rate supplements, capital costs are reduced and financial and political risk spread.

And one final piece of good news: the economic benefits of safe drinking water and sanitation for the world are enormous - an estimated \$60 billion dollars per year - with most benefits accruing in perpetuity.

The global water crisis is enormous in scale and brutal in consequences, especially for the poorest of the poor. Resolving it would reap enormous benefits. A major global killer would be eliminated. The foundations would be laid to attack other infectious diseases. And the economic and social potential in developing countries, particularly in mega-city slums, would be unleashed. As a result, poverty overall would be significantly reduced.

Can we now dare to believe that a unique global opportunity is at hand, driven by a new sense of shared humanity? And if so, will we act?

*Dr. Ralph Daley is Director of the UN University's International Network on Water, Environment and Health, Hamilton. These are his personal views.*