

Think global, act local

a basic load, dependent on local climatic conditions. Economic responsibility is taken for a small area: the water neighbourhoods have to buy water in from central suppliers. In terms of water prices, a clear distinction has to be made between value, costs and tariffs. Here the real cost of supply and disposal has to be met by the user.

This system has a chance of success in the mega-cities because of the living conditions there: people live in a confined local environment, and spend their evenings and weekends in the immediate vicinity. They rely on local shopping facilities and leisure activities. Thus as a rule town-dwellers lead a life that is restricted to the locality, regardless of the size of their town. So the city of the future will have to be a city of neighbourhoods in which life-style and development are determined on a small scale. The central water authorities then follow the wholesale principle and sell to the neighbourhood units, who then manage their water internally.

The question remains of how long it will take to rethink in this way. Hesiod established the basic link between water pollution and the health of townspeople as early as 800 BC. At that time it took about three centuries for the Greek cities to introduce sanitary installation of the kind that already existed in the early cultures of Mesopotamia and on the Indus. We are faced with a learning process that will start in school and continue throughout our lifetimes. Whatever happens, this new way of dealing with water can only come from the inside, from the user.

Solving local problems by taking local measures does not exclude global action, especially as local water problems often have a lot in common. Hydrological and technical principles, the build-up of small water units and strategies for solutions that save expense and resources are transferable. Water-saving technologies can be used everywhere. Constantly rising demand, senseless use and mismanagement can be countered world-wide, by control through price. It is possible to lay down global requirements that all users are considered, river catchment areas are treated as hydrographic and economic units and that integrated overall water planning is set up to do this. The economic value of water is reflected in the price everywhere, and water users are involved in solving their problems, they can help to determine the course of events.

As eco-systems do not respect national boundaries, internationally agreed water management is essential. But within this global network the regulation systems must leave sufficient scope for regional and local implementation. It would be wrong to see globalization as doing everything in the same way. The basic principles must be recognized globally and implemented by regulation – then the appropriate solutions have to be found locally.

Global action should lead to solidarity in dealing with water. Here responsibility still lies with the industrialized countries. They are in a good position economically, and must therefore begin to implement the new thinking, particularly as they have dumped the cost of their growth on to nature and the environment in the past. Here making pretty declarations of intent about water protection is just as inadequate as suggesting to developing countries that they should handle their resources carefully. The development and environmental crises that the industrialized countries went through in the eighties have still not been fully overcome.

Global economic competition between cities must be transformed into global competition for the best ecological conditions, which will make cities economically competitive in the long term again.

It would be good in the year 2030 to be able to look back and say: in the last quarter of the 20th century pilot projects were started that created locally independent water concepts that secured people's basic water needs and also used local water resources following nature's model. And they also helped to maintain valuable eco-systems, at the same time offering people an environment that was worth living in, thus becoming a model for all new building and redevelopment models for the first decade of the 21st century. In many places, renewal went hand in hand with a change of thinking that no longer saw water as an everyday item to be used and then thrown away. Everyone recognised the true value of water. Globalization of markets and the media meant that these ideas spread quickly. The water problems that the 20th century had left behind were visibly alleviated.

In the second decade of the 21st century water neighbourhoods emerged in all towns and cities, and they took joint responsibility for designing and maintaining their immediate surroundings. Every household was geared towards economical and careful use of water. Municipal and regional privately funded institutions, linked with river catchment areas, were responsible for supplying the local water neighbourhoods and dealt with surplus water, preparing it for repeated use. A trade network was established between neighbourhoods, towns and the surrounding agricultural areas. Responsibility for water administration was completely separated from the supply and disposal infrastructure, which was geared to economic viability.

In the third decade of the 21st century, which has just ended, trade with water came to be taken for granted, with the price related to the true value of the water. State authorities retained only regulatory and controlling functions, and agreed these internationally and globally. The global network of main suppliers and locally based water neighbourhoods