

## **Towards a Sustainable Water Future Conference**

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**Speech by Tony Slatyer, Consultant on Water Policy and Governance**

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### **GETTING ON TRACK WITH SDG 6 – A ROLE FOR MULTILATERAL PROCESSES**

The United Nations has declared that the world is not on track to achieve the availability and sustainable management of water for all people by 2030 as was promised by all United Nations member governments in 2015.

Great progress is being made in some countries, including India with its amazing achievements in household sanitation and new commitment to supply safe water to every household in the next five years. However in most countries progress is not fast enough, and some are going backwards.

What does not being on track mean? It means foregone economic development opportunity. It means environmental degradation. It means heightened risk of conflict. It also means hundreds of millions of people, mainly rural women and girls will have their opportunities to lead full and dignified lives and contribute to social and economic development of the society limited by the time they must spend carting water.

We know the SDG 6 targets are ambitious and the imbalance between water supply and demand in many countries is worsening with population growth, economic development and climate change.

But the technologies exist. The science is known. There is enough money, labour and skills in the world. It is possible to do this.

The problem is that too many governments are not making the necessary decisions, and are not giving this challenge the necessary priority.

Given the awful consequences of failure for the wellbeing of populations, why are governments not acting fast enough?

One key reason is that the necessary decisions can be very difficult politically.

For example, to liberate the private equity or pension fund capital needed to invest in new capital infrastructure and service delivery, the investor needs a revenue stream and investment risks to be commensurate with the expected returns. Otherwise why would they invest?

However to achieve this requires tariffs for water services, when people may be accustomed to receiving water at no cost and requires governments to not make arbitrary policy or legislation changes significantly affecting investment returns without compensation, when people will be rightly concerned about losing national control over water resources.

Another example is that the effective management of water in transboundary systems requires two or more governments to cooperate such as by sharing hydrometric and socio-economic data, costs and benefits, when there may be historic rivalry or enmity between the neighbouring population.

In times of water scarcity, achieving water security may require the re-cycling and re-use of water, even though that water may have been previously polluted and unclean and subject to social taboos.

Protecting and restoring water-related ecosystems will generally require the consumption of less water for agriculture and industrial water users, putting upward pressure on food prices and jeopardising employment.

Success is possible in all these areas but policies like these can be extremely difficult to explain and justify to the people, and in democratic countries can put governments at risk of losing office.

Governments facing this dilemma have to weigh up whether it is worth the political risk and the risk to other national development objectives to prioritise water.

We as water professionals need to stand up and make the case to our governments and publicly that it is worth it.

We need to say that it is worth it not because water is important in and of itself, as it clearly is, but because unless water is well managed, it will not be possible for governments to achieve any development objectives, be they

health, education, food and energy security, urban development, human rights, disaster risk reduction or climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Global multilateral processes, through the United Nations system, need to be able to support difficult decision making at the national level.

For example, if there was an agreed set of policy options that have been successful in a range of social and cultural contexts, a government could explain its choice of a necessary but unpopular policy from this set as being in accord with internationally acknowledged good practice.

In-country discussions could then proceed not so much on what to do, but how to do it in a manner that would be appropriate to the society's circumstances.

This set of policy options could be termed 'policy scaffolding' because it would make it safer for governments to take the political risks required to create a successful outcome, just as scaffolding on a building site makes it safer to do necessary but risky building work.

The concept and content of this policy scaffolding could be considered in the United Nations General Assembly or some global conference with the United Nations authority. As it happens, there are two such multilateral opportunities on the horizon with a one day high level meeting on water to be conducted by the President of the United Nations General Assembly in 2021 and a larger water conference to be convened by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2023, when the Agenda 2030 implementation period and the current United Nations Decade on Water will be at their mid-points.

It may be too late in 2023 for any countries not then on track to get onto track, but if a start is made now, some governments may be able to use this kind of work to turn the corner.

In Australia, the world's driest inhabited continent, we have considerable experience wrestling with these political challenges and have learned much about what works and what doesn't work.

For example, we have learned that attempts to frame water issues as technical in nature and able to be solved by scientists, economists, engineers, hydrologists, lawyers and bureaucrats do not work. Water solutions go to the

heart of social values and require political skills and processes to understand and integrate community opinion. The role of experts in policy development is crucial one but it is to reveal the possibilities and to explain the consequences of different possible approaches.

We have learned that for water policies to be sustainable in Australia requires bipartisan agreement which in turn requires the support of community leaders. In a federal system, this generally also requires the support of the state and Commonwealth governments, which may be of different political complexion.

We have learned that markets in share-based water access rights can greatly assist farmers in managing drought periods and adapting to climate change.

We have learned that there will never be perfect information, even in Australia where we have world's best practice water information systems and analytical tools, so it doesn't work to wait for this to get better. Australian governments have needed to make the best decisions they could with the information they have had.

And we have learned that 'policy scaffolding' does work. The political agreement reached between the Australian Commonwealth Government and all the States and Territory Governments in 2004, known as the National Water Initiative, has been a successful basis for many state policies, with states relying on this to make politically difficult decisions and learning from each other's experiences.

In closing, the world is not on track to achieve the availability and sustainable management of water for all people by 2030.

Achieving this requires policies be devised and implemented which will often be politically difficult. Multilateral processes provide an opportunity to make it safer for national governments to make the difficult decisions needed to get on track.

As water professionals let us all use the expertise we do have to lend support to these processes.

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