

Policy revision on water management

Prof. Ranjith Premalal de Silva, Professor and Head, Department of Agricultural Engineering, University of Peradeniya speaks on the salient features of the National Water Policy in an interview with the 'Sunday Observer'.

by Indeewara Thilakarathne

The introduction of a national policy for drinking water is a very appreciable move. Drinking water is a key determinant of the health and sanitation of the nation. However, the draft national policy does not cover some of the significant aspects of drinking water and is confined to include only drinking water supplied by NWS&DB and other water supply projects. This may be due to the policy being developed through the NWS&DB and their mandate being the main focus of the policy.

'Mahinda Chintana'

In 'Mahinda Chintana', a prudent vision of the country, it is mentioned that safe drinking water and sanitation should be made available for all people without restriction. It specifically mentions that Life-line (social) tariff among the three tier tariff structure covers basic human needs and low income communities only be entitled to receive this subsidy.

It is dismaying to note that the NWSDB blatantly violates the principles of social justice ensured by the vision of the 'Mahinda Chintana'. Recent amendments made further deviates the tariff structure from the social justice and equity ensured in 'Mahinda Chintana'.

bottled drinking water

In addition to the pipe borne water supply of National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB), there is an important service sector responsible for the bottled drinking water supply in Sri Lanka. For most of the urban sectors and the tourism industry, the impact of the bottled water industry is predominant.

The bottled water industry has failed to meet the basic standards of bottled water in a large number of occasions. Since bottled water is mainly for drinking purposes, the national drinking water policy should definitely make provisions for regulations related to (a) selection of water sources (b) permitted additives and water purification reagents (c) standards for bottles used (d) water quality standards and (e) information provided on the label in the bottled water industry. The draft national policy on drinking water is devoid of any policy framework for the bottled water industry in Sri Lanka.

Most of the rural communities depend on ground

water for drinking purposes. Indiscriminate abstraction of ground water has led to the reduction of the ground water potential in most areas of the country. Further, industrial expansion has led to the release of affluent to water resources while most of the pollutant loads end up in the ground water zone. Furthermore, changes made on the surface cover have altered the infiltration dynamics and the recharge has been seriously impeded. The users of ground water for drinking purposes from shallow wells and tube wells (deep bore holes) could expose themselves to serious health hazards and face a scarcity of water for abstraction. There is no policy framework related to drinking water obtained.

Provisions should be made in the national drinking water policy framework to monitor the ground water quality periodically and record the water quality characteristics of large aquifers. The regulatory authority responsible for ground water conservation and utilization can be entrusted to monitor ground water quality and quantity (recharge rate) and take appropriate actions for public awareness.

No quality checks on serving water

Drinking water is served to the consumers in hotels, restaurants, cafes, etc.. There are no quality standards currently identified for table water used for drinking. In addition, drinking water used for the preparation of various beverages does not satisfy any quality standards.

There is no policy framework in the draft drinking

and other water conveyance structures (pipe networks) are sometimes found to be made of poor quality materials.

Some of the water tankers used to transport water have rusted inner surfaces that contribute to pollution of the transported drinking water. There is no provision of regulatory mechanism for

Access to safe water denied for poor

The objective of the draft national policy on drinking water defines that access to safe drinking water is an inalienable right. The present cost recovery measures adopted by the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) are contradictory to the objectives of the policy.

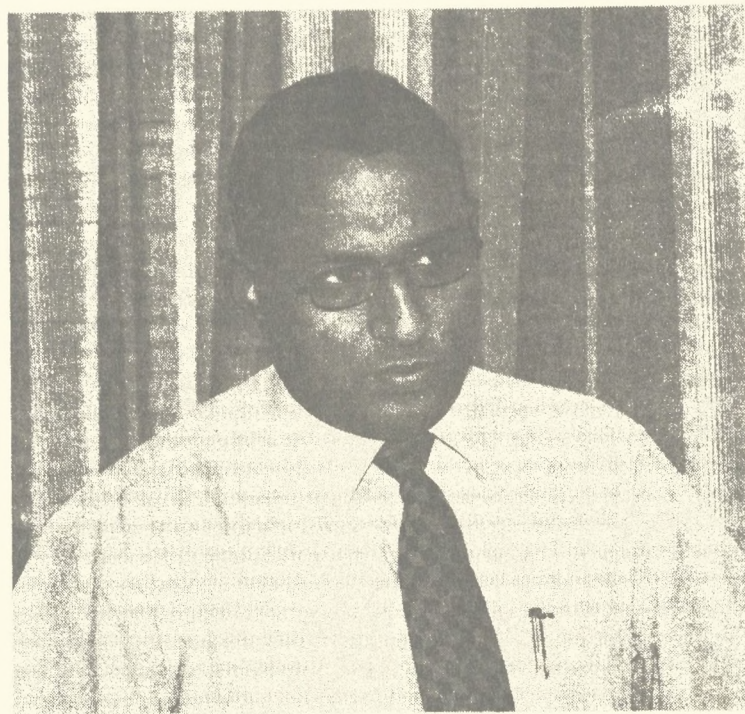
Firstly, the initial connections charge prevents poor people getting domestic water supply. In general, poor people live in areas where infrastructure, accessibility and other facilities are poor. NWSDB connection charges are higher for locations which are far from the established infrastructure thus making poor people living under poor infrastructure to pay more for their water connections.

Secondly, the existing tariff structure provides that the first 15 units are at highly subsidized rate for all the customers including those who are rich and are prepared to pay even for more than 50 units. Here, the basic principle is misinterpreted to include the rich to receive subsidy for water in the first 15 units. Further, the present tariff increases beyond the 15 unit level at a decreasing rate while it should increase at an increasing rate to prevent the excessive use of the limited water supply which has been subsidized with public funds.

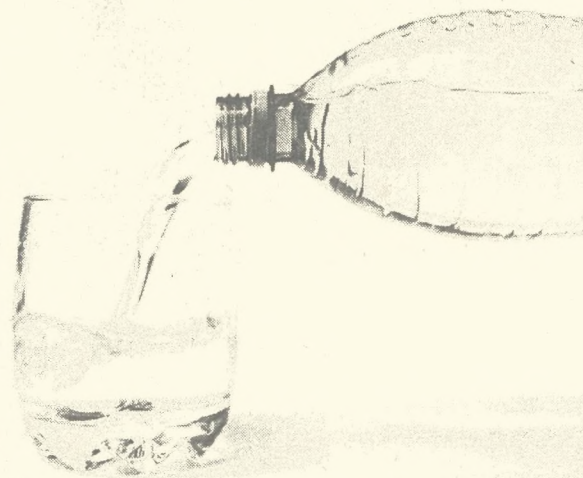
Thirdly, the monthly fixed rate should be changed to a consumption based approach. Although the equipment cost is fixed, the use of the equipment is more in the case of a heavy user and therefore, a heavy user should be charged a higher rate (the charge is for the use of the equipment and not as a recovery of initial cost for the equipment).

Fourthly, the NWSDB's practice adopted for non-payment of bills is also a discriminatory to the poor. Water supply is disconnected if the bill is not settled within a specified period and a flat reconnection charge of over Rs. 1000 is applicable to restore the supply irrespective of the unpaid amount. The disconnection should be based on the accumulated arrears over a certain threshold and should not be solely based on a duration of non-payment. Reconnection charge should also be proportionate to the amount in arrears which should include a fixed basic cost to recover the reconnection cost. A poor customer, who has got 2 months arrears less than Rs. 50 should not be paying the same reconnection cost as a luxurious water user who has got huge arrears. The cost recovery principles should be applied in a framework of social justice introduced through the drinking water policy.

Fifth, those who opt for using the natural water resources available (both ground water and surface water sources) are denied of the rights due to abstraction/diversion of water by NWSDB.



Indiscriminate abstraction of ground water has led to the reduction of the ground water potential in most areas of the country.



water policy to regulate the serving of quality water and using water for water based beverages with respect to the chemical, physical and biological parameters.

Overlooked
In the market today, empty containers used for the storage of various chemicals are sold for reuse as water containers. In some instances, the entire domestic water supply system is channelled through this sort of containers where continuous release of pollutants takes place. Also the pipes

the proper management of water conveyance and storage structures in the draft drinking water policy.

Not recognized

Availability of Surface and ground water resources for drinking water during the dry periods of the year in some of the dry zone areas is very limited. Use of rain-water harvested for drinking would be a viable option. The use of harvested rain water for drinking should be recognized as a useful source of water for drinking.