

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

The Case for Water Diplomacy ^[1]

SINGAPORE --- *“Just turn on the faucet.”*

That’s the answer most Americans and others in the developed world would give if asked how to get plenty of clean water. But for about two billion people, such a response is meaningless. These people – almost a third of the world’s population – do not have access to water that can be drunk without adverse health effects. An even greater number lack access to adequate sanitation, which is a principal reason that more than two million children die of diarrheal diseases each year.

Here at the Singapore Water Leaders Summit, statistics such as these come up with numbing frequency. The task for those in attendance, however, is to *not* become numb, but to aggressively seek solutions to the problems that have been so clearly defined.

Ensuring an adequate supply of safe water can be done. Desalination, reverse osmosis, and other techniques are rapidly becoming less costly. But despite scientific advances, what remains in short supply in most of the world is political will on the part of policymakers and the public.

Singapore is an exception. It has been relying on not-always-friendly Malaysia for much of its water under a treaty that expires in 2061. During the intervening 50 years, Singapore plans to do whatever is necessary to become water self-sufficient.

Singapore’s prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, told this water summit’s attendees that “water is a strategic necessity for Singapore” and so the country had “mobilized our machinery” in a holistic approach that includes investing in new technology and educating the public about water conservation.

Singapore relies heavily on recycled “new water”; 15 percent of its supply is now recycled and the goal is 50 percent by the time the Malaysia treaty expires. In addition, the stinky old river running through the heart of Singapore is now a clean reservoir. In many of the world’s water systems, said Loong, 40 percent of the water disappears because of bad infrastructure, such as leaky pipes. “We have it down to 12 percent,” said Loong, “and we are trying for better.” Singapore has also brought its water and sanitation departments together. Loong said this “integrated management closes the loop” in the sense that better sewage treatment allows easier water reclamation.

Singapore’s accomplishments are encouraging, but this is an exceptional place, with just five million residents and with financial and technological resources that are unknown in much of the rest of the world. The country comprises only 269 square miles and it has no farming, so there is no need to allocate water for agricultural irrigation.

Nevertheless, Singapore’s accomplishments are important, and its success underscores the

potential value of water diplomacy.

From the standpoint of U.S. public diplomacy, undertaking a comprehensive water diplomacy program would be a great accomplishment. Such an effort wouldn't be about "branding" or "engagement," but it would consist of direct service to the people the United States wants to reach. It would save lives.

For amounts that in foreign aid terms are nominal, the United States could improve the water prospects of people throughout the world who are, at least for now, incapable of helping themselves. With 1.3 million people moving into urban areas around the world each week, the need for better water systems is certain to increase dramatically and rapidly.

Committing American technological resources to this kind of public diplomacy would certainly win friends around the globe and would allow the United States to connect with people whose own governments are unable (and in some cases unwilling) to provide safe water.

If public diplomacy is to consist of service rather than propaganda, water diplomacy is the kind of venture that can advance the national interest while also providing help to people who desperately need it. The technology and skills to implement water diplomacy are readily available, but still uncertain is whether policy makers can muster the political will to offer them to the people who need them most.
