

Asset preservation

Mayling Chan calls on Hong Kong to update its water management policy to better reflect today's realities of climate change and depleting resources, as other governments in the region have done

Do you want to be paid to use less water? This is already happening in Shenzhen. Under a newly adopted water management plan, based on the nation's 12th five-year plan, a cash incentive is awarded to motivate Shenzhen residents to conserve water. The mainland is seeing the most stringent update of its water policy in an effort to manage its water shortage.

For the past decade, Hong Kong has sat back comfortably in the midst of a global water crisis. Each year for the past three years, it paid about HK\$3 billion for up to 1.1 billion cubic metres of water from the Dongjiang in Guangdong.

But, from this year, the provision will decline by 25 per cent under a new three-year contract signed with Guangdong. This sends a wake-up call to the Hong Kong government to be more self-reliant in the long run.

For decades, the threat of water shortages has loomed large on the mainland, in the form of extreme droughts, falling underground water tables and evaporating lakes. The World Bank has reported that, in China, the per capita availability of natural fresh water is only a quarter of the world's average. Northern China and, in recent years, the southwestern regions have been recognised as being water-scarce. In particular, even though 42 per cent of the population live in the north, they have access only to 14 per cent of the country's water resources.

The lack of water has restrained growth and had a serious impact on the livelihood, daily basic needs and health of the people. Many academics attribute the water scarcity to ineffective policies and management, unsustainable practices and a weak institutional capacity. Last month, Hu Siyi, a vice-minister of the Ministry of Water Resources, said water usage had already surpassed the level that China's natural resources could bear.

Looking at our own needs in Hong Kong, water imported from the mainland makes up between 70 and 80 per cent of our total consumption, and the government does not plan to change this. With the influence of climate change, weather and rainfall patterns have changed. The 2004 and 2009 droughts in Guangdong, for example, affected more than two million people, according to one report.

And, in the past two years, Yunnan (雲南) province, which is also part of the Pearl River basin, has suffered from severe drought that has led to a drastic drop in its underground water supply. For the six months to March 2010, it recorded just half its normal rainfall for the time of year. Non-governmental organisations in the region fear the trend will continue.

All these are signs that we must start to treat water as an asset to preserve, value and use wisely. Even though Hong Kong has billions of dollars at its disposal, it cannot be complacent as the price of water will continue to rise.



How can we turn things around? Does Hong Kong have a progressive water resource management strategy? Do we have targets and indicators to measure results?

The Water Supplies Department has launched pilot projects to retrofit government buildings and schools with water-saving devices, and it has tried to treat small quantities of grey water and reuse it for non-potable purposes.

But what are the results and the next steps? Surely a higher priority should be given to fixing the old plumbing which is reportedly leaking up to 20 per cent of Hong Kong's total water. Should the Drainage Services Department be

Our government could learn from the practices and political will demonstrated elsewhere

capturing more of our rain water and supplying it to the Water Supplies Department?

Obviously, there is much room for the government and society to do more. A Friends of the Earth (HK) survey on the habits of water consumption showed that, on average, people spend 15 minutes in the shower. If the flow rate of their showerhead is 12 litres per minute, then just taking a shower incurs a loss of 180 litres. That is 80 per cent of our daily per capita water use of 220 litres. In our Dongjiang water conservation project in Jiangxi (江西) province, villagers at source use around 90 litres per day. The United Nations suggests just 50 litres per day should be sufficient. This would be one area Hong Kong could seriously look at to try to tackle the water crisis.

Our government needs to go beyond building expensive desalination infrastructures and slowly fixing the old plumbing. Neighbouring governments are pushing hard for fundamental change. In Singapore, the government buys water from Malaysia. It has an ultimate goal of cutting reliance on others to zero by 2061 by implementing a basket of strategic policies and

major measures with progressive targets. These include: a nationwide campaign to reduce water consumption by 10 per cent, from its current level of 154 litres per capita per day; for advanced water purifying technologies to be used to provide up to 50 per cent of water demand, up from the current 30 per cent; the installation of water saving devices in all public places; and, an increase in the size of the water catchment areas from 50 to 67 per cent of land area.

As a start to dealing with the problem, our government could learn from the attitudes, good practices and political will that have been demonstrated elsewhere, and then commit to a holistic plan with measurable targets. One obvious thing is to require all new buildings to install water-saving devices, both in government and private buildings.

On world water day today, it is an opportune moment to test our perseverance by limiting our water use for the day, to reflect on the importance of water, and why it is an asset that should be preserved.

Mayling Chan is CEO of Friends of the Earth (HK)

Cold light of day

Graeme Lang says research on global warming sceptics unmasks their shaky science and links to industry interests and libertarian ideology

Some people say global warming isn't occurring. Or it's not caused by humans, and is just natural climate variation. A small number of scientists and academics appear periodically in the mass media expressing such views. Sociologists, journalists, science writers and scientists have done some research on these "global warming sceptics". Here is what they have found.

First, most of them are not active climate researchers and have published little or nothing in peer-reviewed scientific journals about climates past or present. In a few instances where they have published work that disputes claims about global warming or its causes, their work was later shown to contain critical errors. Typically, they have little or no influence on the views of active climate scientists.

Second, many are affiliated with a "conservative think tank", which are typically funded by corporations or billionaire industrialists.

Their common mission is to promote free-market ideology. They are typically libertarian: government regulation is viewed as a threat to freedom, and regulation of the economy must be resisted or rolled back. Many people affiliated with these organisations believe environmentalists are not much different from socialists, because they want to regulate business and impose constraints on the economy.

Most think tanks that promote scepticism about climate change have received funds from fossil-fuel corporations and industry associations. They know that one way to prevent regulation or special taxes on their product is to convince the public that there is legitimate scientific doubt about global warming.

If a group of scientists could demonstrate that global warming is not occurring, or is the result of natural processes rather than human activities, those scientists would be world-famous. But no scientists have been able to provide convincing evidence in peer-reviewed scientific journals for either of these claims. Instead, almost all active climate scientists agree that global warming is occurring, and that human activities are contributing to it.

Many business leaders have acknowledged the scientific consensus about global warming, and surveys show that people in most countries now also accept that global warming is occurring.

Even so, some libertarian think tanks and industry-funded organisations continue to misrepresent the current state of scientific knowledge in order to spread doubt or scorn about global warming. Such views are featured on websites and occasionally find space in mainstream media. They are also aggressively amplified by conservative television talk-show hosts in the US, and echoed by anti-regulation politicians, notably Republicans in the US Congress.

When many voters and conservative politicians are sceptical, in countries that are major greenhouse gas emitters, it can hinder attempts to reduce or tax carbon emissions. Of course, that is precisely the aim of these organisations and their patrons.

This is well-known among academics in the US, but not so well-known in Hong Kong. Professor Riley Dunlap, who has done extensive research on the organisation and funding of climate-change denial, will speak on this topic at City University tomorrow.

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Pain of history should push China to persevere with political reform

People who care about China's future are likely to have been surprised and heartened by what Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) said during his press conference at the end of the National People's Congress meeting this year, broadcast live on March 14. Over three hours, Wen spoke several times of reforms, particularly political reform.

This time, though, he highlighted three relationships: that between political and economic reform; the link between reform and the people; and the relationship between reform and history. His words brought home the urgency of political reform, which China must no longer delay or avoid.

History will be the ultimate judge of his leadership, Wen said; on reforms, the premier also took the historical view.

Twice he mentioned the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the Republic". It was no accident. The resolution, adopted in 1981, reflected on the mistakes made by the government in the 32 years of nationhood. It admitted that, between 1957 and 1966, the "party made serious mistakes in guidance, leading to detours in development". The 10-year Cultural Revolution was a period of internal turmoil "wrongfully started by the leadership and exploited by anti-revolutionary groups", that brought "catastrophe to the party, the country and the people".

Even after the fall of the Gang of Four, in 1976, China struggled for a time before finding the right path to development. The decision on

Hu Shuli says a responsible government ought not to fear the consequences of change, or the difficulty of progress, so much that it fails to answer society's needs



reform and opening up was reached at the third plenary session of the 11th Central Committee (in 1978) and affirmed by the resolution.

No one should refute this decision. No matter how difficult the project of reform, China cannot turn back. The pain of these lessons of history is too raw.

China has made astounding strides since reforms began, but problems, too, abound. In particular, corruption, unfair wealth distribution and a loss of trust in society have created deep resentment. Solving these fundamental problems requires comprehensive reforms that have proved painful. Thus, some people mislead others by blaming reform for the problems, compounding the difficulty of progress.

This makes clear the relationship between reform and the people: as Wen said, reforms cannot succeed without the people's understanding and full-hearted support.

After the Cultural Revolution, China's economy was left on the brink of collapse. Hence, economic reforms such as those on farm output quotas quickly won public approval. But, today, reaching a consensus through such sloganeering is no longer possible.

The multiple frustrations of daily life are feeding into public discontent that can easily turn into mob rage. We've seen how, during

the Cultural Revolution, ambitious politicians and fanatical populism ended up destroying civilisation. Just recently, Vice-President Xi Jinping (習近平) warned in an essay against party cadres who play to the crowd for personal gain. History cautions us that regression for China would be dangerous; it reminds leaders of their responsibility to press on with reforms – they must face up to problems and strive to win people's support for reforms.

Reforms are at a crossroads, Wen said. "Without the success of political structural reforms, economic structural reforms cannot be carried out in full, and whatever gains we have made may be lost." Without solving the roots of social problems, a historical tragedy like the Cultural Revolution could occur again, he warned.

For the past 30 years, China has been tough on reforms in some areas, but lax in others. Today, the lack of progress on political reform is stalling the entire project. Thus, many vocal advocates of market reforms, including the economist Wu Jinglian (吳敬璉), have in recent years begun urging leaders to prioritise political reform.

But far too many people oppose change, and our biggest problem today is an irresolute leadership. Our leaders waver because they are afraid political reform would

cause instability. But reality has proved them wrong. The unrest that erupted last year in the Guangdong village of Wukan was eventually pacified when the party leadership worked with the villagers to reach a solution stressing people's autonomy, and fair and open elections were held. This is an example of successful political reform that improves, rather than disrupts, harmony.

Asked about China's democratic development, Wen said: "People who run a village well can run a county, and people who run a county well can run a province, and so on. We should encourage people to practise, because through practice they learn."

Political reform is not frightening. Reform should be gradual and step by step, but firm. Two tasks in the government's work report directly relate to political reform: to hasten administrative reform and enhance measures to fight corruption. Both hold the key to a breakthrough in reform progress. The government must, as Wen pledged, not let up.

The Communist Party will soon hold its 18th party congress, where some progress on promoting intra-party democracy is expected. The recent removal of Bo Xilai (薄熙來) as Chongqing (重慶) party chief underlines the urgency of political reform. A responsible government must act.



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Daunting obstacles to the full university experience

Louisa Mitchell urges better support for undergraduates with disabilities

Hong Kong's universities are notoriously competitive, with only around 19 per cent of the university-age population successfully enrolling last year. So imagine trying to navigate that competitive process with a disability. The obstacles are daunting anywhere, but particularly in Hong Kong.

In a research project for the think tank Civic Exchange, only 257 new students with a declared disability were found to have enrolled in our public universities last year. This represents around 1 per cent of the new student population, compared with about 11 per cent in the US, 7 per cent in Britain and 4 per cent in Australia.

However, staff here reported a "social shift" that is steadily bringing in more students with disabilities. And there are many who do not declare that they have a disability.

But support services here are patchy. For example, only one university in the research has a member of staff dedicated to support for students with disabilities. Students reported having to run around different departments every year to make arrangements, plus long waiting periods. One student waited six months for the height of a desk to be changed.

By comparison, the London School of Economics has a Disability and Well-being Office, which draws up individual support agreements for students and uses this to co-ordinate with all departments on their behalf.

Many students with disabilities in Hong Kong live at home, have a relative with them all day to help them navigate the campus and run their life constrained by transport schedules. One student gave up a course because he simply could not get there. These students cannot come close to fully participating in the university experience.

Only one university in the study publishes tips for how to prepare teaching materials for students with disabilities. In Britain, an initiative in higher education has made teaching practices more flexible.

Staff in Hong Kong said they lack time and expertise and, as a result, support is sometimes misdirected. One student who uses a wheelchair was given a designated space at the front of a lecture theatre, but that meant having to look up high to see the slides, which she could not do.

Support is particularly lacking at the points of entry to and exit from university. Only one student said a university offered a tour to determine campus accessibility. In Britain, this is standard practice.

And none of the student interviewees were offered support in finding employment and were all "very worried" about it. The University of California, Berkeley has a programme that helps students with disabilities navigate the path to employment, while in Australia, a successful national programme provides these students an internship at a company as a way of gaining work experience.

Despite the limited support services, Hong Kong students

enjoyed their university experience, finding the staff helpful. But these positive attitudes are not being translated into long-term, strategically planned services.

To do so requires a joined-up approach and top-level support from universities, companies and the government. The key is to design a flexible system. There is already plenty of expertise and goodwill to harness in Hong Kong from non-governmental organisations, community organisations, staff and students. But funding is an issue. Currently, it is largely squeezed out of existing budgets. Public funds need to be released, while philanthropists can step in and companies can offer scholarships linked to internships.

Hong Kong would be taking a leading role in Asia if it recognised diversity positively. And isn't it the aim for our universities to be among the leading educational institutions in the world? World-class universities cater to diverse needs. To achieve the official vision of becoming "people-centred", "inclusive", "knowledge-based", and a "quality living area", Hong Kong must get comfortable making long-term, recurring investment in human potential.

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