

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

This is why we can't dismiss water scarcity in the US

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The United Nations Water Conference will be held in New York in March this year and is the first UN meeting solely about water since 1977.

Water is a fundamental human right and a critical discussion for the Water Conference will address how governments, corporations and organizations can provide safe drinking water and sanitation to communities.

With over 40% of the world's population affected by water scarcity conditions, the Water Conference could focus on developing countries severely impacted by water scarcity. And why not? Water scarcity is a massive issue in developing countries.

But access to sufficient, safe and accessible drinking water is not just a developing world issue.

Too many Americans still face water insecurity due to groundwater exhaustion, infrastructure challenges, climate change conditions and contamination, resulting in devastating effects on public health and community prosperity.

Grassroots solutions

In response to water scarcity issues, some communities are adopting off-grid solutions to manage and provide access to water. These solutions include smaller town waste treatment systems, reuse and rainwater capture. Sounds great in theory but many communities need more funding or are on long approval lists to adopt new technology or infrastructure and rely on community organizations to access clean drinking water.

US corporations and governments must support community-based organizations addressing water access issues in the United States. These organizations educate stakeholders on community water issues, provide hands-on support to fund water hauling programmes and install and manage critical equipment, such as tanks, filtration systems and even sinks, to ensure equal access to safe drinking water.

DigDeep, a human rights nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that every American has clean water, reports that there are 2.2 million people in the United States without running water and basic indoor plumbing and many more without appropriate sanitation. Additionally, more than 44 million people are served by inadequate water systems that recently had Safe Drinking Water Act violations.

DigDeep and the US Water Alliance have recommended that a pivotal way to address water access and inequities facing vulnerable people is to publicly acknowledge water access in the United States as a crisis – formal recognition leads to more significant support, resources and funding.

“The water access gap is costing the US economy around \$8.6 billion each year and remains unsolved,” said DigDeep CEO and founder George McGraw. “However, we also found that there is hope: for every dollar invested in closing the water gap, the US economy would see a nearly five-fold return. We must close the water access gap. As the research shows, we can’t afford not to.”

Environmental impacts of water scarcity

In California, there are over 2 million private wells that access groundwater. But due to drought conditions, excessive industrial pumping of aquifers and newly drilled deeper industrial wells, local communities struggle to access adequate water. That is a critical issue in regions like California’s Central Valley, where 95% of families rely on groundwater for home use.

The issue is compounded as pumping and low groundwater levels have contributed to the release of heavy metals and other toxins from clay or other natural underground structures into wells and community water.

Recent storms and flooding have also exacerbated the issue with storm water intrusion and failing private sanitation septic systems making many private wells inoperable.

Self-Help Enterprises, a community development organization in California, provides essential and emergency services. The service offering includes operating a tank and hauled water programme for many low-income communities in the California Central Valley that lack adequate housing, water and sewer infrastructure. Self-Help provides hauled water assistance to nearly 2,000 households, bottled water assistance to 4,000 homes and conducts regular water quality testing for 100 families.

“Severe environmental conditions impact the quality, quantity, availability and access to clean drinking water. Disadvantaged communities, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley, who already contend with limited or no access to infrastructure and rely upon groundwater for lifeline activities, now face increased uncertainty in accessing clean water. The number of families requiring access to

clean, safe drinking water is expected to increase in the next 12 months,” said Tami McVay, director of emergency services at Self-Help Enterprises.

Raising awareness

Bringing awareness to the issues associated with the lack of clean drinking water is required to ignite stakeholder action. For example, the Thirst Foundation, a nonprofit organization focused on driving the effort to ensure clean water and sanitation are provided to everyone on the planet, has reached more than one million people via its non-traditional campaigns.

Mina Guli, the founder of the Thirst Foundation, brings awareness and education to global communities via her exhaustive marathon running campaigns in the most recent campaign, Run Blue.

The goal for Mina is to complete 200 marathons, spanning water-stressed cities in nearly every continent and finishing at the United Nations Water Conference in New York. Mina’s marathon running campaign includes US cities facing water scarcity issues.

The Thirst Foundation and Mina believe that “Access to water should be universal. Companies currently account for a large proportion of the world’s freshwater use, which means companies can become the biggest problem solvers for water.”

Mina encourages US and global companies to assess their water risk, understand where they need to improve and implement a plan to refine their water use.

Water scarcity is a global issue but challenges are uniquely regional; therefore, no silver bullet solution exists. Every region and community will face different access, quality and reliability issues. Corporations must listen to organizations working on the ground with communities that thoroughly understand water issues.

There are 2.2 million identified human reasons for solving water access issues in the United States. Therefore, when considering water commitments at the UN Water Conference in March, US corporations must equally support organizations addressing community water scarcity issues in developing nations and the United States, as water access is a universal human right regardless of location.