

Water, water everywhere?, by Marco Cremona

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Calculated on a per-capita basis, Malta is the ninth thirstiest country in the world. We are extracting groundwater from our aquifers at a rate that is more than twice the sustainable rate (possibly more, but we do not know for certain, as the greater part of the extraction is illegal) - which means that this precious strategic resource will be rendered useless during our lifetime.

Sixty per cent of our potable water supply comes from energy-intensive desalination (RO) plants, making the Water Services Corporation (WSC) the single largest consumer of electricity in Malta. The balance is made up of groundwater, which has to be blended with RO water in order to make it potable and meet EU Drinking Water quality standards. The dependence on RO water has been increasing year after year, so as to make good for the consistent deterioration in the quality of our groundwater supplies.

And yet there is no widespread concern on water issues in Malta. Few people know about, or are interested in, the sorry state of our groundwater reserves. As long as potable water is readily available at their taps, and is still relatively inexpensive, nobody raises an eyebrow. If you're a huge consumer of water, you might be enticed to drill a borehole and extract as much water as you want, for free. The Maltese water authorities do not seem bothered about this at all.

With the free availability of water comes wastage. We have now even resorted to growing turf on roundabouts, and irrigating them with sprinklers during the midday heat in July! Water is seriously under-valued in Malta. One only needs to look at the miserly cost of potable water when compared with electricity, for example.

The water bill for a family of three in Malta (consuming an average 90 litres of water per person per day) works out at €3.07 per month - which compares very poorly with the €23.69 per month forked out by the same family for electricity (surcharge not included). Moreover, potable water in Malta is among the cheapest in Europe.

Something is amiss here. How is it possible that a Maltese citizen pays much less than a citizen of another EU country when we have to produce our water artificially, and through a very energy-intensive process at that?

Clearly, the potable water supply in Malta is heavily subsidised, and even the 95 per cent surcharge does not make good for the difference in the real cost of production and the revenue from the sale of the water. Water subsidies are present in more ways than one. The government transfers millions of euros every year from its coffers to the Water Services Corporation to make good for the deficit between revenues from the sale of water and operating costs.

Moreover, as a heavy industrial consumer of electricity, the WSC pays €0.05 for every unit of electricity it uses - when the cost of generation of electricity to Enemalta is now close to €0.14 per unit or more. That is, the energy sector in Malta is heavily subsidising the water sector.

In addition to this, the Maltese consumer does not pay any sewerage costs. Most of the sewage is still being discharged into the sea without treatment. However, as an EU member state, Malta is obliged to treat all its sewage and this will entail significant treatment costs that have to be borne by WSC, and therefore its clients.

But even more worrying is the fact that the quality of groundwater - our main source of water, contributing 34 million cubic metres a year, out of the 54 million cubic metres we consume - is in freefall. Apart from the need to protect this strategic resource for our own good, we are now obliged to protect groundwater because of the EU Water Framework Directive.

Given that successive governments have been unable to take generally unpopular but necessary decisions, as an EU member state Malta also has to abide with the articles in the EU Water Framework Directive that stipulate the need for cost recovery of water services by 2010. This essentially means that all subsidies will have to go. It is likely that the forthcoming revision in tariffs in September will be the start of this painful process.

However, increasing the water tariffs without controlling illegal extraction of groundwater is suicidal. Any increase in tariffs will send everybody (and I mean everybody) seeking quotations for the drilling of boreholes to extract free groundwater. This will of course aggravate an already bad situation with regard to the condition of our aquifers.

In view of the above, isn't it time that we had a national discussion on water issues in this country? And for those of you who are in the process of building their own home, some free advice... invest in a cistern. You'll need it more than anything else in the coming years.