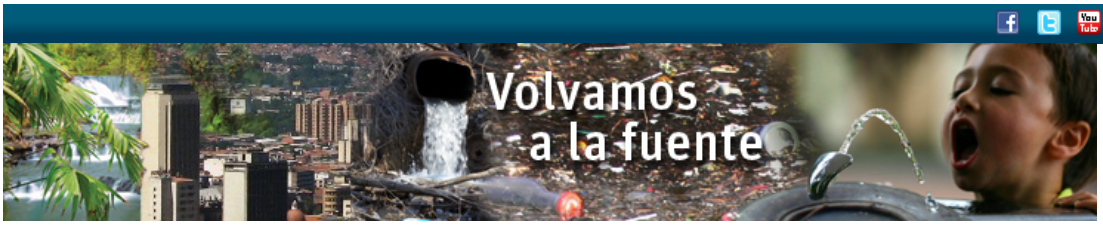


## Acerca

Un blog sobre la gestión integral de agua, saneamiento, residuos sólidos y el ambiente urbano.

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# How Latin America and the Caribbean can help avert a water crisis

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**Op-Ed article by Crystal Fenwick and Fernando Miralles***

*With immense swathes of tropical and sub-tropical zones and a seemingly bountiful supply of freshwater, Latin America and the Caribbean is rarely associated with water scarcity. Indeed, according to the UN, Latin America and the Caribbean is home to one-tenth of world's population while generating one-third of its water resources.*

**A closer look reveals disparity in the details.**

Hydrological regimes can vary dramatically from watershed to watershed and globally aggregated data often fail to accurately represent the reality on the ground. So while Latin America and the Caribbean may seem water-rich, the fact is almost half of the region's total precipitation falls in one country – Brazil. In addition, available water supply is not necessarily where the people live. In Peru, roughly 90 percent of the population resides near its Pacific coast, which holds only about 10 percent of the country's available freshwater.

Indeed, in the coming decades, many of the largest cities in the region – Lima, Santiago, Caracas, Quito – may face water shortages while Mexico City has had a long history of water scarcity.

Increasing demands on existing supplies, competing uses, poor water quality and dilapidated infrastructure are only some of the additional challenges facing the region today. Combined with climate change, which is generally expected to exacerbate extreme drought and flood events, increase rainfall intensity and



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quicken glacial retreat, decision-making has become increasingly complex, particularly in areas where water resources are physically or economically limited.

To help avert a water crisis, Latin America and the Caribbean must adopt an integrated approach to water management. The Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) Framework, introduced by the global water community over 20 years ago, established an approach to begin the integration process. Two decades in, however, there is much work still to do. The framework cultivates knowledge and helps develop effective water resources management strategies, but its success, relies on our collective ability to do three things more effectively.

First, countries need to better **assimilate and manage large amounts of data**. Historically, governments have prioritized data collection differently based on the availability of funds and political motivations. Adopting **newer, better, and more affordable data monitoring options** can help minimize these differences.

Conventional methods for collecting field data are labor and cost intensive particularly in distant areas. Additionally, global datasets available online are often aggregated at the macro scale, masking local variability. Advances in earth observation technologies, such as satellite remote sensing systems, have enabled data to be collected over extensive – and often inaccessible – areas in a timely fashion. When combined with local data and simulation models, these systems offer an alternative, cost-effective and robust approach to this age-old dilemma.

Second, countries need to develop a legal structure to **encourage water conservation** while creating greater **cultural awareness** of disparity in water availability and quality among citizens. Traditionally, countries have focused their water management efforts on demand management technologies designed to increase water supply, but must now transition to supply management strategies designed to conserve limited resources.

Rapidly growing demands on existing supplies and competing uses for water may compromise already fragile resources, particularly in areas of physical or economic scarcity affected by climate change. The equitable sharing of resources may seem economically undesirable or indeed infeasible, but a sound demand management strategy can help balance the need to ensure public access to adequate basic services with agricultural and industrial demands and environmental services.

Third, governments need to **improve water governance**. Good governance requires the active participation of all stakeholders, from small farmers to major industrial and domestic consumers. This requires shared ownership, transparency, and a combination of both top-down and bottom-up management approaches. Importantly, it also requires inter-institutional collaboration at all levels of government and society – particularly when managing water resources across national borders, groundwater and competing demands between upstream and downstream users.


Governments should begin by taking stock of where they stand on each of the three areas to help set priorities and define better water management strategies for the future. The good news is this involves better use of knowledge and more coordination, rather than massive amounts of investments. And the savings down the road, from better managing scarce resources to mitigating climate change, could be significant.

Peru, for example, has adopted an Integrated Water Resources Management strategy to protect three critical watersheds: the Chira-Piura, Santa, and Tacna. Each of these has faced pressures typical of the Pacific drainage basin

including water scarcity, droughts, floods and landslides, as well as degradation related to untreated wastewater.

In accordance with Peru's Water Resources Act, the IWRM approach includes promoting a culture of water that encourages conservation and improvements to water quality and monitoring, along with other measures.

Better water demand management does not necessarily generate big headlines or offer ribbon-cutting photo-ops. But it is a giant step towards ensuring Latin America and the Caribbean's long-term sustainability of water resources and improved livelihoods of its citizens.

***Fenwick and Miralles are water specialists at the Inter-American Development Bank**

Versión en español: Cómo evitar una crisis de agua en América Latina y el Caribe



Etiquetas: agua, conocimiento, conservación, cooperación, gestión, recursos, saneamiento, sanitation, sostenibilidad, water

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