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Organización
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联合国教育、
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**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion
of World Water Day**

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Water scarcity can undermine development efforts, damage the environment, and lead to tension, conflict and even war. However, history also shows that water shortages have motivated human innovation, propelling societies to devise the means to remedy or alleviate water shortages. This year on World Water Day, we are encouraged to reflect on how communities worldwide are “Coping with Water Scarcity”, and how their efforts may be supported and sustained. Of special concern are issues of equity in access to freshwater and the social impact of water allocation policies. With growing scarcity and competition for water a threat both to peace and poverty eradication, it is imperative to secure a more effective and equitable allocation of this vital resource.

Water scarcity is not just the result of a physical lack of water resources. It is also aggravated by problems in water management and governance. Population growth, economic development, pollution and climatic variability all exert pressures on water resources. Equally, human activities such as deforestation, dam-building, prevention of erosion, irrigation and water withdrawals and transfers all affect hydrological processes and the water resources at our disposal, emphasizing the importance of responsible stewardship.

Although water scarcity is not limited to arid and semi-arid regions, climatic conditions and unsustainable practices make these areas highly vulnerable to water shortages. Developments in technology have made increases in our standard of living possible in places where nature’s resources are far from abundant. Desalination technology has become more affordable, turning oceans into freshwater resources, but not without cost and environmental consequences.

Modern and traditional means of harvesting water increase the amount of water available for use. The use of non-renewable groundwater also offers an opportunity to alleviate the growing water scarcity in water-poor areas, thereby improving social welfare and facilitating economic development. However, these benefits have to be carefully weighed against the costs. Greater availability today must be balanced with sustainability for future generations. It is necessary to conserve available water, decrease demand, and increase awareness of the limited nature of water resources. Wise adaptation strategies are needed to ensure livelihoods in marginal areas that suffer from the impacts of climatic variability. Knowledge, capacity and effective technologies must be made available to developing countries, where problems of water scarcity are often the most acute.

UNESCO believes strongly that although the accurate scientific assessment of our resources is a basic prerequisite for the formulation and implementation of sound policies, improved capacity to cope with water scarcity cannot be achieved through the application of science and technology alone. Rather, a multi-disciplinary approach is required, which takes into consideration the socio-cultural dimension of freshwater management. Education plays a vital part in bringing about behavioural changes that can help to conserve water. Culture also plays an important role in determining the kind of water management measures and technical solutions that will be acceptable to specific communities. Communication is vital in transmitting to the public at large the importance of safeguarding water resources. UNESCO, with its mandate in sciences, education, culture and communication, is uniquely well-placed to lead such a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach.

Coping with water scarcity is a complex issue that demands broad-based cooperation at all levels of society. The United Nations is already working together, through the coordinating body of UN-Water, to develop a system-wide approach to this challenge. On World Water Day, I invite all other partners and stakeholders to join us in forging a comprehensive global response. Let us make the sustainable and equitable allocation of water a priority for all.



Koïchiro Matsuura