**Philippines Water Management**

[Omer Qayyum](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/omer-qayyum)

October 26, 2023

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns)

Pakistan is facing a crisis of urban management as its cities grow bigger while provincial and local governments struggle to provide sufficient basic amenities to its citizens. Water and sanitation systems in big cities like Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi are in a sorry state as urbanites are denied access to adequate supply of clean drinking water and quality sanitation system. Issues like rising population, depleting water resources and crumbling infrastructure portend a complete collapse of the urban water management system in the country if corrective action is not taken soon. Inspiration can be drawn from examples of similar nature in other developing countries.
The Philippines was facing a similar crisis around three decades ago; only 26% of the population of Metro Manila had 24-hour water supply while the water system was plagued by debt, inefficiency, water losses, and poor infrastructure. The Philippine government responded to the crisis by privatising Metro Manila’s water management in 1997 and divided it into two zones, east zone and west zone, with operations in each zone handed over to two different concessioners. In 2023, the two private operators, Maynilad Water and Manila Water, now serve a combined population of 17 million with 24-hour supply of clean drinking water and a reliable wastewater system.
Both the concessioners work under regulatory control of Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS), a government body reporting directly to the office of the President of the Philippines. As per the concession agreements, any change in water tariffs is decided by MWSS in reviews that take place once every five years. Concessioners have to show extreme care to maintain quality of service and customer satisfaction or they risk tougher review from MWSS that can make the provisions more stringent in terms of squeezed profit margins and enhanced service delivery targets. Pakistan can set up new Regulatory Offices (ROs) under each provincial government which can enter into agreements with private firms to manage water systems of their urban centers. These ROs can ensure much better supply of drinking water and an overall quality of service improvement while safeguarding tariffs that are affordable for consumers.
One point to note in Metro Manila’s privatised water management journey is that Maynilad Water, the east zone concessioner, didn’t succeed in its first attempt as it couldn’t sustain its operations, went bankrupt and was eventually overtaken by the Philippines government in 2005. It was revived when new investors took over the company and it won the concession for west zone again in the second privatization of 2007. This time they found success as they were able to payback outstanding debts within one year and started on a path of sustainable service delivery. In Pakistan we have PPP Authorities in Federal as well as Provincial governments that can help workout sustainable financial models that aim at obtaining immediate benefit for citizens through investment in new infrastructure and better-quality service while also providing for a good return on investment for the investors in the longer run.
The need of technology-based infrastructure for building an efficient urban water management system cannot be overstated, especially in Pakistan’s case. Water meters do not exist in our water management systems. Resultantly, households in Pakistan are not charged for water supply based on their consumption but instead are charged a flat monthly rate based on locality and size of the residence. Both Maynilad Water and Manila Water prioritised infrastructure development and embraced technology to manage their operations cost-effectively. Similarly, in Pakistan we can engage private sector to raise investments for modernising crucial infrastructure like replacing old damaged pipelines, installing accurate metering equipment, establishing water filtration and waste water treatment plants. With improved infrastructure, implementation of data-driven solutions would become possible that can help in monitoring water quality, distribution, and consumption patterns to optimise resource allocation.
While Maynilad’s journey offers valuable insights, it’s essential to adapt these lessons to Pakistan’s unique context. The country’s diverse water challenges, including water scarcity, river management, and regional disparities, require tailored approaches. However, the principles of efficient infrastructure, public-private collaboration, and sustainable practices can serve as guiding lights on Pakistan’s path towards efficient water management in urban areas. Following Metro Manila’s example, we can start by privatising one of our many WASAs with aim to create an efficient organisation that could provide24-hour supply of clean drinking water to millions of Pakistanis through taps in their households in a few years.