

Call to cut subsidies on water, power

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DOHA: Qatar's policy-makers and experts on sustainable development have strongly recommended charging the nationals for their domestic consumption of water and electricity. They have also urged reducing the heavy subsidies enjoyed by both Qataris and the residents on the use of the country's non-renewable resources.

The ideas came up during a national seminar on "Achieving the Environmental Development Outcomes of the Qatar National Vision 2030", hosted by the General Secretariat for Development Planning (GSDP) here yesterday.

Presenting a paper on "Water resources in Qatar: Shortage and Alternatives", Dr Hassan Ibrahim Al Mohannadi, director of the Technical Bureau at the Permanent Population Committee (PPC), said at least two GCC countries had started charging their citizens for the electricity and water they consume.

Qataris have been enjoying free use of water and electricity since the 1960s. Water charges were first imposed in the 60's, when the government started overseeing the production and distribution of water. However, influenced by the views of a large number of nationals, the government decided to do away with the system. Ever since, Qataris have enjoyed free electricity and water supply, while expatriates pay subsidized prices for the same. Charging nationals for water and electricity consumption will lead to a check on the massive use of these precious resources, Al Mohannadi said.

Speaking in a separate session, Dr Renee Richer, Assistant Professor of Biology at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, stressed on the need for imposing a major cut on the subsidies enjoyed by Qataris and the residents on the use of non-renewable resources. "Reduce the subsidies and do not solely rely on hydrocarbons", she said.

The cost of production of one cubic metre of desalinated water is \$1.64, while the operation and distribution cost is \$1.1, and the government supports this sector with QR829m annually. Rapid socio-economic development and a massive increase in population has contributed to a serious water resources problem in Qatar. The municipal water supply is dependent solely on costly and unsustainable desalination. "There is little regulation. Native Qataris do not pay any water tariff and expatriates pay a subsidised price - approximately one third the cost of production," he said.

Dr Al Mohannadi said Qatar's per capita water consumption is higher than that of the United States. Compared to other developed nations, the US has the highest per capita water consumption in the world. In the US, each citizen consumes 575.5 litres of water per day on average. Against this, each person in Qatar consume 675 litres per day. The per capita consumption in most European countries is 200-300 litres a day.

The major share of Qatar's water resources — 56 percent — is consumed by the agricultural sector. The large agricultural expansion that depends mainly on groundwater is the key reason depletion of groundwater. The country's total area under cultivation has expanded considerably over the past few decades. The total area of arable land in Qatar has expanded from 109 hectares in 1960 to 43,156 hectares in 2007, he said.

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