

# Impacts Of Global Mega-Conferences On The Water Sector

Mega-conferences, which can be defined as those having more than 2,000 participants from most countries of the world, have become increasingly frequent in recent years. The costs of organising such conferences have increased exponentially, but their benefits and impacts have never been realistically assessed. In order to fill this gap, the Third World Centre for Water Management, with the support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (USA and Japan) conducted a global study to determine the impacts of such events on the water sector. The impacts evaluated were for Mar del Plata, Dublin, Rio and Johannesburg Conferences (all organised under the United Nations), Freshwater Consultation (Bonn, 2002) and the three World Water Forums organised by the World Water Council at Marrakech, The Hague and Japan.

A Questionnaire was sent to 2,698 people from 121 countries, among whom were the members of the World Water Council and International Water Resources Association, as well as the participants of recent major water conferences. Even though the latest available e-mail addresses were used, 372 questionnaires bounced back. Out of the remaining 2,326 questionnaires, 651 responses were received, a response rate of 28 percent. Considering the global, multi-institutional and multi-sectoral nature of the survey, the response rate can be considered to be quite good. Correspondents were specifically requested to give their own personal views, and they were assured of full confidentiality. In addition to the global survey, specific countries or regions were selected for in-depth studies. These were for Australia, Brazil, India, Bangladesh, Japan, Scandinavia and Southern Africa.

Think-pieces were commissioned from distinguished water experts from different parts of the world, including a Deputy Secretary-General of an UN mega-conference. All these papers and the main findings of the global survey were discussed at a workshop in Bangkok, 29-30 January 2005, where leading water experts from different countries were invited to review the findings and the commissioned papers.

## SURVEY ANALYSIS

**Strengths of Mega-Conferences** – Survey participants were asked to identify the three most important strengths of the mega-conferences. The main strengths identified were the following:

- Promoted increased awareness of water as a global concern;
- Facilitated interactions between diverse views, opinions and visions under different settings;
- Provided better understanding of how different countries are approaching to solve similar problems;
- Provided an opportunity for developing countries to raise their problems and concerns in an international setting;
- Identified critical water issues;
- Promoted professional-politician-NGOs interactions;

*The Third World Centre for Water Management recently conducted a study to evaluate the impact of global mega conferences which have become so common in recent years. Do these mega conferences actually achieve anything or are they merely global extravaganzas?*

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- Provided an opportunity for networking and information exchange;

**Weaknesses of Mega-Conferences** – Correspondents were similarly asked to identify three major weaknesses. More weaknesses were identified compared to the strengths. The main

weaknesses identified were the following:

- Too many issues discussed superficially, with too many poor-to-mediocre sessions;
- No time for discussions, too many conflicting views in different sessions but no attempt to reconcile them;
- Almost non-existing effort to disseminate the results and conference-related documents;
- Overall management of the events is poor, with no strategic thinking by the organisers as to what they wish to achieve from these events;
- Participants are from the water sector; solutions are sought almost exclusively from this sector; no attempt is made for multi-sectoral approaches needed for solution of complex problems;
- Conferences have degenerated to festivities rather than being serious events; outcomes are predetermined by certain groups, with preconceived ideas and hidden agendas rather than being generated from interactions between the participants;
- Unnecessary vast nature and format make the events impersonal and forgettable experiences with numerous activities that are redundant or peripheral;
- No attempt is made to prioritise critical water issues: thus wheat and chaff receive the same level of attention;
- Outputs lack specificity, cohesiveness and relevance; no thought is given to their implementation and also from where the funding for their implementation will come from;
- Policy dialogues dominated by certain international institutions, who have very specific ideas and agendas;
- No political commitment for implementing the declarations at national, regional and international levels;
- Raise very high expectations, which are not fulfilled;
- No consideration of long-term global, regional and national water scenarios, except in very general terms;
- No mechanisms available to promote and assess potential follow-up activities.



**Cost-Effectiveness** – Overall, the participants were very positive on the cost-effectiveness of the UN Water Conference at Mar del Plata. The general consensus was that no other mega-conference exceeded, let alone equalled, the impacts of Mar del Plata. In contrast, the respondents felt that the World Water Forums, very specifically the Japan Forum, were not cost-effective.

The Japan Forum specially came under severe criticisms for the following reasons:

- Badly organised with the strategic error to organise it in three cities, which made impossible for participants to attend the sessions they wanted;
- Criteria for success appeared to be the number of people present and number of countries represented, but not on the quality of presentations, discussions, outputs, and impacts;
- Organisational costs were very high, and thus it is necessary to prune non-essential activities in the future, and focus on result-oriented doable activities;
- Cost-effectiveness was poor because of very inadequate emphasis on information dissemination.

Nearly 90 percent of the respondents felt that in the light of the Japan Forum, attempt should be made to redesign/restructure/rethink the way mega-conferences are now being organised to increase their impacts and cost-effectiveness very substantially.

**Overall Impacts** – Nearly 44 percent of the respondents felt that mega-conferences had no perceptible impacts, or at best marginal impacts, on the individuals concerned and on their institutions. Another 11.5 percent were even more negative on their views.

In contrast, 7 percent felt that the events were “excellent,” and 26 percent felt that the conferences had perceptible impacts on their institutions, primarily due to the UN Conference on Environment and Development at Rio, which seemed to have enhanced environmental considerations. Other subsequent mega-conference did not produce similar impacts. Another 11.5 percent of the respondents did not express any view. Respondents from USA, Canada and Western Europe were notably more sceptical of the benefits and impacts, compared to the participants from developing countries.

The overall views on the mega-conferences can be summed up by the following table:

VIEWS	PERCENTAGE
Concept of such global conferences is good, but present organisational framework needs to be changed radically. Events should be more focused and output-oriented. Main criteria for success should not be the number of people who attend the conference, but the quality of outputs and impacts.	48.37
Instead of the global mega-conferences, organise regional meetings, dealing with regional problems and issues, which should be focused and impact-oriented.	30.70
Conferences have now become one big “water fair,” with many activities but not much thought on their relevance, appropriateness, outputs or impacts. There is no coordination between events, no clear focus, and their cost-effectiveness leaves much to be desired.	11.48
Global mega-conferences are useful and cost-effective, and thus should be continued with only marginal changes.	2.27
No view	7.18



The consensus opinion is that the benefits of the present form of the global mega-conferences on the water sector are somewhat marginal. Global and regional water policy dialogues should become more focused, and problem-and solution-oriented. They should be planned with clearly identified goals and objectives. The follow-up activities and impacts should be monitored and objective evaluations should be carried out by independent experts.

The impacts can be increased if the organisers make a determined effort to maximise their benefits and minimise their disadvantages. Additionally, the success of these conferences should be measured in terms of outputs and impacts, and not by the number of people who participate, or by the number of countries represented.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS OF BANGKOK WORKSHOP

The above conclusions represent a strong consensus view among the water professionals around the world, although there is a less clear consensus on how to change the current system of mega-conferences to make them more productive and impact-oriented.

The workshop recognised that it is unlikely that the governments and organisations that host mega-conferences will immediately stop doing because the impacts are marginal. However, the findings of the global survey and the conclusions and recommendation of the Bangkok survey would form important inputs for a global discussion on how future mega-conferences should be organised to maximise their impacts. The workshop made the following recommendations:

1. Significantly reduce the frequency and expense of mega-conferences.
2. If a conference is considered necessary, analyse its purpose rigorously with a view to achieving it through a smaller regional and/or sectoral meeting, and not necessarily through a global mega-conference.
3. Improve the planning, clarity of purpose, structure, attendance and follow-up of each mega-conference and of each smaller meeting.
4. Link each mega-conference firmly into the regular ongoing processes of water development and management.
5. Evaluate each mega-conference using independent evaluators.

The global, regional and national assessments, and the commissioned papers will shortly be published by Springer as a book. **AW**

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