

# WATER MISSING FROM AGENDA

For example, for all practical purposes, it disappeared as a topic of any significant discussion at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held at Rio de Janeiro last June. Issues like climate change, biodiversity, deforestation and ozone depletion took the centre stage at Rio, whereas water was at best a 'bit player' largely confined to the wings.

In my view this is a very important fact, and one worth considering by the water profession, especially when it is considered that an issue like climate change has not killed even a single person thus far and is highly unlikely to do so for the next several decades. And yet one can document clearly that millions of people die every year due to lack of water caused by prolonged droughts and/or from drinking unclean water. Why then this disparity?

## DUBLIN DISAPPEARED

To get a proper answer, let us consider why water virtually disappeared from the Rio agenda.

The reasons are many and complex. First, the International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE), convened in Dublin in January 1992 by the UN system, was expected to formulate sustainable water strategies and action programmes for UNCED. Irrespective of the success or failure of the Dublin Conference, the way it was structured – unfortunately – ensured that whatever came out from ICWE had no impact at Rio. This was because any UN world conference can only consider recommendations from an inter-governmental meeting, which ICWE was not. The pattern and the precedent for this was firmly established by the earlier UN world conferences of the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, not surprisingly, certain countries firmly objected at Rio to any discussion of the ICWE results. Accordingly, the word Dublin does not even appear in the chapter of Agenda 21 which deals with water.

## NO WATER EXPERTS PRESENT

Second, the agenda for Rio was drawn up at preparatory meetings of government representatives. These were attended primarily by environment and

**Water, said the eminent Greek philosopher Pindar, is the best of all things. This is not an overstatement, since life without water is simply not possible. If Pindar's statement is accepted at face value, one can legitimately ask a fundamental question: if water is so important, why is it missing from the international political agenda?**

foreign ministry bureaucrats. Countries of the North could bring in subject-matter specialists in areas in which they were interested, like climate change or biodiversity. Water was not represented by such experts, since it was not of any special interest to the North.

Clearly the perspective of the South on water is very different from that of the North. For example, a prolonged drought can markedly reduce the productivity of individual developing countries, contribute significantly and directly to the reduction of per capita food availability, and often constitute a direct cause of famine, resulting in a substantial number of human and livestock deaths. The implementation of national development plans suffers a serious setback. In contrast, the economies of the countries of the North are more resilient, famine

has been basically unknown in recent decades, and good-quality drinking water is taken for granted by the entire population. While prolonged drought is a matter of life or death for the South, it is a mere temporary inconvenience to the North. (For a detailed analysis of the differing perspectives of North and South in terms of water, see Asit K. Biswas, 'Water for Third World Development: A Perspective from the South,' *International Journal for Water Resources Development*, Vol. 8, no. 1, March 1992, pp. 3-9.)

## WEAK CAMPAIGN

If water is so important for the countries of the South, why did they not put it firmly on the Rio agenda? The answer probably lies in the poor coordination and interlinkages between their water and environment ministries. Environment ministries jealously guarded their role during the UNCED preparatory process. As a result, water ministries had virtually no role at Rio. Sadly, the water ministries did not campaign strongly at home to be given such a role, either. The net result was that the South did not push hard to secure a greater emphasis on water at Rio.

## UNNECESSARY READING

Because of the benign neglect of both the North and the South, water ended up with a very low profile at UNCED. The net result of these and other factors ensured that Chapter 18 of Agenda 21



*Freshwater focus. During the first Stockholm Water Symposium in 1991, Professor Biswas, Professor Falkenmark, Dr Horchani, Tunisia, and Dr Abu-Zeid, Egypt, gathered round a bowl. It contained water which the Globetree children had brought from all over the world.*

was poorly formulated. It is very general and all-embracing. In fact, it is not even necessary for anyone to read the chapter before claiming whatever they propose to do is included in and recommended by Agenda 21!

Clearly, for the sake of future human welfare and the preservation of environmental quality, water has to be placed firmly as a priority item on the international political agenda. How this can be achieved is an important issue which the water profession in general and the Stockholm Water Symposium in particular should address in the near future. We really do not have any choice.

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