

Integrated Water Resources Management: From Concept to Implementation, Cecilia Tortajada (Editor), 2015, Routledge, London, 267 pages

Preface by Asit K. Biswas

Over a decade ago, I wrote a paper assessing the sorry state of application of integrated water resources management (IWRM) in the real world to solve the global water management problems. I wrote the paper because my experience showed that even though the donors and international organisations controlled by them have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in promoting IWRM, neither I nor any objective water professional I had met anywhere in the world could identify even a single macro- or meso-scale project to which IWRM has been successfully applied.

Over the past twenty-five years, it has become increasingly clear to me that the donors and the international organisations were determinedly promoting the *mantra* of IWRM to lead the world to water resources *nirvana* primarily because of their own vested interests. This is in spite of the fact that all the evidence over the past three generations of attempt to implement IWRM has been spectacularly unsuccessful anywhere in the world and has raised more questions than we had answers for. Over the past several decades, IWRM has remained a somewhat seductive concept on which countless papers and books have been written and thousands of meetings and conferences have been held all over the world. Yet, it has been impossible to operationalise this concept anywhere in the world.

Even though donors and the development agencies have promoted IWRM consistently and forcefully for use by developing countries, a central question that has never been asked by the water and development professionals in the past, let alone answered, is why if IWRM is such an universal solution, the donors have never even attempted to apply it in their own countries? The likely answer is that the donor countries have never followed the path of IWRM primarily because they are aware that it simply cannot be operationalised. Yet, they have wanted developing countries to adopt this concept universally.

Not surprisingly, in the domain of water management and also in many other development sectors, the traditional Western donors have been increasingly losing their relevance, reliability and credibility from the developing country governments, academics, institutions and media primarily because they do not practice what they preach. Thus, institutions like the World Bank and all the regional development banks have progressively lost, and are still losing, their prestige and credibility in recent decades in the developing world. Unless they make a conscious effort to reorient their modus operandi, they are likely to become increasingly marginalised by the new development-oriented banks managed and controlled by the developing world. Among their new competitors will be the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in Beijing and the BRICS Bank in Shanghai. These new development banks are unlikely to have the conflict of interest that exists in the Bretton Woods institutions that are controlled by the Western countries. These conflicts of interest are evident when issues like IWRM are considered.

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The vested interests of most developed countries in actively promoting IWRM over the past twenty-five years lie in the fact that this concept has been very useful to them since it has contributed to the employment opportunities for consultants and institutions in their countries, use their training and capacity-building facilities, and buy whatever instruments and equipment are necessary from them. As a previous President of the Canadian International Development Agency confided during a private meeting, the institution's primary objectives are to create employment in Canada, and ensure Canada's services, goods and products are exported through the official aid budget to developing countries. Canada is not alone. Other bilateral aid agencies follow a very similar philosophy. Thus, from the supply side, IWRM has had many strong suppliers in the past.

On the demand side, with consistent heavy funding from the donors, a thriving industry has grown up in the recipient countries where thousands of highly paid and coveted jobs have been created through various IWRM-related projects which would not have existed without such strong donors support. This intricate dependency between the two groups in donor and recipient countries is now institutionalised around the IWRM aid ecosystems. The interdependencies and mutual symbioses have steadily grown over the past decades. There is no question that this has been beneficial to the donor countries. However, the real losers have been the recipient countries which are now slowly recognising that IWRM has been a lost cause and their current water management practices and processes would have been much further ahead than where they are now, had they not been seduced by the proclaimed all-purpose universal charm of IWRM. Belatedly they are coming to the conclusion that the emperor has no clothes!

As many developing countries like China, India, Brazil, Turkey and South Africa are becoming economically stronger and their people are getting better educated and informed, they have started to ask difficult and pertinent questions to the traditional aid agencies. Countries like South Africa and India have already started to jettison IWRM increasingly and moving into new ways of managing water. This new paradigm focuses on the management of water resources so that it acts as an engine for economic development, improve the standards of living of its nationals and reduce poverty. In other words, countries are managing water increasingly to enhance their economic growth rates and achieve their stipulated national development goals.

What about the future of IWRM? Throughout history, very few, if any, donors and donor-controlled institutions have ever publicly admitted that the prescriptions they had strongly promoted in the past did not work and will not work in the future. What is most likely to happen is that as developing countries increasingly become self-assertive, confident and realise IWRM does not have the potential of being the path to water *nirvana*, the IWRM terminology and paradigm will be used less and less, until disappearing from the national and international discourses in about a decade or so. This has already started to happen in many developing countries.

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