

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking Water Management. Innovative Approaches to Contemporary Issues

Caroline M. Figuères, Cecilia Tortajada & Johan Rockström (Eds)
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This book is presented as selected contributions by young, but highly qualified, water professionals from different countries. Behind the book project are the Nippon Foundation and the Third World Centre for Water Management, the idea being that the younger generation may have something extra to contribute in a situation where we are facing a number of complex water-related issues. In their opening statement, the three editors point to a growing demand for water from the industrial, domestic and agricultural sectors. Population growth, urbanization and increasing water pollution suggest that water quality and water availability will remain central issues in many, if not all, parts of the world. In relation to the challenges faced, 'business as usual' is probably not the best strategy. Paradigms have to be reconsidered, and the book is edited with an ambition to influence the mindsets of various water actors.

While water is an issue for all kinds of actors and all countries, for instance in the sense that international co-operation is needed, a Third World perspective dominates in the book. It begins with theoretical issues and ends with a more practical agenda for change, and even handbook recommendations about how to finance investments in water infrastructure projects.

In Chapter 2, Cecilia Tortajada discusses the meaning and relevance of 'Sustainable Development' (SD) as a guiding concept. While the concept has some potential, its influence on practical affairs has so far been limited. She also criticizes the way in which Environmental Impact Assessment has been applied in many countries. Odeh Al-Jayyousi similarly takes an historical review of the development dialogue, pointing to the simplistic idea of economic growth as problematic (Chapter 3). We need 'people-centred' rather than 'money-centred' development, although both of course have a role. Naser Faruqui discusses the same issues, but focuses more on the arguments of different actor categories, such as 'neo-liberals' and "activists who yearn for a nostalgic return to an idealized past" (Chapter 4, p. 62). Faruqui also suggests a classification of 'privatization models' and in addition points to the possibility of 'public-public partnerships'.

In the following chapters the emphasis is on 'managing rain' (Johan Rockström), thinking in terms of 'derivative waters' (Christopher A. Scott), groundwater management (Karin E. Kemper) and water rights in different countries, including China (Dajun Shen). Two chapters focus on trans-boundary water management, one (by Aaron T. Wolf) suggesting a conceptual frame of reference (conflict resolution, preventive diplomacy, etc.) and the other (by Zahir Uddin Ahmad) emphasizing challenges and opportunities in a specific region, i.e. the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna basin. In her chapter, Caroline M. Figuères deals

with risk analysis as part of the financing of water-related projects. The editors finally make an attempt to summarize some of the arguments put forward in terms of recommendations for water professionals, politicians and others.

It is not possible here to do justice to such a multi-faceted book. A first comment concerns SD as a guiding principle, as discussed by Tortajada. She is right in that SD so far has mainly been part of the rhetoric and that the influence on practical affairs has been limited. The move from 'environmental sustainability' to sustainability as a multi-dimensional concept in the Brundtland Report of 1987 may have increased ambiguity. I believe, however, that there is still potential in the SD concept and that it is up to us as scholars to participate in a debate about how it should be defined. First, SD is different from the tradition of simplistic economic growth in gross domestic product (GDP) terms. Values related to the environment, health and various aspects of poverty are thereby made legitimate. Second, SD should perhaps be defined by its negative, unsustainable development (USD). Looking at the ecosystem health of Chapala Lake in Mexico, mentioned by Tortajada, and how the quality of water changes over time in terms of states or positions, it becomes relatively clear whether the trend is a sustainable or an unsustainable one. At the same time, we should not expect too much from a single concept. Cecilia Tortajada rightly observes that the meaning attributed to SD is a matter of ideology, and in a democratic society more than one ideological alternative has to remain open.

My second comment concerns the contribution by Naser Faruqui. The title of this chapter is 'Balancing between the eternal yesterday and the eternal tomorrow', and the author tends to connect environmental activists with the past as opposed to new thinking in various forms. I think that the activists Faruqui is referring to, like others, tend to think in terms of different futures (rather than compare a specific future with a specific past) and try to find out that alternative which best matches their respective ideological orientations. Scientific argument is not enough to point out the best possible compromise or a final equilibrium between various impacts. In addition, political discourse is needed. As 'experts' we can illuminate an issue in a multi-faceted way and point to conditional conclusions. We can have our own political opinion, but this opinion is not more relevant to the final decision than that of any citizen.

It is an impressive book that Figueres, Tortajada and Rockström have edited, and it was a pleasure to read it. As a senior reader I learnt a lot, and my 'mindset' or 'mental map' is not the same as before. Having read the book I would, however, like to add one thing. Many of the authors point in the direction of water quality as an important issue. If this is so, then environmental policy concerning the use of chemical substances in society should rightly be part of the water agenda and deserves a chapter in the next book by 'water' professionals. The pesticides used in agriculture or the chemicals used in computers have to become part of the water agenda and water policy. Environmental policy of this kind cannot be separated from water policy. I am in fact questioning to some extent the whole idea of making a distinction between water issues and non-water issues. We can never solve water issues if we do not include all sectors in society on equal terms as part of our aspirations toward a sustainable society of some kind.

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