The Developing Economies IDE-JETRO

The Developing Economies (2019)

BOOK REVIEW

Interactive Approaches to Water Governance in Asia edited by Kenji Otsuka, Singapore, Springer, 2019, viii +225 pp.

The book's title notes three important issues: interactive governance, water governance, and Asia. Let us consider only interactive governance, a little-known term in water management. The editor defines it as "an interactive form of governance generally and also means the core framework developed mostly in Western democratic countries in some contexts. Comparing to this seminal wording, 'interactive approaches' and 'interactive perspectives' mean methodology and sub-concepts referring to the theory of interactive governance which are applied or mentioned in case studies in different contexts" (p. 15).

Unfortunately, after reading this definition and the entire book, one is no wiser as to what "interactive governance" is, whether it can be applied to improve water management, or even how individual chapters are related to this concept.

There are numerous incorrect statements in the book. The very first page claims "1977 United Nations Conference on Water at Mar del Plata, Argentina, was the first UN conference focusing on water," when hundreds of UN conferences on water were convened during the pre-1977 period. Mar del Plata was different since it has been the only intergovernmental water conference ever held by the United Nations at ministerial level.

The editor is not much aware of the global water scene before 2003, and also what has happened since 2003. The issue of a global water crisis was raised by many eminent scientists and institutions repeatedly during the 1980s and 1990s. This issue most certainly did not start with the UN's *World Water Development Report* in 2003, which simply repeated what had been said thousands of times before.

There is more wrong information. The book claims that the "concept of IWRM [integrated water resources management] was developed through a series of international consultations on water issues, such as the 1977 UN Conference on Water at Mar del Plata, …" (p. 3). I was the Chief Advisor to the Secretary General of the UN Water Conference, and also instrumental in formulating much of the resulting Mar del Plata Action Plan (Biswas 1978). IWRM has been a concept that has been around since at least the 1930s!

During the UN Water Conference, IWRM was discussed somewhat briefly (Biswas 1978). By the mid-1980s, the concept of IWRM was mostly discarded since no country had succeeded in applying it.

The Global Water Partnership (GWP) was created around the International Conference on Water and Environment, held in Dublin, in 1992. Its founders, primarily donors, had important roles to play in this Dublin meeting. Not surprisingly, the GWP focused its initial program on four Dublin principles and IWRM. The Dublin principles were vague and general. Thus, the GWP's programs did not find much traction. However, IWRM did because the GWP and other donors spent hundreds of millions of dollars in

 doi: 10.1111/deve.12223

promoting it. All this serious funding spawned a new global IWRM industry. Not surprisingly, as had been realized by the early 1980s, IWRM was unable to improve water management (Biswas 2004, 2008).

IWRM, in turn, spawned two other similar concepts: Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) and Integrated Lake Basin Management (ILBM). IRBM was pushed heavily by mostly French actors and ILBM by the Japanese. None of these have received much traction.

During the past 60 years, river basins have been increasingly interconnected by long-distance water transfer projects in several countries like Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa. The concept of a river or lake basin is not the same as before. For example, three routes of China's South–North Water Transfer Projects have interconnected numerous rivers and lake basins. They are not independent any more.

The issue of scale is an important factor for why IRBM and ILBM do not work. Consider three Indian interconnected rivers: Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna (GBM basin). Because of the complexities of this immensely large river basin, it is impossible to do an IRBM even only for the Indian section of only one river, Ganga, let alone for this entire GBM system that covers China, Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Bangladesh. India attempted to see if one of Ganga's tributaries, Yamuna, could be managed on a basin basis. It was not possible. Yamuna was then split into two basins: Upper and Lower Yamuna. Still it was not possible because they were too big and complex to handle!

Both China and India are now practicing an anti-IWRM approach. In 2018, China took away water quality and environment issues from its Ministry of Water Resources, and gave them to the Ministry of Ecology and Environment as well as the Ministry of Natural Resources. This adversarial relationship between water and other ministries is expected to improve water and environmental conditions as well as their impacts on human and the ecosystem's health. India has had this adversarial relationship between water and environment ministries for decades. Many countries may still give lip service to IWRM, IRBM, and ILBM, primarily because of pressures and financial support from donors, but in reality they have ignored them.

The title of the book refers to Asia. However, five of the nine chapters are by Japanese authors, and each of the others is by Dutch, Indian, Thai, and Chinese writers. Many of the topics considered are not important national issues for the five Asian countries considered. Among these are the removal of a minor 25m high dam in Japan, managing Taihu lake eutrophication, and managing a small lake in Ajmer, India. One chapter discusses water governance in the Netherlands. The title of this chapter states "reflection and implication to Asian cases," but there is no discussion of how the Dutch experience can be used in Asian countries.

Most of the chapters do not discuss how interactive approaches can improve water governance, especially for major projects, or the rationale as to why these specific topics were selected.

Asian countries are not homogeneous. Laws, regulations, institutions, history, and the culture of water management vary from one Asian country to another, and often within one country. This means a process that may work in a certain part of China, India, Indonesia, or Pakistan may not work for another part of the same country. In addition to the

spatial dimension of water governance, there is also a time dimension. What may have worked in an Asian country in the 1980s may not work now, or 10 years in the future.

Water management practices in all Asian countries are changing as their economic, social, physical, institutional, and cultural conditions change, scientific and technological developments and management practices improve, and people's expectations of water provisioning change. It is thus impossible to postulate one management practice or process that will be valid for all Asian countries for all time.

It would have been helpful if a rationale was provided for the selection of the case studies and then linked them to the overall focus of the book. For example, a major concern for Japan is how to downsize its water and wastewater works in small and medium-sized cities, which are steadily losing population. For India, how can we manage interstate rivers or steadily declining groundwater levels? Both China and India are facing serious water pollution problems. None of these issues is even mentioned.

All Asian countries are facing and will continue to face even more serious problems in the coming years, unless water governance is significantly improved. The water problems of each Asian country are not identical, and their political and economic priorities are different. Their solutions and their social, political, and institutional acceptances are likely to differ significantly from one place to another. It is also essential to challenge some prevailing wisdoms like IWRM, IRBM, and ILBM and their usefulness. In the absence of even one successful implementation for a major project, in any country of the world, their usefulness has to be seriously questioned.

Public participation is another concept that needs further debate. If a society decides that public participation in water management is an end in itself, there is no problem. However, as is implied in the book, public participation and interactions will invariably improve water management, but there are no definitive studies that prove this case.

The translation should have received more attention. I had difficulty in understanding what is meant by "River Director Mechanism" in Chapter 4, until I realized the author meant "river chiefs" systems.

Water management in all Asian countries must be significantly improved to avoid serious water-related disasters. The book provides a few select examples of how this can be done, albeit on a rather limited scale for some comparatively small projects.

Water management in all Asian countries is becoming increasingly complex with time. Yet, the water profession still persists in solving tomorrow's problems with yesterday's knowledge and the day before yesterday's experience. Not surprisingly, these attempts are not solving the problems of the present, and are unlikely to do so for the problems of the future. This is why it is not easy to be optimistic about Asia′s water future.

REFERENCES

Biswas, Asit K. 1978. *United Nations Water Conference: Summary and Main Documents*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

———. 2004. "Integrated Water Resources Management: A Reassessment." *Water International* 29, no. 2: 248–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060408691775.

———. 2008. "Integrated Water Resources Management: Is It Working?" *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 24, no. 1: 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/07900620701871718.

Asit K Biswas
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK;
Water Management International Pte Ltd, Singapore