

Impacts of Megaconferences in a New Book

By Sahana Singh

We watch a colourful opening ceremony; we listen to speeches and wonder what is new; we queue up for coffee; we look around for known faces; we look at the programme to decide which sessions can be given a miss; we queue up for lunches; jet lag sets in as we get confused with room numbers; we nod through the presentations; we figure out how to get back to our hotels. What a boost to the cause of the world's water.

"Impacts of Mega-conferences on the Water Sector," a book compiled and edited by Asit Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada and published by Springer takes a hard look at the mega-events that bring thousands of people together purportedly to discuss the water issues of the world.

Are these mega-conferences improving water management practices so that objectives like economic efficiency, improved quality of life, poverty alleviation and environmental conservation are being better fulfilled compared to the case if they had not taken place, ask the editors.

Based on responses to questionnaires by water professionals and think-pieces contributed by experts such as Gourisankar Ghosh, Jon Lane, Anthony Milburn, Morris Miller and Robert Varady, and the financial support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of the United States, the book confirms what many have felt.

Anthony Milburn gets to the crux of the matter when he wonders whether the real power-brokers in a country such as the Ministers of Finance and Planning have ever attended or were particularly influenced by the conference outcomes. The water sector has always been poor in arguing its case for a greater share of the investment pie, he says. The continued fragmented sectoral approaches and weak advocacy skills have not helped either, he reflects. "Water conference attendees largely talk to themselves, and

however influential they may be in the water sector, they still have problems in influencing their national and regional administrations on their return home," he informs.

Most experts agree that no single water megaconference, except the one held at Mar del Plata in 1977 has significantly influenced any major policy or had any significant impact.

"It is not rewarding to assemble thousands of people with different views, agendas, interests and expertise to discuss unreachable goals and targets, without any consideration of possible implementation of what often have been wishful thinking conclusions, recommendations and declarations in the past," say the editors.

They observe that these events have become social gatherings which could well be classified as water-related tourism. They point out that not more than one-third of the total number of registered participants are present at most of the formal sessions. Also, the previous water forums have not yielded much by way of documentation.

Gourisankar Ghosh goes to the extent of referring to the World Water Forums as travelling circuses which keep coming back. He recommends that there should be a moratorium on the Forum for at least the next five years and that donor nations must use their funds for local and country level actions. The annual Stockholm Water Week can be used as a serious water policy development platform in between these global forums, he suggests.

Smaller, sharply-focussed conferences are more likely to lead to actionable initiatives according to Morris Miller. He cites the examples of three successful initiatives, which were implemented without the help of megaconferences – the Montreal Protocol on the issue of ozone depletion, the establishment of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) which

led to increased food production worldwide and the Manhattan Project to build the atom bomb.

Then why are mega-conferences perpetuating? According to the editors, these events provide legitimacy to national, regional and international institutions to continue what they have been doing in the past. "Institutions like to be seen at these events, and try to publicise their activities and results, irrespective of their quality, relevance and implementation potential. Thereafter, they proudly proclaim their presence at these events," inform Drs Biswas and Tortajada.

While this might seem like a stinging indictment of megaconferences, this first-ever book on the subject is a must-read for organisers and sponsors of such events. It is a clarion call to examine more closely the objectives of holding gargantuan events that are self-serving rather than serving the millions of people without water and sanitation.

As Morris Miller quotes appropriately from the musical 'My Fair Lady',

Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!

I get words all day through, first from him, now from you!

Is that all you blighters can do?

Sing me no song! Read me no rhyme!

Don't waste my time, show me!

Make me no undying vow. Show me now!

For obtaining copies of 'Impacts of Megaconferences on the Water Sector', please email the editor of Asian Water at vikass@singnet.com.sg.