Water Woes: There's a Solution at Hand

Poverty alleviation and regional development simply cannot take place without rational water management, says Asit Biswas, in an interview with Rajeev Turlapati

Prof. Asit K. Biswas, founder and president, Third World Centre for Water Management, Atizapan, Mexico, and Distinguished Visiting Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School for Public Policy, Singapore is one of the world's leading authorities on water and environmental management. His centre is an independent, knowledge-based think tank focusing on knowledge generation, synthesis, application and dissemination. Under his dynamic leadership, the Centre has established a unique international identity in pursuing cutting-edge and forward-looking research. By ensuring world-class research and focusing on out-of-the-box thinking, the Centre has established for itself a unique reputation in the world of water as a generator of new and innovative ideas. The work of the Centre has been published extensively in several languages by major international publishers.

An adviser to six heads of United Nations agencies and the governments of 17 countries, he regularly travels throughout three continents spreading his ideas and sharing his knowledge. He was instrumental in establishing the International Water Resources Association and World Water Council, and has been one of the most active members of the World Commission on Water.

Born in Balasore, India, and a graduate the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur, he worked as a civil engineer for a British firm before taking positions as a research fellow at Loughborough University of Technology, England, and lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland. He moved to Canada in 1967 as a visiting professor at Queen's University, Kingston. In 1974 he was invited to help in formulating the program of the newly established United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi, Kenya, where he spent 15 months under an exchange program of the government of Canada. Biswas spent 1981–1997 at Oxford University, England, pursuing research interests, advising governments and international organizations, and chairing the Middle East Water Commission during 1993–1997.

Excerpts from the interview:

Considering your relationship with the United Nations and Prime Ministers across the World, I am sure your access to 'classified information' has huge potential to solve water problems around the world. How appropriate is it for you to let the consumers know about the content of the information before the ideas are implemented?

Information could be of two types. One type is confidential, where I am privileged to receive certain confidential information on what a specific government is planning to do, and also sensitive data, both of which must remain confidential. I cannot discuss them in public. I would guess that about 30% of my discussions have to remain confidential, at least until a certain time. The rest of the information can be divulged to public. Many times I am in fact asked to convey certain information on the problems and solutions to the public. If I agree with the processes and solutions, I do so. If not, I do not since I do not act as "public relations officer" of the institutions or the governments.

Do you think your efforts designed to solve water problems will reach the smallest of areas of large cities?
My work is having considerable impact on the poorest people of the urban areas. It is a myth that poor people do not want to pay for water. In fact, they pay an exorbitant amount at present compared to their richer counterparts. From Manila to Mexico City, the urban poor pay for water 10-15 times more than their richer counterparts, and still receive poorer quality water and a very bad service. Our work in Phnom Penh shows poor people are very happy to pay for water as long as they receive good quality water in the convenience of their houses at a reasonable price. I am trying my best to change the mindsets of the Indian decision-makers and water professionals that both rich and poor are willing to pay a decent price for water as long as they receive a good service. It also ensures water utilities have financial sustainability.

How quickly can a governing body solve a problem, say, contaminated water resulting in several deaths?
The main and the most cost-effective way would be to do proper planning and then implement the plans. In India, with the current economic situation, knowledge and technology available, there is absolutely NO reason as to why at least everyone in urban centres of more than 200,000 people don't have access to clean drinking water 24-hours every day. The fact that they do not is a damning indictment of our political process, water profession and the general public who are accepting a third-rate service. For such cities, there should be no health problems due to water. The fact people do not have access to clean water all over India is a failure of the management and political processes. For rural and small-size urban areas, it is necessary to find out immediately where and how the contamination is taking place, and the pathways through which such infections may occur. Then, appropriate steps have to be taken to prevent the contamination and infection. These types of problems should have been resolved in India at least some 25 years ago.

Can you tell us what does it take to bring all the out-of-the-box ideas to practical use?
The problem of acceptance of out-of-the-box ideas is people all over the world tend to have a fixed mindset. Convincing them that out-of-the-box solution actually is better than the conventional one is the most difficult part.

What do so many different awards against your name mean to you? Have you ever thought enough done, enough achieved?
The awards to me have very limited meaning, except that my work is appreciated. The world has too many water-related problems which have to be solved. It is difficult to see how I can ever come to the conclusion "enough done, enough achieved."

Poor people are very happy to pay for water as long as they receive good quality water in the convenience of their houses at a reasonable price.

What kind of effort does it take to travel to different places of the world and offer solutions to local water problems?
People often think I have an exciting life, going to interesting places, and speaking with important people. Reality is different. Living out of a suitcase is no fun. For example, during the past six months, I have not been able to spend more than 10 days in any one city! The work is professionally very satisfying but come at a very significant personal cost and reduction in quality of life.

In one line, can you tell us the primary aim of Third World Centre for Water Management?
The Centre is a think-tank that offers cost-effective and implementable solutions to the water and water-related problems in both developed and developing countries.

You travelled all over the world, give us an example of one properly planned city in terms of water management.
Phnom Penh, Cambodia, has excellent water management that is better than London or Los Angeles. People have 24-hour water supply that can be drunk safely from the taps. It is indeed remarkable. If Phnom Penh can do it, why cannot cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai or Kolkata which are significantly richer and more advanced?

How easy or hard is to convince or propose a solution to someone heading a large Organization like the Secretary General of the UN? Can you brief us about the steps involved in getting a solution or an idea approved by an Association/Council/Organization?
The main requirement is access to the top decision-makers and trust. The Advisor must have regular access to the corridors of power. He must NOT have a hidden agenda, real or perceived. Equally, the person I am advising must have a real and continuing interest in water: otherwise it becomes a public relations exercise. It takes two to tango! This is why I exclusively work in 19 counties where I have good and continuing access to the people in power. This is absolutely essential for my work.

In a country like India where there are still disputes over usage of transboundary river water, what do you propose could be the ideal/logical solution?
Prof. Biswas: Only solution to transboundary water problems is constructive and meaningful negotiations. There has to be tradeoffs and compromises by all the parties. One party must be willing to give in some areas and the second party will have to give in other areas. For example, our work categorically shows that over the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin, if Bangladesh, India and Nepal are all willing to make some constructive compromises, all the three countries will benefit tremendously. Negotiations are not zero-sum games.

At what age did you decide that 'Water' will be your life? Can you give us an instance that influenced you in to this?
Right from when I was student in the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, water has been of direct and special interest to me. I was fortunate to have some wonderful teachers in water who are my role models, and imbibed in me a life-long interest in water.

Are there any places where the water is not utilized?
Many places. For example, the Amazon River or the Congo River have tremendous amount of water which are mostly not utilized.

Are we in a state of world water crisis?
The world is NOT facing a water crisis. We have enough water if it is managed properly. However, we are facing a serious crisis in water management which no other earlier generation had to face. Water management is extremely poor not only in India but also in most parts of the world. Unless we improve our management practices, we would unquestionably face a serious water crisis.

What are the projects that you are working on and how will they help to better utilise water resources?
Our work encompasses many activities, ranging for implications of free trade and globalization on the water sector to issues like water pricing, institutional reforms and water quality management.

After 'Water', what is the next thing in your mind?
Water is a cross-cutting issue. Without water, we cannot produce electricity, food or industrialization. Poverty alleviation and regional development simply cannot take place without rational water management. My focus now is how do we use water as an engine for economic growth to generate employment, improve food and nutrition and reduce poverty and enhance environmental conservation. All this can be achieved, but we need new mindsets and new paradigms to achieve them. We have to think outside the box and come out with business unusual solutions for the benefits of all mankind.