

Don't run after foreign experts, says Prof Asit Biswas



Prof Biswas receives the Aragon Environment Prize from Spain's President and Environment Minister on the World Environment Day this year.

*Prof Asit Biswas will be awarded the 2006 Stockholm Water Prize for his outstanding and multi-faceted contributions to global water resource issues. Known as one who constantly challenges the "status quo" and who helped foster a critical rethink among UN agencies, governments, professional associations and others about how to improve delivery of water, sanitation and management of water resources, he is also a delight to interview. Here, he offers his forthright views to the editor of **Asian Water**.*

- **Could you tell us a little about your growing-up years?**
- **You helped the UN to formulate the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1980-1990). Would you say this Decade had an impact on water and sanitation around the world? How has Asia fared?**

I was born in Balasore, then a small and sleepy town in Orissa, India. My schooling was in Balasore. I graduated in Civil Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kharagpur, and did my Master's degree in the same Institute in water resources engineering. Thereafter, I left India for the U.K. in late 1961.

- **How did you get interested in water?**

Water has always fascinated me. After my studies at IIT, my first job was with a consulting group, Ward, Ashcroft and Parkman, in Liverpool, where I designed a medium-size dam for Wales. I then moved to the Loughborough University of Technology as a Research Fellow in Hydraulics, and subsequently to the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, as a Lecturer in Hydraulics. Thus, my career throughout has been related to water.

In retrospect, the Decade was an important event for the entire developing world. For the first time, the issues of water supply and sanitation were put firmly in the international political agenda. Numerous developing countries picked up the challenge, and then formulated programmes for implementing access to water supply and sanitation to improve the health conditions and the quality of life of millions of people. Most Asian countries made tremendous progress in providing accelerated access to water supply and sanitation facilities to their citizens.

While the ambitious goal of the Decade in terms of providing access to water supply and sanitation facilities

to every person in the world could not be reached, it generally set the scene for continuous improvements in this sector for nearly all developing countries. The Decade unquestionably has turned out to be one of the most successful outputs of the United Nations Water Conference, held at Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977, for which I had the privilege to prepare several background documents and the Action Plan.

• **You also chaired the Middle East Water Commission. Do you see any signs of collaboration between the countries of the region on water issues?**

Water is only one component, albeit an important component, of the overall development milieu of the Middle East. Decades of hostility and mistrust between the countries concerned have produced an environment that is not conducive for collaborative actions. While there have been treaties signed between Jordan and Israel and Israel and Palestine, progress in their implementation has been minimal, and sometimes even retrogressive. Until the overall political situation improves, and the countries develop trust between themselves, progress in all development sectors of the region, including water, will be painfully slow. At present, there is no sign of progress. Let us hope that the situation will improve in the future.

• **You have worked in projects in different parts of the world. Could you tell us about the similarities and dissimilarities in water problems faced in different countries?**

Viewed at a macro-policy level, the main water problem facing most countries of the world is somewhat similar. This is because nearly all the countries of the world are mismanaging their water resources, some more than others.

Based on the research done at our Third World Centre for Water Management, we have concluded that the world is unlikely to face a water crisis because of actual physical scarcities of water. The crisis is more because of continuing and extensive mismanagement of water all over the world.

The developed world is now primarily concerned with water quality, and the developing countries are still pre-

occupied with water quantity. For the developing world, we are running out of time in terms of instituting proper water quality management. Studies at our Centre indicate that less than 10% of wastewater produced in Latin America is treated adequately and disposed of in an environmentally-safe manner. The situation is probably no different in the Asian developing countries, and perhaps considerably worse in Africa.

The types of water problems we face in various countries of the world are very different because physical, climatic, economic, social, political, institutional and environmental conditions are not similar.

"It appears that the world as a whole does not like independent institutions, with no dogmas, vested interests or subservient attitudes."

• **Do you think the educational institutes today are well-equipped to train a new generation of managers for the water sector? How is Asia equipped in this regard?**

Sadly, educational institutions all over the world are somewhat conservative in nature. Changes come slowly and incrementally. Water management will change more during the next 20 years compared to the past 2000 years. We simply cannot anticipate tomorrow's problems (let alone find efficient solutions) with yesterday's knowledge and day before yesterday's experience.

The new forces that are being unleashed by globalisation, free trade, information and communication revolution, accelerated quest for energy security, technological developments, etc., are changing water management practices and processes by myriads of pathways, some known but others mostly unknown. Educational establishments all over the world are progressing blithely with the implicit assumption that the future is going to be an extension of the past, with only modest and incremental changes. They are in for a rude awakening. Future problems are going to be increas-

ingly more complex and more interrelated with the other development sectors. The existing institutes will simply be unable to cope with the future water problems of the world.

• **You have often written about the problems of using foreign consultants and imported technology in developing countries. Can you give some examples? Do you see this trend continuing?**

The history of water development is littered with examples of foreign consultants who come to developing countries with limited knowledge of their climatic conditions, social and cultural habits, institutional and management capacities, and environmental situations. They come when the weather is most pleasant. For example, all the 5-star hotels in Islamabad or Dhaka are full each year with foreign consultants between October and February, when the climate is most agreeable. One will be hard-pressed to see a foreign mission during the monsoon season, or the hot periods of May and June, in the Indian sub-continent. They stay in the country for a few weeks (often their first visit to the country) in fancy hotels and move around in air-conditioned cars with several local officers to look after their every whim. After this artificial existence, they propose solutions for the Western conditions with which they are familiar with and which may work in North America or Western Europe. These are mostly wrong solutions, because the prevailing conditions in the United States or the European countries are very different from Asia. Not surprisingly, many of these solutions proposed by Western consultants, with limited knowledge of the local conditions do not work in developing countries.

Let me give you two recent examples. A well-known foreign consultant advised Bangladesh that it will save lot of water if all the bath-tubs in the houses were converted into showers. The poor man did not know that most households in Bangladesh use buckets of water to clean themselves! Thus, the solution obtained at a great cost had no relevance for Bangladesh. Sadly, no one told him that his proposed solution was useless.

Another example is the establishment of a pollution control research institute in India, for which the UNDP provided a US\$7 million grant. UNIDO,

which was the executing agency for this project, hired a Chief Technical Advisor (CTA) from the US to establish this research institute. Technically, he was a very competent person, but he had never worked in a developing country. After his death, I was brought to the scene. By this time, more than 80% of the UNDP funds had been used or committed on unnecessary items. For example, the previous CTA bought a wet scrubber from Germany at a cost of nearly US\$500,000 to take sulphur out of coal, and another \$300,000 was spent to buy an automatic water quality monitoring van from The Netherlands.

The only problem with the scrubber was that the Indian coal, unlike the American coal, contains very little sulphur, but its ash content is extremely high. If the wet scrubber is to be used, one would have to add sulphur in the coal first before it can be taken out! With regard to the monitoring van, it was designed to be used on the smooth roads of Holland and not on the uneven pot-holed roads of India.

The first time the van was driven for about 25km to carry out some water quality monitoring, the calibrations of all its sophisticated instruments went haywire. No one in India could recalibrate them, and a Dutch expert had to be flown in at a great expense to recalibrate them. The next time the van was sent for another monitoring mission, the same problem occurred. In addition, all the instruments in the van were designed for a maximum temperature of 35°C, which is fine for the Dutch conditions. In the very first summer, when the average temperature in this Indian city went up to 44°C, all the resistors blew up like popcorns! Thus, these two instruments, and many others that were bought, though state-of-the-art, were either totally useless, or of very limited use, for the Indian conditions.

With a US\$7 million external support, it should have been possible to establish a world class research institute in India. However, all this money, plus the local counterpart funding, were basically wasted to establish this research institute. The project did not help the country in any visible way.

There are two further points that should be made. First, when I made my report to UNIDO, I called these instruments "white elephants," and pointed out that the UNDP funds had



been wasted, as a result of which the institute had no future. While UNIDO did not dispute my findings, I was under tremendous pressure to tone down my criticism substantially. This I refused to do. Interestingly, thereafter I have never been invited to advise UNIDO again! This is often a standard problem with foreign-funded projects. International organizations mostly do not want serious and objective evaluations by competent and independent experts. They prefer pseudo-evaluations, where they use their regular so-called independent consultants, who depend on these institutions for much of their incomes. Not surprisingly, these so-called "independent" consultants play up the benefits and play down the shortcomings of a project, as a result of which, at least on paper, the project becomes an "outstanding" success.

The second point is that senior officials from developing countries often have a complex. They consider mediocre, or even third grade foreigners, as "experts," but mostly ignore professionals from their own countries whose technical and local knowledge is significantly better than these so-called "experts." Until and unless this mindset of kow-towing to any foreigner irrespective of his/her expertise changes, the progress will continue to be limited. True foreign experts, with good knowledge of the local conditions, should be welcomed, but all the others should be politely shown the door!

● **You have always been the voice of knowledge and reason, whether you talk about dams or privatization. Are you helping to set up more institutes on the lines of the Third World Centre for Water Management in developing countries?**

It appears that the world as a whole does not like independent institutions, with no dogmas, vested interests or subservient attitudes. When we started our Centre, we started with one simple philosophy: anything we do must be based on facts, figures and objective analyses. We do not accept any funding unless we have a priori agreement with our funding institutions that our results will be available to anyone who is interested. If something does not work, we say bluntly that it is not working, and the reasons as to why it is not working. We then suggest cost-effective alternatives which are likely to work.

This philosophy does not go well with most international organisations, which have their own bandwagons and pre-determined solutions. For example, when after extensive analyses in South and Southeast Asia, we concluded that integrated water resources management (IWRM) is not working in this region, and will NOT work for many countries like India for large to medium-size projects, it upset many donors, who are now using IWRM as their *mantra* as an universal solution for all the water problems of the world.

When we found out that integrated river basin management is not working in Latin America, irrespective of the widespread rhetoric of the international and bilateral institutions, it upset many donors who had already decided that this is the only solution. Similarly, when we estimated that the Fourth World Water Forum held in Mexico City, in March 2006, cost an incredible US\$205 million, but will not provide access to clean water to even one single person, or change the water policy of even a single country, or increase our knowledge base even very marginally, many institutions and individuals associated with the organisation of this mega-conference became very upset. Many of the supporters of these events agree with us in private.

As an Under Secretary-General of the United Nations told me not so long ago "We agree with you, but do you have to say all these things in public?" The Centre has absolutely no interest in being "politically correct": we want to ensure that we are only "correct." In addition, our public and private views are always the same.

Because we have concluded that many of the existing popular paradigms like IWRM, IRBM or private sector participation are not working in many parts of the world, or mega-conferences are neither cost-effective nor producing any perceptible impacts, many bilateral and multilateral funding institutions are getting upset at our findings, even though they are factually correct. These institutions would prefer to fund other groups, who a priori accept (and thus will justify) their current thinking, dogmas, programmes and hidden agendas.

Fortunately, we have several funding supporters who are not interested in activities but in results, and they would like to see visible impacts of their projects in improving the quality of life of the poor people all over the world. While we have absolutely no problem in funding the activities of our Centre, it is likely to be time-consuming to establish similar independent think tanks in other parts of the world, especially when our findings point out that many of the existing ideas of water management that are being pushed by the donors and international institutions are not working, and are unlikely to work in the future. It will be fair to say that the work of our Centre has earned us respect, but we are not popular with

many donors, especially when our studies clearly indicate that their ideas are wrong and their solutions are not working.

On the positive side, the world outside is appreciating the work of our Centre. For example, this year, within a period of three months, I received the Stockholm Water Prize, the prestigious Aragon Environment Prize of Spain and the Man of Year Award from Prime Minister Harper of Canada. All these awards are a recognition of the quality of work of our Centre and its global impacts.

Developing countries must not fall prey to the current syndrome of what I call solution-in-search-of-a-problem approach which is now very popular with the donors and international institutions.

We are now seriously considering as to how the philosophy of our Centre and the modalities of our operation to ensure consistent good and usable outputs can be duplicated in other parts of the world. We shall probably opt for helping other dedicated and competent individuals to establish similar type of Centres in other parts of the world. These will probably be independent and stand-alone Centres rather than branches of our Centre. The first similar institution has just begun to function: it is the International Centre for Water in Zaragoza, Spain. Our Vice President, Dr. Cecilia Tortajada, is the Director of this new Centre, and she will spend half-time in Spain and half-time in Mexico. We are confident that this arrangement will work, but we shall closely monitor the results for the next few years.

- **I am curious to know why you set up a Centre in Mexico. You have an Asian origin and Canadian citizenship, but you have chosen to settle in Mexico.**

The reason for settling down in Mexico is personal. My wife, Cecilia Tortajada, is a Mexican, and because of her family commitments, initially we had to stay in Mexico. However, establishing the Centre in Mexico has proved to be a mixed blessing. Because of the way we work, it will be a simple pro-

cess to move our Centre from Mexico to any other country, as long as the location has very good communication and transportation facilities. We are now seriously considering the possibility of relocating our Centre, and we are now discussing this possibility with two countries.

- **What do you plan to do with the prize money?**

This is a very simple question to answer! Prize amounts from both the Stockholm Water Prize and the Aragon Environment Prize have been earmarked for use as core funding for our Centre. We have no problem in getting project funding; in fact, we regularly refuse to accept several projects, primarily because we do not have interest or expertise in the subjects and/or the countries. However, it is very difficult to get core funding. Thus, these two prizes will help us to replenish the core funding of our Centre, as will other future prizes.

- **Is there any message you would like to give to the executives and professionals of the water sector who form the readership base of our magazine.**

First, many Asian countries like India, Malaysia, Singapore or Thailand now have very good cadre of experienced and knowledgeable water professionals. They will be much better off in the long run if they use the expertise available in the country first, before accepting foreign experts willy-nilly for national or foreign-funded projects. Only when the necessary expertise is not available in the country, advice of good and competent foreign experts should be sought. These will bring the countries substantial benefits over the long run.

Second, developing countries must not fall prey to the current syndrome of what I call solution-in-search-of-a-problem approach which is now very popular with the donors and international institutions. A solution is found that has worked in one country, and new problems are being sought in other countries to which the same solution could be applied, irrespective of totally different boundary conditions. This practice is now widespread and it mostly does not work. One should always start with an objective analysis of a specific problem, including assessment of boundary conditions within which the solution would have to be applied. This elementary approach will invariably result in a better solution. One size does not fit all. **AW**