

Editorial: Middle East Water Commission

In February 1993, the Committee on International Waters of the International Water Resources Association and the United Nations University convened a highly successful Middle East Water Forum in Cairo, Egypt. The Forum was supported by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of Japan and the United Nations Environment Programme. The Convenor of the Forum was Prof. Asit K. Biswas in his capacity as the Chairman of the IWRA Committee on International Waters.

The Forum was a 'closed' event, where participation was strictly restricted to invitation only, and limited to leading world experts on the subjects and key players from the countries concerned, plus major international organizations. The importance of the Forum was evident from the fact that *all* of the 27 participants invited in their personal capacities attended the event. Seventeen of the 27 Forum participants are now directly associated with the multilateral and bilateral peace talks. The background papers commissioned specially for the Forum have just been published as a book by Oxford University Press (Biswas, 1994). Through the generosity of our sponsors, this book is being made available to 1000 key players in the Middle East water issues.

Following the success of the Forum, and in order to address directly the need identified by many of the Forum participants for a group of well-known, independent and objective international experts, who could work parallel to the current negotiations on the water resources of the region, a Middle East Water Commission was established. Membership of this multidisciplinary Commission consists of Prof. Asit K. Biswas (Oxford, UK, Chairman), Dr John F. Kolars (University of Michigan), Dr Masahiro Murakami (Nippon Koei, Japan), Dr John Waterbury (Princeton University) and Dr Aaron T. Wolf (University of Alabama). The work of the Commission is supported by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

The Commission, as established, has three important objectives:

- (1) to examine fully the key issues related to water for peace in the Middle East;
- (2) to identify and analyse possible scenarios in terms of their potential, technical, political, economic, social and environmental implications; and
- (3) to make a special attempt to familiarize the Middle Eastern countries' main bilateral and multilateral funding agencies, who might provide substantial investment funds to plan and implement water development projects in the region, and the mass and technical media, with the contents of the Report.

The first meeting of the Commission was in Santa Fe in October 1993. Members felt that, while there exists much research in the area of Middle East water, some constraints often restrict its direct applicability to current negotiations. For example:

- Many research projects are unidisciplinary in nature and, while they may answer one aspect of a crucial question, answers to large-scale, broad-based

issues, which by nature are multidisciplinary, are vital to the political decision-making process.

- In the same vein, some ongoing research is too abstract or theoretical to be directly pertinent to current negotiations.
- Too often in the negotiating process, the two critical and mutually dependent aspects of water resources issues, the technical and the political, are relegated to separate realms where, by virtue of their isolation, they languish.
- Many of the actors involved in the negotiation process are restricted by their national and/or institutional affiliations from examining some creative solutions which might deviate from their stated bargaining positions.
- Many assignments are performed in a static environment, and do not provide planning timelines in conjunction with policy or technical recommendations.

The Commission examined these constraints and dealt with them explicitly in formulating an agenda for 1993–94 and beyond. The assessment of current negotiating issues which is taking place is therefore multidisciplinary by nature; it is hoped that, by embracing both the technical *and* the political aspects of Middle East water resources, and by retaining autonomy from any of the governments and agencies participating in the multilateral negotiations, particularly useful and relevant conclusions might be arrived at and set within a dynamic planning framework for the negotiators to consider.

Schedule and Product

It is expected that within one year, a report will have been prepared which examines the following main subjects:

- An examination of the multilateral negotiation process thus far, and a comparison with other water negotiations, both those which were successful and those less so.
- A preliminary assessment of technical options from a 'techno-political' perspective. Thus, incorporating each party's political concerns may offer better technical planning, while particularly viable technical options may offer a greater incentive for political cooperation.
- A suggested timeline for both the technical and political steps which will be necessary to reach specific goals in reducing water demand and increasing supply in the watersheds of contention. By incorporating both technical and political stages within a planning process which is *dynamic* in both time and space, policy makers should have a useful tool in determining what is needed *now* to help solve the inevitable problems of the coming decades.

Once a text examining each of these issues is completed, by September 1994, distribution and discussion of the results will take a variety of forms:

- A complete text will be published, shortly after its completion, by Oxford University Press. The possibility of an Arabic translation of the text is being explored.
- A summary volume with conclusions and critical timelines will be published and distributed to water policy makers throughout the world.
- Workshops discussing the results will be held for participants from the multilateral negotiators and their advisors in a number of locations, including possibly Israel, Jordan and Washington, DC.

- Offshoot articles will be submitted to academic journals and presented at relevant conferences.
- Media sources will be contacted as it is deemed appropriate to help disseminate pertinent results.

Although current planning only extends through to December 1994, it is hoped that interest can be generated throughout this first year of work to help support a more extensive and detailed study in the future.

The Commission members would welcome ideas and suggestions on the Middle East water issues from anyone interested. These should be sent either to the Chairman or to any member of the Commission.

References

Biswas, Asit K. (1994) *International Waters of the Middle East: From Euphrates–Tigris to Nile* (Oxford and New Delhi, Oxford University Press).

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