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Opinion

From Mar del Plata to Kyoto: an analysis of global water policy dialogue

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Abstract

Many major global mega-conferences on water have been held since the United Nations Water Conference in 1977. Viewed from any direction, this Conference was an important benchmark. In 1992, the UN system organized an International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin, and the UN Conference on the Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro. The results of these two meetings have had only marginal impacts on the water management processes and practices. The impacts of the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, Bonn Consultation, Johannesburg Summit and of the three World Water Forums are discussed. A fundamental question that needs to be answered is are these mega-meetings worth their costs and the efforts needed to organize them in terms of their impacts.

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1. Introduction

During the 1970s, the United Nations System organized a series of global mega-conferences at high decision-making levels on critical global issues. These mega-conferences were on Environment (Stockholm, 1972), Population (Bucharest, 1974), Food (Rome, 1974), Women (Mexico City, 1975), Human Settlements (Vancouver, 1976), Water (Mar del Plata, 1977), Desertification (Nairobi, 1977) and New and Renewable Sources of Energy (Nairobi, 1979). Around 20 years after these major events, during the 1990s, the United Nations System decided to convene similar mega-conferences on issues that it still considered to be important: Environment (Rio de Janeiro), Food Security (Rome), Population (Cairo), Women (Beijing) and Human Settlements (Istanbul). In addition, a framework convention on Desertification was also agreed to in recent years. Unfortunately, however, there was not only no review of the water situation 20 years after the Mar del Plata meeting, but there was really not even any serious discussion in the United Nations on the

desirability of organizing such a consultation. It seems, somehow, water simply no longer was considered important.

Generally, for a variety of reasons, water disappeared from the international political agenda during the 1980s and 1990s. Apologists have argued that water was one of the issues that was considered during the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, since the Chapter 18 of Agenda 21 was on water. Regrettably, however, several factors negate such arguments. First, very few water professionals from developing countries participated at the Rio Conference, or its preparatory process, which were almost exclusively dominated by the officials from the Environment ministries. Equally, the Heads of States that were present at the Rio deliberations, with the exception of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, did not even refer to water as an important environmental issue. Chapter 18, even though it was the longest Chapter of the Agenda 21, was also the most poorly formulated. In all probability, developments in the water sector would not have been very different at present, even if the Rio Conference had not taken place.

These and other similar symptoms indicate that any objective and realistic assessment would conclude that water basically disappeared from the international

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political agenda during most of the 1980s and 1990s. It was certainly not considered to be a priority issue. The situation started to change during the late 1990s, primarily through the efforts of the annual Stockholm Water Symposia, the formation of new institutions like the World Water Council and the Global Water Partnership, and the establishment of a high-powered blue-ribbon World Commission for Water in the 21st Century.

Some 25 years after the Mar del Plata Conference, and after the latest World Water Forum in Japan, it is an opportune time to objectively and constructively review the progress that has been made during the past 25 years in the water sector globally.

2. Mar Del Plata in retrospect

It is worthwhile to recall the main objective of the Mar del Plata Conference, which has so far been the only major and substantial water meeting at a high political level ever held in human history. Its objective was “to promote a level of preparedness, nationally and internationally, which would help the world to avoid a water crisis of global dimensions by the end of the present century”. The Conference was to deal with “the problem of ensuring that the world had an adequate supply of good quality water to meet the socio-economic needs of an expanding population” (Biswas, 1978).

The expectations of the Mar del Plata, in the words of its Secretary General, Yahia Abdel Mageed, were as follows:

It is hoped that the Water Conference would mark the beginning of a new era in the history of water development in the world and that it would engender a new spirit of dedication to the betterment of all peoples; a new sense of awareness of the urgency and importance of water problems; a new climate for better appreciation of these problems; higher levels of flow of funds through the channels of international assistance to the course of development; and, in general, a firmer commitment on the parts of all concerned to establish a real breakthrough so that our planet will be a better place to live in (Mageed, 1978).

The Conference approved an action plan, which was officially called the Mar del Plata Action Plan. It was in two parts: recommendations that covered all the essential components of water management (assessment, use and efficiency; environment, health and pollution control; policy, planning and management; natural hazards; public information, education, training and research; and regional and international cooperation), and 12 resolutions on a wide range of specific subject areas.

A retrospective and objective analysis of the Conference achievements and its subsequent impacts on the

world clearly indicates that it was more of a success than its most ardent supporters believed at that time. A comprehensive review of the Conference achievements in 1987, a decade after, indicated that it had numerous primary, secondary and tertiary impacts, which were for the most part beneficial (Biswas, 1988). It was undoubtedly a major milestone in the history of water development during the second half of the 20th century.

The activities leading to the final Conference produced a wealth of new knowledge and information on various aspects of water management as well as country- and region-specific analyses. For the very first time many developing countries produced detailed national reports on the availability and use of water as well as reviews of planning needs and management practices (Biswas, 1978a). Equally, unlike other major international water fora, all these documents are available for consultation. Several developing countries put in motion processes to assess the availability and distribution of surface and groundwater resources, and existing and future patterns of water demands and uses. Many developing countries not only have continued these activities, which were initiated during the preparatory process of the Water Conference, but also have significantly strengthened them progressively during the past two decades.

A major output of the Conference was to recommend that the period 1980–1990 be proclaimed as the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. The idea was to indicate to the world forcefully that millions of people did not have access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and accelerated political will and investments were essential to improve this unacceptable situation dramatically. Even the most confirmed cynic of the international system would have to accept the fact that the Decade unquestionably changed the quality of life of millions of people all over the developing world. Clearly, the task is not yet complete since much more needs to be done. Equally, without the Water Conference, the progress in this area would have been much less than what it is at present.

Looking back, the Water Conference had an important impact on the UN Systems as well. During the 1970s, the rivalries between the various UN agencies working in the water area were intense. The work initiated by the Secretary General Mageed on the potential modalities of collaboration between the various UN agencies went a long way to smoothen the interrelations between them. The intensive rivalries of the 1970s gradually gave way to extensive consultations, but limited cooperation, between the agencies concerned in the 1990s. This unquestionably has been an important result.

Viewed from any direction, the Mar del Plata can be considered to be an important benchmark in the area of water development and management. The main

Conference itself, and the four regional meetings that preceded it, considered water management on a holistic and comprehensive basis, an approach that became popular only a decade later.

Looking back, two areas could have received additional attention: financial arrangements and the modalities for the implementation of the Action Plan, and the management of water resources shared by two or more countries. On the first issue of the financial arrangements needed to implement the Action Plan, regrettably this aspect has not received the attention it deserved in all the UN mega-conferences starting from Stockholm in 1972. Thus, not surprisingly, the ambitious Action Plans of these Conferences have never been properly implemented. It is also a sad and regrettable fact that UN system has never critically analysed the efficiency of the processes used for organizing these world conferences, their relative strengths and weaknesses, and the impacts of the final outcomes. Consequently, many of the mistakes made have continued from one conference to another. How the agreed to Action Plans could be effectively implemented is one area that has consistently received inadequate attention in all the high-level UN mega-conferences. The Water Conference was no exception to this process.

For a variety of reasons, the management of international waters was not considered as comprehensively as it should have been at Mar del Plata. In an objective and retrospective analysis the Water Conference, its Secretary General pointed out that both the above areas “were not tackled satisfactorily at the Conference” (Mageed, 1982). He also suggested “a re-examination and re-evaluation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan” in order to revive the spirit developed at the Conference and, hopefully, to give it a new vigour”. Regrettably this suggestion was never considered, and even more unfortunately the International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE), which was convened in January 1992 in Dublin (hereinafter referred to as the Dublin Conference) by the UN System as a prelude to the UNCED, all but ignored the achievements of Mar del Plata. It is evident that the institutional memories of the UN System somehow disappeared during the preparatory process leading to Dublin and at Dublin itself. Thus, not surprisingly, overall the results of the Dublin Conference were in sharp contrast in comparison with the achievements at Mar del Plata. Some of these aspects will be discussed next.

3. Absence of water in the international agenda after Mar Del Plata

Fifteen years after the Mar del Plata, the world's leaders met at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 for the

UNCED. It was hoped that UNCED would not only revive the spirit of Mar del Plata but also would put water firmly in the international political agenda. Most unfortunately, however, exactly the reverse happened. Issues like climate change, biodiversity, deforestation and ozone depletion took the centre stage during the statements of the Presidents and the Prime Ministers at Rio: water was at best a “bit” player largely confined to the wings (Biswas, 1993).

The omission of water from the international political agenda, as was evident in Rio, and the subsequent developments are important, but regrettable facts which the water profession need to consider very carefully. While some institutions and people are glossing over this situation, the water profession can no longer ignore the fact, and the reasons why the mega-meetings of Dublin and Rio failed so miserably to put water in the international political agenda.

3.1. Failure of the Dublin conference

The Dublin conference was convened by the United Nations System, and was expected to formulate sustainable water policies and action programmes for consideration by the UNCED. Its timing, only four months before UNCED, was ill-conceived. Even if the Dublin Conference had come out with a single new idea or concept, which it did not, and had considered critical issues like major programme initiatives, including how much would such programmes cost, where would the funds come from, and how and by whom would the programmes be implemented, which again it basically ignored, there simply was not enough time available to incorporate such ideas effectively in the Rio programme. Overall, the planning process for the Dublin Conference left much to be desired.

Second, the Dublin Conference, most incredibly, was organized as a meeting of experts and not as an inter-governmental meeting. This was in spite of the advice given by certain governments, notably Sweden, and certain knowledgeable experts on water and the rules governing the UN mega-conferences. The distinction between a meeting of experts and an inter-governmental meeting is a critical one in the context of any UN World Conference, since such conferences can only consider recommendations from inter-governmental meetings *and not from an expert group meeting*. Accordingly and predictably, certain countries objected at Rio to consider any reference to the results of the Dublin Conference, irrespective of their importance or relevance, since it was not an inter-governmental meeting. In all probability, Chapter 18 of Agenda 21, which deals with water, would have been very similar, irrespective of whether the Dublin Conference had ever been convened or not.

Thus, not surprisingly, during the Third Stockholm Water Symposium in 1992, the overall view of the participants was that the Dublin Conference was a failure and the water profession cannot afford another similar major setback in the foreseeable future.

During the 1990s, it was “politically correct” for certain international organizations to speak glowingly of the Dublin principles as if, by themselves, they could contribute to rational and efficient water developments. It is high time to realize that the so-called four Dublin principles, which incidentally were not included in Agenda 21, are basically bland statements of the obvious, which even if implemented by a miracle, *will not provide sufficient conditions for efficient water management*. It even basically ignored a fundamental objective of water resources development that has been accepted universally since the 1960s, the concept of equity and regional income distribution. No water development project can be sustainable if the issues of equity and poverty are completely ignored.

In addition, an objective analysis may indicate that in several instances Dublin may even have been a retrogressive step compared to what were achieved at Mar del Plata. For example, Dublin principles stated that water should be “recognised as an economic good”. In contrast, 15 years earlier, Mar del Plata had specifically urged to “adopt appropriate pricing policies with a view to encourage efficient water use, and finance operation cost with due regard to social objectives”. This principle was recommended not only for drinking and industrial uses but also for the irrigation sector.

Equally, much of the so-called Dublin principles are generalities, and at best could be considered to be a good rhetoric. They are of limited value to developing countries which are searching for alternatives as to how best to formulate and implement efficient water management policies and programmes. Furthermore, no thought was given in Dublin as to how these vague principles could be operationalized by the decision-makers and water professionals in developing countries. A decade after Dublin, the proponents of the Dublin principles have failed to indicate how these principles can be operationalized in the context of water management in a real world. Not surprisingly, the memory of Dublin has now basically disappeared from the collective sub-consciousness of the water profession, except perhaps of those institutions and individuals who were responsible for organizing it.

4. World Commission for Water for the 21st Century

Past experiences indicate that generally world commissions are not easy to organize and manage. Even more difficult is to establish a World Commission that can produce something useful and worthwhile that

could have lasting impacts. There is no question that much of the success of the World Commission on Water could be attributed to a single individual, Ismail Serageldin, former Vice President of the World Bank, who as the Chairman of the Commission, assembled a very distinguished group of individuals, who willingly agreed to serve on the Commission in their personal capacities.

Right from the very beginning, the Commission had a very tight time schedule to organize itself and to produce a report within a very short period of a little over 1 year. The time element was critical since the Commission decided to undertake the exercise in a participatory manner that would include as many stakeholders as possible from different parts of the world. It also made a very special effort to engage women in all its discussions. The consultation process eventually encompassed thousands of individuals from all over the world, representing hundreds of institutions that are local, national, regional or global in nature, and both governmental and non-governmental. This was thus a unique and difficult exercise, and never before in the entire history of water management, was such an exercise ever attempted, let alone carried out.

The Commission reviewed the results of all the consultations and discussions to produce a final report entitled: “A Water Secure World: Vision for Water, Life and Environment”. The report is concise (68pp), and written in a form that is easily understandable by any one interested in water. Equally, since the Commission was independent, it could make several recommendations which would not have been possible in any inter-governmental fora, where consensus rules the day.

The main thrusts of the report could be summarized as promoting

- holistic, systemic approaches based on integrated water resource management,
- participatory institutional mechanisms,
- full-cost pricing of water services, with targeted subsidies for the poor,
- institutional, technological, and financial innovations, and
- governments as enablers, providing effective and transparent regulatory frameworks for private action.

The Commission believed that the above requirements will not be achieved until and unless attitudinal shifts occur, resulting in

- mobilization of political will, and
- behavioural change by all.

The Commission recognized that much more work needs to be carried out so as to mobilize the necessary political will to implement its finding and recommendations.

The day when water could be considered to be a free good that would be automatically provided by the governments at very low or no costs is gradually, but most certainly, coming to an end. Achieving water pricing would not be an easy task because there are too many vested interests in maintaining the current practices and also the status quo, too many dogmatic views which are often based on erroneous facts and/or understandings, and too many mind-sets that belong to the past. Equally, many people automatically assume that water pricing and making water management practices more efficient would mean automatic transfer of all the functions from the public to the private sector. This thinking was evident during the Second World Water Forum, held in March 2000 in The Hague (hereinafter referred to as the Hague Forum) and to a lesser extent at the Third World Water Forum which was held in March 2003 in 3 locations, Kyoto, Osaka and Otsu in Japan (hereinafter referred to as the Japan Forum). This of course is not correct, since both public and private sectors have their strengths and weaknesses. For example, one of the best examples of urban water management is the case of Singapore, where a public sector autonomous company has a superb record. Losses from the Singapore water system, at about 6%, are now the best in the world. In contrast, losses from a few public sector companies are now running close to 80% (Biswas, 2000). The variations between these two specific cases are simply far too large to make any definitive statement on the performance of the public sector companies. Equally, there are several instances of private sector involvement which have created more problems than they have solved. Thus dogmatic solutions, one way or the other, are not the universal answer. Each case should be considered on its own merits and constraints, and the prevalent local conditions.

In the future, the main focus will be unquestionably to encourage public–private partnerships in different forms, and it should no longer be the continuation of the simplistic argument of public versus private sector considerations. Similarly, no one public sector or private sector model will fit equally well to all countries, and these models will continue to evolve for many years to come.

5. World Water Forums

The report of the World Commission on Water in the 21st Century was the centrepiece of the Second World Water Forum. Organized in The Hague, the Netherlands, 17–22 March 2000, the Forum was strongly supported organizationally and financially by the Government of the Netherlands. Some 4600 participants from all over the world registered for this event. It was a far bigger meeting, at least in terms of the number of

participants, than the Mar del Plata. However, unlike Mar del Plata the Forum was sponsored by the World Water Council, and not by an inter-governmental body like the UN, who normally organized similar high-profile fora in the past. The success of the Forum confirmed the new global trend of the 1990s for the water sector: the major roles played by the UN System in the past have started to decline, and these are now being taken over by new institutions like the World Water Council, Global Water Partnership, and Stockholm Water Symposium. This trend is most likely to continue in the coming years.

The Hague Forum was different from the Mar del Plata Conference at least in three important ways. First, unlike the continuous speech-making in the UN-sponsored mega-conferences by Ministers from all the countries present and by the heads of the inter-governmental organizations, the Hague Forum constituted over 100 special sessions on a variety of topics, which included issues like water and energy, next generation of water leaders, water vision for Mexico, senior women water leaders, water and religion, and business community (CEO) panel. Most of the sessions were well attended. Second, participation to the Forum was open to all. This was in contrast to Mar del Plata, where participation was very strictly restricted only to the official representatives of the governments and international organizations. Third, the Mar del Plata Conference resulted in an Action Plan, which was accepted by all the governments. For example, one of the outputs of the Mar del Plata was the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, whose impact on the world clearly has been very substantial. In conjunction with the Hague Forum, there was also an Inter-Ministerial Conference, 21–22 March, participation to which was also strictly restricted. The Ministers, however, came out with a declaration that not surprisingly was very general, and it broke no new grounds. A prominent Mexican journalist wrote that the “results of the Inter-Ministerial meeting was like water: no odour, no colour and insipid.” Much of the Forum activities were conducted peacefully. There were, of course, heated discussions on many issues, especially on privatization, but for the most part these were carried out in a civilized and democratic manner. However, there were some difficult moments. The Plenary Session was disrupted by a group of protesters, two of whom took off their clothes on the podium, and others chanted slogans or simply made loud noises so that the session had to be postponed. Clearly this disruption was planned well in advance, and it resulted in the suspension of the proceedings for a considerable time, and thus loss of valuable time.

Similarly, the session on water and energy, which was organized on behalf of the World Water Council to review the linkages between water and energy policies,

was hijacked by a small group of activists interested only in a single issue, which had nothing to do with energy. They unfurled a banner and made any civilized discussion on the focus of the session impossible. This was indeed most regrettable since the water profession has basically ignored energy in the past, even though water and energy policies are closely interlinked. For example, in India, hydropower accounts for nearly 22% of electricity produced. Equally, a nearly similar percent of energy is used to pump water. The reason as to why groundwater levels in many parts of India are declining rapidly is because of the misguided energy and water policies. The session during the Hague Forum was specifically organized to review this and other critical water-energy linkages. However, a few activists ensured that this issue could not be discussed by focusing their entire attention to another issue that was the subject of discussion at other sessions, but which had absolutely no relevance to the objective of the water and energy session. Such unwarranted incidences during the Forum, which prevented participants from having a dialogue, were most regrettable. The security in the Forum was increased very significantly after the first day. This ensured that the type of unwarranted disruptions noted during the first day did not occur again.

A significant part of the credit for the success of the forum goes to the Dutch Government, which ensured that the event remained a public forum, where people could express their views and opinions. Thus, when Mexico formally requested the Forum organizers to “modify the program” so that the “officially designated representative” of that country could present the official “vision” of the country, instead of the representatives of the civil society as was planned, the request was politely but firmly declined. This is a most welcome step that simply would not have been possible, had the Forum been organized under the aegis of the UN, or other similar major inter-governmental institutions.

6. After the Hague Forum

The main global water fora after the Hague Forum was the Freshwater Consultation at Berlin in December 2001, which was expected to send a message on water to the World Summit on Sustainable Development that was held in Johannesburg, in South Africa, in August/September 2002. Like its precursor, the Dublin Conference, which was expected to send a similar message to the Rio meeting, the results of the Bonn Consultation looks even weaker now compared to the Dublin discussions. Not only it did not break any new ground in terms of ideas, targets, investments, or programmes, some of the discussions were grossly out-of-date. In fact, a cynic may be excused for saying he/she had heard most of the Berlin statements some two decades ago! Except

for the discussion on corruption, “political correctness” was the order of the day! Thus, not surprisingly, the so-called “Bonn keys” have already disappeared from the collective memory of the water professionals.

The Ministerial declaration of Bonn was equally vague and insipid as the Hague declaration. In fact, the Bonn declaration stands out for its stark neglect of the issue of the water requirements for the agricultural sector. This is in spite of the fact that agriculture is the main user of water, and water use for food production is a major consideration for the developing world. The primary focus was on water supply, sanitation and water quality issues. This highly skewed outcome is probably due to the interests of the organizers who were responsible for the Bonn discussions. A cynic may again be excused for saying *the Bonn discussion focused more than 90% of its attention to less than 10% of the global water problems.*

So far as the Johannesburg Summit is concerned, it is still somewhat early to draw definitive conclusions. On the positive side, certainly significantly more water professionals participated in this Summit, compared to the Rio Conference. Current indications are that the Johannesburg Summit broke no new grounds, unlikely to spawn any new definitive programme on water, or bring any new investment funds to the water sector. It reiterated the Millennium goals in the area of water supply and sanitation, which, if the trends of the last two years are any indication, are unlikely to be achieved by 2015.

The global consensus on the achievements and impacts of the Summit thus far has not been auspicious. Consider the following headlines from prestigious media on the results of this Summit:

World Forum ends in failure: The Financial Times of London,

World Summit falls flat: Asahi Shimbun of Japan,
Dialogue of the Deaf: The Daily Telegraph of London,

Big Agenda, little action: International Herald Tribune of Paris,

A long way to go for little success: The Financial Times of London,

The bubble -and-squeak summit: The Economist,
Was the sustainable summit a wash out? The Economist.

The Third World Water Forum was held in Japan in March 2003. This Forum attracted more than four times the number of participants of the Hague Forum, and had nearly three times the number of sessions. Whereas the Second Forum was held in one city, the Third Forum was held concurrently in Kyoto, Osaka and Otsu. The high number of participants and sessions, spread over three cities, meant that no participant or institution, including the Forum Secretariat, had a clear and integrated view of what was happening during the

Forum, and what, if any, message that came out of this Forum. Whereas, the Second Forum had the binding thread of the Report of the World Commission on Water, the Third Forum basically constituted a jumble of some 350 independent sessions, without any integrative linkages.

Like the Second Forum and the Bonn Conference, the Third Forum also had an Inter-Ministerial meeting. The Ministerial Declaration was equally bland as the other two meetings, and it can be said with almost near-total certainty that it is highly unlikely to have any impacts on water management and development practices in the world. The draft Ministerial declaration was prepared well before the Ministerial meeting took place, and many Ministers complained that there was very strong reluctance to change the Declaration that was initially prepared, and to which they had made no inputs.

Accordingly, it is absolutely essential for the water profession to critically and objectively assess the impacts of the various major water-related global fora. The old thinking of the number of people or governments that participated in a meeting, or the total money spent, can no longer be considered to be important, or even relevant, criteria for success.

So far as the Marrakech, the Hague and the Japan fora are concerned, a quick evaluation indicates that the Marrakech Forum had only speeches (far too many of them for any one individual to listen), and no discussion. The Hague and the Japan fora discussed literally every water issue under the Sun. Due to the vast choices of sessions available, participants often went to the ones that interested them, and where their ideologies and views were likely to be supported. A good example was the various sessions on dam-related issues. At one session in the Hague, a speaker passionately claimed that all dam builders should be prosecuted through the war crimes tribunal since building of dams was a crime against all humanity! At another session, another speaker suggested that dams are absolutely essential for poverty alleviation in the developing world. Although the two statements were diametrically opposite, no one challenged these statements. Thus, both the speakers presumably returned home thinking that the Forum had basically accepted their views. Accordingly, a major constraint of the Second Forum was the total absence of integration between the various sessions. Furthermore, the papers and discussions of the Hague Forum are now irretrievably lost, since no effort was made to document them. What is available is a set of somewhat superficial summaries of certain selected sessions. Regrettably, the problem was exactly the same for the Third Forum.

The situation in some ways was better, but in other ways worse, at Japan, in comparison to The Hague. For example, if the dam issue is considered again, at Kyoto, a constructive debate on this subject was organized by

the International Hydropower Association and the International Rivers Network. The views on dams of these two institutions are polar opposite. The two groups listened to each other, and there was the beginning of a dialogue between the opposing camps. The debate could not have changed the views of the diehards in the two camps, but it may have had some impacts on some members of the audience, who perhaps were neutral on the issue. If it was a wrestling match, an objective and dispassionate referee would have awarded the match to IHA without any hesitation. While this debate was a plus for the Third Forum, on the issues of dams, the sheer number of sessions held at Kyoto made sure that very few, if any participant, had an integrative view of the all discussions on the dam-related issues.

All the three fora were similar in one way. None seriously discussed or raised the water issues of the future, say beyond the post-2010 period. The world is changing rapidly, and we really need visionaries to develop a future water vision of the world. There were far too many visions at The Hague, at national and regional levels as well as on a sectoral basis.

None really managed to develop a vision of the future to even 2010, let alone to 2025. The vast majority of these visions were far too general and too vague to be implemented and also far too past- and present-oriented to be of any use after 2010. For all practical purposes, even though they were called visions, in reality they were business-as-usual, incremental approaches. Not surprisingly, and for all the practical purposes these visions have disappeared from the national, regional and international agendas.

The vast majority of sessions at the Third Forum were similar as in The Hague. There were mostly past- and present-oriented. No new ideas came from the Second and Third World Water Forums, no new ground was broken, and no new commitments were made by the Government present in terms of new investments.

It is interesting to note that the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, Agnes van Ardenne said categorically at Kyoto that large-scale conferences like the World Water Forum have no future. The statement made by the Dutch Government, which hosted the Second World Water Forum, should be carefully considered by the water profession.

The question that must be asked at present is, are these mega-meetings worth their costs and the efforts needed to organize them, especially when their final and overall impacts are considered? Are there better and more cost-effective alternatives, where the world can get “bigger bangs for smaller bucks”? Unfortunately, these types of questions are not even being asked at present, let alone being answered. As one eminent head of UN Agency told me during a private conversation somewhat sarcastically: “all our delegates are honourable, all our background documents are excellent, and all our

meetings are outstandingly successful". Everything considered, it is high-time that we stop being politically correct, and objectively review our past performances in order to develop a cost-effective and impact-oriented road map for the future.

It is thus necessary for the water profession to critically and objectively assess the overall impacts of the past water-related global fora. This should not be a pseudo-evaluation carried out with rose-coloured glasses, and by people associated with the organizations of these fora.

The evaluations must be independent, objective, comprehensive and usable. The results of such evaluations should be used to define what other alternatives that may be available to obtain significantly better results with lower costs for similar global water policy dialogues in the future.

Because of the current absence of any reliable assessment of the global water-related fora of the past, the Third World Centre for Water Management has embarked upon a project which will critically and realistically examine past global water-related events in order to determine their contributions to a water-secure world. This study will also analyse what, or indeed if, there are better alternatives which could produce better results.

7. Conclusions

The water management profession is now facing a problem, the magnitude, complexity and importance of which no earlier generation has had to face. In the run-up to the 21st century, our profession really has two choices: to carry on as before with a "business-as-usual" attitude that attempts to solve future complex problems on the basis of experiences from simpler problems of the past, or continue in earnest an accelerated and truly genuine effort to identify the real problems of the future and face the overwhelming challenges collectively and squarely by implementing workable solutions and within the short timetable available to us. One of the main lessons of the past has to be that the time for rhetorics and using 1 min sound-bites are over. We must develop urgently new and cogent solutions and paradigms which could be operationalized in developing countries and in the fields. Conceptual attractiveness alone is no longer adequate.

Globally, water is likely to become an increasingly critical resource issue for at least the next decade in the developing world. Equally, forces of globalization, urbanization, population growth, technological developments and information and communication revolution are changing the management of requirements of the water sector with stunning speed. The world is

moving into a new kind of economy as well as to a new kind of society, where we need new mind-sets and knowledge to resolve increasingly complex and inter-related issues. The water sector is no exception to this development. Whether we like it or not, *the world of water management is likely to change more during the next 20 years compared to the past 2000 years*. The past experiences will often provide no guidance during this period of explosive change and increasing complexities. The stakes are high, but equally it gives us new opportunities to improve water management practices very significantly like never before in human history. I believe that with some luck, we can manage these changes. The opportunities are clearly there, and we must rise to meet these challenges successfully and in a timely manner.

The water crisis, as envisioned at present, is solvable. It would not be easy, but it can be done. One can only be reminded of the warning of William Shakespeare: "men at some times are masters of their fates. The fault dear friends is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings".

Note: The Third World Centre for Water Management is carrying out a systematic, comprehensive and objective evaluation of all the major global mega-conferences related to water. Readers are encouraged to share their views on any specific forum or the various fora in general at the following e-mail: thirdworldcentre@att.net.mx.

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