

7 Evaluation of Global Megaconferences on Water

Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada

7.1 Introduction

In the area of water, megaconferences are of comparatively recent origin. A megaconference in this context is defined as an event attracting more than 1,500 participants. Historically, one would be hard pressed to identify many water conferences that attracted more than 1,500 participants prior to 1975. The participants in this context are defined as people who participated in the presentations and discussions, and not someone who participated in ancillary events as visitors.

The definition of who is a participant is an important one because in recent years, there has been considerable “inflation” in the estimation of the number of participants. This is because, at least implicitly, one of the main indicators of success of a megaconference, if not the primary one, has been the number of participants it is supposed to have attracted, and not its outputs or impacts. Thus, the organizers often may include the number of visitors to ancillary events like exhibitions as participants, even though they had absolutely no role in the main meeting itself, and they may have visited the conference venue only once to see the exhibition or attend some minor events. For example, according to the World Water Council, the Japan Forum attracted 24,000 participants and the Mexico Forum had 20,000 participants. Even if all the seats available at these two Forums were taken, which they were not even during the opening plenary sessions, even less than half of these numbers could have been accommodated! For example, a bus-full of school children who may visit an exhibition, linked to a megaconference, can be considered to be visitors but they are certainly not participants to the discussions or what happens within the Forum itself. Thus, in the future, some clarity and consistency will be needed to collect the real statistics in terms of the number of participants for evaluation purposes. Because of this “flexibility” to define who is a participant, various estimates are now available as to how many people “participated” in any specific event.

7.2 Impacts of Megaconferences

None of the water-related global megaconferences has ever been evaluated independently, objectively and comprehensively. Their impacts and cost-effectiveness are now basically unknown, even though their costs have generally escalated very

rapidly with each succeeding event. It should, however, be noted that very few megaconferences on any field have ever been objectively assessed in terms of its results and medium- to long-term impacts. Thus, water megaconferences are not an exception: it is simply part of an overall problem in this area.

In order to fill this gap, the Third World Centre for Water Management, with the support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of the United States conducted a global analysis on the perceived outputs and impacts of such events on the water sector, as well as their strengths, weaknesses and lessons learnt. The events specifically considered for this evaluation were Mar del Plata, Dublin, Rio and Johannesburg Conferences, Bonn Freshwater Conference and the first three World Water Forums.

A two-pronged approach was used for the evaluation of the impacts and the effectiveness of the megaconferences. The first part of the process was to invite a select group of experts who are well-versed with international water-related activities and are renowned for their acumen, objectivity and scholarly work, to review and assess the outputs and impacts of these events. One of the invited authors was also the Deputy Secretary-General of a major megaconference organized by the United Nations in the 1970s, who also happened to be a water expert. Vast majority of these authors had participated in one or more water-related megaconferences. In addition, all the authors were carefully selected and then specially invited to prepare assessments from their personal perspectives. They represented different countries, disciplines, sectors and institutions, both national and international, and also had diverse professional backgrounds and experience. The primary objective was to collect different objective views and analyses of the events. The authors of all these invited papers, as well as a group of additional selected water experts, were then invited to review and critique all these contributions at a special invitation-only workshop that was held at Bangkok, Thailand. In the light of these discussions, the authors then finalized their papers. These final papers are included in the present book.

The second component of the evaluation was a questionnaire survey of water professionals to find out their personal views on the outputs and impacts of these events. An open-ended questionnaire was sent to 2,698 people from all over the world, among whom were all the members of the World Water Council and International Water Resources Association, participants of selected major international and national water conferences, including Stockholm Water Symposium, and other professionals interested in water-related issues from academia, government, private sector and NGOs. The study also attempted to get a list of participants to the Japan Water Forum to solicit their views, but this request was declined. Questionnaires were also sent to participants who did not attend any of the megaconferences in order to see what impacts these events may have had on their institutions and/or on their work. Participants were specifically requested to give their own personal views and not of their institutions.

Special care was taken in order that the survey was universal and unbiased, and that study did not target any specific groups, countries or institutions, in order that as objective and comprehensive information as possible could be obtained. All the persons contacted were specifically informed that their responses would remain

strictly confidential, and that these would not be shared with any other institution or individual not directly associated with the project under any circumstances. This explicit undertaking was given to ensure that all the respondents could freely give their own candid views, without any potential ramifications on their careers in the future. Accordingly, the access to the responses was strictly restricted only to the core study group who analysed the questionnaires.

In addition to this global questionnaire survey, some special countries or regions were selected for in-depth analyses. These special studies were focused on India, Bangladesh, Japan, Scandinavia and Southern Africa. Japan and Southern Africa were specifically selected since these countries/regions were host to two megaconferences: Japan for the Third World Water Forum and Southern Africa for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development. Scandinavia was selected since the Stockholm Water Symposium has become an important annual global event on water (in recent years, this Symposium has transformed itself to a megaconference), and also because many of the participants to the questionnaire survey came from Scandinavia. India and Bangladesh were selected because water is an important requirement for the social and economic development of both of these countries.

For each of these national/regional studies, internationally well-known and objective water experts from the region were invited to conduct the studies. For Japan, the questionnaire was translated into Japanese, and the survey was conducted in Japanese to overcome possible linguistic constraints. Each national/regional study leader sent out similar questionnaire like the one used for the global survey to the prospective correspondents in their study areas. In addition to the questions asked in the main questionnaire, the national/regional ones also had some additional questions that were considered to be relevant and important for the specific study areas. Thus, with the overall global study, and specific national/regional studies, the views of a very large number of people interested in water issues were canvassed and obtained. These regional analyses are included in this book.

During the analysis of the questionnaires, it was noted that personal views of some of the correspondents were very different to the views of their institutions. This was unquestionably due to the fact that the questionnaire very specifically requested personal views, whatever they may be. Also, the views expressed during the survey were assured to be totally confidential, and thus the respondents did not have to be politically correct, or worry about personal interrelationships with the sponsors and organizers of the events, or be concerned with potential backlashes, especially when their views were not complimentary on these events. This philosophy was also used for the Bangkok workshop, where the participants were very specifically invited in their personal capacities, and this factor was stressed in both the letters of invitation that was sent to them, and also during the workshop discussions. It was further stressed during the workshop that it was being organized under Chatham House rules in order that the participants could freely express their views, without any possible ramifications later. The present chapter is an analysis of the questionnaires that were returned.

7.3 Global Perceptions of Impacts

Altogether 2,698 questionnaires were sent electronically to the people interested in water from governmental, intergovernmental and international institutions, academia and research institutions, private sector and NGOs, both national and international. The total universe represented 121 countries. Even though the latest available addresses were used, 372 questionnaires bounced back.

Out of the 2,326 questionnaires which presumably reached their targets, 651 responses were received. This is a response rate of 28%. Considering the global, multi-institutional and multi-sectoral nature of the survey, and considering the possible sensitivities of the answers, the response rate can be considered to be quite reasonable. Of this number, 89 respondents said they not only did not attend any of the megaconferences, but also they knew nothing much about them in order to make any comment which could be considered meaningful in the context of the study. This itself is an interesting finding, since it indicated that some 14% of the respondents were not even aware of the proceedings and the results of the megaconferences, let alone of their possible impacts on the water sector. Of the balance of the 562 respondents, their personal participation rates in the various megaconferences are shown in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Percentage of respondents participating in megaconferences

Number of megaconferences attended by the respondents	Percentage
None	46.59
One	25.51
Two	11.36
Three	8.33
Four	4.54
Five	1.51
Six	0.37
Seven	0.37
Eight	0.37

7.4 Strengths of Megaconferences

Participants were asked to identify what in their views were the three most important strengths of the megaconferences. No list was provided of the perceived strengths from which they could select the most appropriate ones. Accordingly, the participants had to do their own thinking and then provide their own personal views. The main strengths identified by the correspondents the most were the following:

- Increasing awareness of water as a global concern, and of multidisciplinary, multi-sectoral and multi-institutional nature of the water problems and their possible solutions;
- Increasing awareness of the current water problems among various sectors of the population, including the general public and the media;
- Interactions of diverse views, opinions and visions under different settings;
- Better understanding and appreciation of how different countries have approached to solve somewhat similar water problems and what have been the results;
- Bringing together interested/relevant parties to one location for discussions of different issues from different perspectives and interests;
- Providing an opportunity for developing countries to raise their problems and concerns in an international setting so that the world as a whole realizes the complexities associated with their solutions, including the appropriate financial and institutional constraints faced;
- Identifying critical water problems and important global, regional and national water-related issues, which subsequently could become part of the professional agenda for additional discussions in other fora;
- Listening to different opinions on somewhat similar problems and issues, and be aware of the reasons of these differences;
- Ensuring increased attention on water issues as governments and institutions have to define and justify their positions during these events;
- Enhancing political support to domestic water agenda because of global support and recognition;
- Promoting professional–politician–NGO interactions;
- Focusing attention on specific water issues which are not receiving adequate attention at present;
- Meeting and listening to global water experts from different sectors, disciplines and nations to get more knowledge and better appreciation of water problems and their solutions from different parts of the world;
- Raising the profile of water-related issues in the national and the international media during the events;
- Meeting old friends, making new ones, and enhanced opportunities for networking with people from different parts of the world; and
- Exchanging ideas and information on technical, economic, political, social, environmental and legal situations and trends on water-related issues and problems, and their institutional implications.

7.5 Weaknesses of Megaconferences

Correspondents were similarly asked to identify three major weaknesses of the megaconferences. Again, no list was provided for this selection. Significantly more weaknesses were identified by the correspondents compared to the strengths.

The main weaknesses identified can be classified under the following categories. It should be noted that they are not in any order of priority.

- Too many issues are discussed superficially and often dogmatically, with too many poor-to-mediocre sessions which often repeat what has been said or written numerous times earlier;
- Too many presentations and set speeches which do not say anything new or interesting, and not enough time is available for proper discussions and interactions between the participants;
- Too many conflicting views in different sessions, and no real attempt to reconcile different views, or to assess them objectively, or strive for a consensus;
- Very poor (mostly non-existent) efforts to disseminate the results and background papers and documents, both before and after most of the events; unless one attends the events, or even a specific session, documentation is simply not available; documentation available after the events is far too general and superficial for any specific use; only exception has been the UN Water Conference at Mar del Plata for which detailed documentation is still readily available some three decades after;
- Overall planning and management of the events leave much to be desired; inadequate or inappropriate strategic thinking from the organizers as to what they wish to achieve from these events; interactions between participants are mostly superficial; sustained interactions are impossible because of the large number of participants; sessions and events are conspicuous by the absence of any discussion on long-term, or even medium-term, water-related trends and developments;
- Participants come primarily from the water sector and thus solutions are sought almost exclusively from within this sector; no attempt is made to consider multi-sectoral approaches, which is essential for solution of complex water-related problems;
- Conferences primarily deal with the sponsors' and the donors' agenda, who have limited knowledge, understanding and appreciation of water problems of developing countries;
- Events, outcomes and declarations, to a great extent, are controlled by a small group of individuals and institutions from developed countries, who are often the same from one megaconference to another; thus, superficially, it may appear that there is true stakeholders' participation and consultation during the planning process, but in reality the main agenda is controlled by a very few selected individuals and institutions; in other words, while on the surface there is a veneer of extensive stakeholders' participation, in reality the process and outcomes are controlled;
- Megaconferences have degenerated to be the likes of fairs or festivities, rather than being serious events; outcomes are mostly predetermined by certain groups, with preconceived ideas and hidden agendas rather than being generated from free, frank and true interactions between the participants during those meetings, as invariably claimed by its sponsors and diehard supporters;

- Too much repetition from one conference to another which often promotes bandwagon effects in many areas, and contributes to very little real progress in solving the actual water-related problems faced by different countries of the world;
- Unnecessary large nature and format make the events impersonal and forgettable experiences; numerous activities are redundant or peripheral and thus have no near-term value, let alone over medium- to long-term; events often degenerate into ritualistic fanfare and self or institutional publicity, or restatements of the obvious;
- No attempt is made to prioritize critical water issues; thus wheat and chaff receive the same level of attention;
- Outputs lack specificity, cohesiveness and relevance, and often they are packaged in a new bottle but the wine continues to be old, even very old;
- No thought is given to their implementation potential, or who could implement them and also from where the funding for their implementation could come from;
- Policy dialogues are dominated by certain national and international institutions, which have very specific ideas, agendas and dogmas that they want to promote or perpetuate. These institutions are well-funded and, accordingly, can participate in all the preparatory meetings, which individuals or institutions from developing countries cannot. They primarily come to advance their agenda, power and visibility. Not surprisingly, their ideas mostly prevail, since they mostly control the process and the outputs, even when participants propose different but more efficient and implementable solutions;
- No political commitments for implementing declarations and commitments at national, regional and international levels;
- Raise very high expectations with high rhetoric, which are never fulfilled, as a result of which deep frustrations set in later;
- Seldom provide any new insights to the future global, regional and national water scenarios, except in somewhat general and superficial terms; discussions are invariably on the problems and solutions of the present or of the past and very seldom of the future;
- No attempt is ever made to objectively evaluate the performance, outputs and inputs of the events. In fact, the organizers would be hard pressed to define what exactly are the objectives of the events, and the types of outputs and impacts that should be reached in order that these meetings can be considered to be successful. The process has become more important than the end objectives; sponsors never discuss what in their views are the indicators of success of these meetings;
- Because of the global nature of the megaconferences, the linkages between them are mostly non-existent. There is thus no continuity, since they are primarily planned, designed and organized as discrete events;
- There are no mechanisms to promote and assess possible follow-up activities, nationally, regionally or internationally;

- Results are often lost opportunities with sanitized waffle with politically correct posturing, phraseology and adherence to, or promotion of, the prevailing band-wagons;
- By making a deliberate attempt to please every government, and declining to offend or ignore anyone, the Ministerial Declarations avoid hard choices in terms of priorities and specifics. They often degenerate to general and sanctimonious statements which are of very limited use in policy and planning terms to any country. In addition, these general statements have been made so many times before that no one takes these declarations seriously any more, including the ministers themselves;
- The world is very heterogeneous, with different physical, social, economic, environmental and institutional conditions. While the types of problems faced by many countries may be similar, the Forums basically discuss and promote monolithic solutions which implicitly assume that one size will fit all. Since this seldom is the case in the real world, a significant part of the discussions become irrelevant or inappropriate at least in terms of understanding of the problems and their possible realistic and implementable solutions.

7.6 Cost-Effectiveness

Overall, the respondents of the survey were very positive of the cost-effectiveness of the UN Water Conference at Mar del Plata. The overwhelming general consensus was that no other megaconference exceeded, let alone equalled, the impacts of the Mar del Plata. After Mar del Plata, the respondents felt that the Rio Conference also had discernable impacts on the water sector, both nationally and internationally, since it put environment firmly on the agenda of the water institutions. The respondents further believed that the Bonn Conference and the first three World Water Forums have not been cost-effective, and their impacts, if any, have been conspicuous by their invisibility.

Overall, the World Water Forums very especially came under severe criticisms from the correspondents for the following reasons:

- Poorly organized with the fundamental strategic error of organizing too many sessions, often on very similar topics, which means it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the participants to attend the sessions they want, and receive a consistent message, or get an overall picture of the results of the discussions on a specific issue;
- The main criteria for success appears to be how many people participated in the Forum, but not on the quality and relevance of the presentations, discussions and outputs. Very little thought is given during the planning process on how the proceedings could impact upon water planning and development processes and practices of different countries and international institutions;

- Costs for each succeeding Forum are going through the “ceiling to the sky”, and thus it is necessary in the future to prune non-essential activities and events, and focus on result-oriented, doable, and useful activities;
- All “omelettes need eggs”. Good ones are worth the efforts and the eggs. Bad ones are waste of eggs and efforts. Water Forums have become expensive events with very limited outputs like “bad omelettes”;
- Cost-effectiveness can be increased somewhat, even with the existing arrangements, if serious efforts are made in terms of collecting, editing and disseminating good information that were presented, and generated during the events as well as through the processes leading to the events;
- Except for meeting old friends, and seeing new cities, the Forums now provide only limited benefits to most of the participants. In fact, six months after the event is over, one wonders what the fuss was all about, and what were the lasting results, if any. However, the events are useful to organizations like the World Water Council since it provides it with the main *raison d’être* of its existence, and considerable income from the events. Its other sponsors get some international visibility and power. However, the overall cost-effectiveness of these Forums for the world as a whole is very low.

Nearly 90% of the respondents felt that in the light of the experiences from the past Forums, a determined and comprehensive attempt should be made to redesign/restructure/rethink the way megaconferences are organized in the future in order that their impacts and cost-effectiveness can be increased very substantially.

7.7 Key Lessons

The general view that emerged from the survey was that the megaconferences have their own momentum, and they satisfy the needs and the agendas of certain specific institutions and individuals. Accordingly, they are likely to continue, at least for a while, in their present format, perhaps only with marginal and incremental changes, irrespective of what the majority of water professionals and water-related institutions may think about their relevance, impacts and effectiveness. Accordingly, it is somewhat unrealistic to expect that the next 2 to 3 water-related megaconferences will be materially different from the earlier ones in terms of process, structure, results or impacts. Especially for the World Water Forums, the perception is that the same group of institutions, and also many of the same individuals, that were responsible for organizing the earlier Forums are likely to continue to be the driving forces behind the arrangements for the future ones. Thus, at most, irrespective of the relevance and cost-effectiveness of the past Forums, one should realistically expect only minor changes in the foreseeable future.

The main lessons that could be learnt from the past megaconferences that were identified by the respondents are the following:

- Megaconferences generalize problems and solutions, even though the world is not homogenous. Equally, it is now well-known that one size does not fit all.

The global generalizations override a country's or even a region's specific needs and requirements, consideration of available management, technical and administrative expertise, and prevailing institutional and legal frameworks and financial capacities. The devil invariably is in the details and not in large generalized global talk-fests, where a good time can be had by most participants.

- 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.
- Megaconferences should be specifically focused on perceived needs and issues and they should have clearly stipulated goals and objectives. The process used for their organization should assure formulation of realistic, understandable and implementable recommendations for actions, and provide mechanisms to ensure the availability of adequate levels of funding to implement the recommendations. They should also bring to the attention of the participants latest scientific and technological developments, as well as what solutions have worked and what have not, along with the reasons for their successes and failures in different locations. Regular repetition of the same old water issues and problematics, as well as their so-called solutions, is a sure recipe for overkill in terms of impacts and relevance, both inside and outside the profession. These conferences appear to be reaching the point of diminishing returns. They do create temporary awareness of water-related issues, which evaporate quickly in the absence of follow-up actions, monitoring and evaluations. The events are thus rapidly losing their moral authority.
- Donors are still influencing the outcomes to suit their own views and agendas, irrespective of actual needs and requirements of developing countries. Many developing countries, irrespective of the rhetoric from both sides, continue to accept donor-driven agendas, priorities and solutions, which, not surprisingly, do not produce anticipated results. Progress thus continues to be marginal and suboptimal in the water field.
- It is necessary to consider country-specific or at most region-specific solutions and recommendations, which are implementable. The megaconferences should not be overloaded with pedestrian, outdated, irrelevant and dogmatic views and generalized presentations, most often this is the case at present. There are also no global solutions for a very heterogeneous world. The events should consider the importance of the co-existence of different paradigms, depending upon site-specific considerations.
- One way to look at the past megaconferences is that they are social events, which have been transformed into a form of water-related tourism. In fact, one will be hard-pressed to find even one-third of the total number of participants in most days at the formal sessions. One can thus legitimately wonder where are the rest of the two-thirds of the participants. These events often provide cover and legitimacy to the national, regional and international water institutions to do what they have done in the past, or are doing at present, or planning to do in the future, and then wrap around them the sessions, discussions and declarations emanating from these events to justify their past, present and future actions and

programmes to their superiors or governing bodies. The process gives a veneer of legitimacy and impression that the participating institutions are *au courant* with the latest international ideas and cutting-edge developments as outlined during the discussions and as enunciated by the general recommendations and declarations. The events thus often degenerate to a self-serving process, rather than creating added values for countries, water profession or the world as a whole.

There is a general perception, especially among the organizers of these megaconferences that momentous advances and decisions are being made during these events, and these developments shape and chart the future of the water management in the world. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A retrospective analysis of impacts of these meetings indicates the following:

- These events have generally not only failed to give future directions for water management but also have mostly generated too few decisions that are realistic and can be implemented promptly and cost-effectively in different countries.
- They seldom provide a forum for adequate, objective and comprehensive analyses of current water problems, or sustained discussions and reflections of emerging trends which are likely to affect water management in the future. Irrespective of the continuous rhetoric of “business as usual is no longer a solution”, the actual discussions indicate that the implicit assumption continues to be that basically “no business unusual” solutions are available. As a result, progress in water management due to these megaconferences can at best be marginal and incremental. The overwhelming focuses of discussions are often of the “SOS” (same old stuff) type, which one has heard time and again, sometimes even for over half a century!
- The processes used for the organization of these events, and subsequently much of the discussions at these meetings are often based on a cacophony of vested, entrenched and competing interests of national and international institutions, whose objectives often are to get some form of “blessing” or approval so that they can continue with their activities as before. Institutions like to be seen at these events, and try to publicize their activities and results, irrespective of their quality, relevance and implementation potential. Thereafter, they proudly proclaim their presence at these events, irrespective of whether they achieved anything substantial by their presence. There is often some form of paralysis, at least in terms of reaching consensus in many complex or controversial areas, because of the competing and conflicting interests and agendas of different institutions, both national and international.
- Many of the principal institutions that are directly associated with the organization of these events are gradually becoming ineffective because of their somewhat static view of water management in a rapidly changing and very heterogeneous world. Equally, many of these institutions are becoming increasingly ineffective because they were given responsibilities, often decades ago, when the global conditions were very different, or because they have unilaterally assumed additional responsibilities that far exceed their original authorities, as

well as their intellectual, technical and management capacities, and available financial resources.

- There is no question that during these megaconferences many interinstitutional or interpersonal deals get discussed, or even completed. However, the main objectives of these events should not include transactions of institutional or personal deals, for which better and more focused opportunities may exist elsewhere, and where such discussions can be conducted under more conducive and congenial conditions.
- A major question that needs to be asked and answered is why some 20,000 individuals, or even more, have participated in the third and fourth World Water Forums, if their impacts are mostly not discernable even six months after they ended. Probably the answer lies in the fact that these are basically social events, masquerading as serious meetings, with lots of receptions, good food and drinks, meeting many old friends and making a few new ones, and all under agreeable environments in interesting cities, and paid for by someone else. They can hardly be considered as a milestone or an important event in the history of water development, except by the organizing institutions. Several respondents to the survey felt that these megaconferences have basically now become “Woodstock of water”, except Woodstock was a once in a lifetime event, but these water-related megaconferences are now being organized annually in one place or another.

7.8 Overall Impacts

Based on the survey conducted, nearly 44% of the respondents felt that megaconferences had no perceptible impacts, or at best marginal impacts, on them, or on their institutions, governmental, academic or private. Another 11.5% were even more negative on their assessments.

In contrast, only 7% felt that the events were “excellent,” and 26% felt that the conferences have perceptibly changed the policies, programmes and projects of their institutions. It should, however, be noted that the majority of those who felt that the policies of their institutions have changed, referred very specifically to the UN Water Conference and the UN Conference on Environment and Development at Rio. The Rio event appeared to have injected strong environmental components in the policies and programmes of the various national and international water institutions. If Mar del Plata and Rio megaconferences are not included, the rest, according to the respondents, do not appear to have produced similar impacts. In fact, if the impacts of the Mar del Plata and the Rio are not included, the percentage of respondents who consider that these events had significant impacts come down to mid single digit. Another 11.5% of the respondents did not express any view. An important difference noted is that the respondents from US, Canada and Western Europe were noticeably more sceptical on the benefits and impacts of the megaconferences. In contrast, the participants from developing countries had a somewhat more positive view.

It should also be noted that several of the respondents felt that some of the impacts of the megaconferences have actually been negative since they have sometimes promoted inappropriate approaches and solutions that several institutions have later implemented with disappointing results.

7.9 Overall View on the Megaconferences

The overall views of the respondents on the megaconferences assessed are summarized in the Table 7.2.

Table 7.2 Views of the respondents on the megaconferences

Views	Percentage
The concept of such global conferences is good, but the current framework for organization needs to be changed radically. The events should be more focused and output-oriented. The main criteria of success should not be the number of people who attended the conference, nor the number of countries represented, but the quality of the discussions, results and their eventual impacts.	48.37
It would be desirable to organize regional meetings, dealing with regional problems, issues, solutions and institutions, and which could be focused and output- and impact-oriented.	30.70
The events have now become one big “water fair,” with a lot of activities but without much thought being given to their relevance, appropriateness, outputs or impacts. There are no interlinkages between succeeding megaconferences, no clear focus, and their cost-effectiveness leaves much to be desired.	11.48
The global megaconferences in their current form are useful and cost-effective. We should continue with them, but only with marginal changes.	2.27
No view	7.18

The overall view of the respondents very clearly indicates that the people are now mostly sceptical of the benefits of the present form of the global megaconferences in the water sector. While they feel that there are needs for global and regional water policy dialogues, the general view is that these events should become more focused, and more problem- and solution-oriented, rather than being extended talk-fests. They should be planned with clearly identified goals and objectives in terms of achievements and impacts, which do not appear to be the case at present. Equally, there should be mechanisms in place to monitor the follow-up activities and impacts of the events, and also for objective evaluations by independent and capable experts of the processes used to organize each event, the event itself and its outputs and impacts. These evaluators must not only be

independent, but also be perceived by the water profession to be independent, so that their assessments are considered to be accurate, objective, comprehensive and without hidden agendas or biases. The evaluators should not be linked to the conference organizers in any way to avoid pseudo-evaluations. Furthermore, these evaluations should not be kept confidential: rather, any one interested should have easy access to them. The evaluations should subsequently be used to improve the process, structure and other organizational aspects of the future megaconferences in order that their outputs are usable and their impacts become significant.

It should be noted that good and objective evaluations are only part of the story. Until and unless the organizers of these events seriously consider the results of the evaluations and then incorporate them appropriately during the planning process for the next event, these analyses are likely to be only paper exercises that will simply collect dust on various book shelves. Furthermore, and most unfortunately, currently there appears to be a tendency to shoot the messenger bringing any bad news, rather than consider the reasons behind such news, and then decide how the situation can be improved.

The respondents pointed out that for any large continuing series of events, there are invariably many vested interests, both personal and institutional, as well as inertia in terms of instituting any significant change, which collectively will favour mostly business-as-usual approaches with only incremental, but marginal, changes. It will require a courageous, enlightened and politically incorrect leadership to institute the necessary changes that are now clearly needed. Unfortunately, such enlightened leaderships generally are mostly in short supply in nearly all fields, including water. Without such a determined effort, the megaconferences are most likely to continue to attract large number of participants as “water fairs”, but equally they will continue to have limited impacts on water management processes and practices, globally, regionally or nationally.

7.10 Alternatives to Megaconferences

During the Bangkok workshop, it was noted that the megaconferences are in fact only one small part of an overall global process, with numerous other actors all over the world, who are contributing to an exponential increase in understanding of better ways of planning and managing water. Vast majority of these actors have never participated in these events and never will. They are unlikely to do so in the future. Even if it is assumed that these events are attracting around 20,000 real participants, which is highly unlikely, these numbers, when viewed from a global perspective, are not that significant, especially when compared to the number of people interested in water issues all over the world. Viewed in another way, even this high number of 20,000 represents less than 1% of the people interested in water-related issues in a single major country like China or India. Thus, vast majority of people interested in water do not attend these meetings, or are even aware of them. The organizers of these events may have self-interest in conveying the impression and/or encouraging the perception that these global megaconferences, with numerous ministers and water experts from different countries of the

world, are the places where seminal and momentous decisions on overall water management are made. Unfortunately, this is not the case. While these meetings may discuss most water-related issues under the sun, they are generally producing very few concrete and implementable ideas and decisions.

Among a number of barriers to effective actions to improve the effectiveness of megaconferences are inertia, with its related partners and attributes such as ignorance, scepticism, fatalism, etc., which are powerful forces that are likely to prefer the maintenance of the *status quo*, aversion to risk-taking in the face of many uncertainties and their implications, and vested interests in maintaining the present situation. This is particularly relevant for those who fear they may have to bear the lion's share of the financial and other intangible costs of any change in institutional and/or personal terms but without assurance of commensurate benefits or pay-off. Furthermore, and most importantly, any serious change will require strong and determined national and international leaderships. Equally, all these events will have to invariably wrestle with cacophony of entrenched competing institutional and personal interests which mostly will require extensive compromises to arrive at any consensus decision on any complex issue. The current process mostly results in the acceptance of the lowest common denominator types of actions, which are acceptable to most actors. They are highly unlikely to be at business unusual type of decisions that the world currently needs and clamouring for.

Because of numerous prevailing uncertainties, it is too early to predict the future shape of the global water megaconferences with any degree of confidence. However, what is certain that the current overwhelming global perception is that these megaconferences are not delivering the results that were anticipated, and business as usual is no longer an acceptable alternative. Whether there will be an emphatically courageous call from the water profession as a whole for changes in the structure of the megaconferences, in stark contrast to what has happened in recent years, only the future can tell. What is evident from the global survey is that there will be renewed and persistent calls for more changes which will ensure that business as usual is no longer an alternative for the way the past water-related megaconferences have been organized. What no one can foretell at present, with any degree of confidence, is how long it will take before the needed changes will actually occur.