

# 1 Impacts of Megaconferences on Global Water Development and Management

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## 1.1 Introduction

The concept of megaconferences is not new. However, like most concepts, the approach has evolved considerably over time. The process was started during the early 1970s, somewhat inadvertently, by the United Nations, with its Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm, in 1972. This intergovernmental conference was initially proposed by Sweden to discuss existing and emerging environmental issues, including acid rain that was having significant adverse impacts on the ecosystems of the Swedish lakes and forests but which the Swedish authorities were unable to control because the atmospheric emissions originated from Germany and the United Kingdom. It was convened at a high decision-making level, and was instrumental in giving the nascent national and international environmental movements a major push. The success of the Stockholm Conference immediately spawned a new trend of megaconferences on priority global issues. The United Nations, shortly thereafter, followed through with a series of megaconferences on Population (Bucharest, 1974), Food (Rome, 1974), Women (Mexico City, 1975), Human Settlements (Vancouver, 1976), Water (Mar del Plata, 1977), Desertification (Nairobi, 1977), New and Renewable Sources of Energy (Nairobi, 1979), and Science and Technology for Development (Vienna, 1981).

Some of these megaconferences attracted more global attention than the others, and, not surprisingly, their global impacts varied widely. Generally, the earlier meetings, especially those held up to 1977, generated more international interest and impacts than the later ones. For example, by the time the Conference on New and Renewable Source of Energy was convened in Nairobi, in 1979, the global interest in megaconferences had waned very significantly, even though this meeting was on an important issue. Neither the Nairobi Energy Conference nor the Vienna Conference on Science and Technology left any visible footprint on the world.

The participation to these megaconferences was restricted only to governmental delegations and representatives of intergovernmental organizations. Sometimes, concurrent to a megaconference, there were parallel meetings in which the general public could participate. However, the number of participants at most of these parallel meetings was small. In addition, these parallel meetings had no impact on the discussions, conclusions and recommendations of the main events.

Exactly 20 years after these megaconferences, the United Nations decided to revisit those issues on which there were still considerable political interests. These

included Environment (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), Food Security (Rome, 1994), Population (Cairo, 1994), Women (Beijing, 1995) and Human Settlements (Istanbul, 1996). In addition, during the 1990s, under the aegis of the United Nations, a framework convention on Desertification was also agreed to.

In retrospect, for a variety of reasons, water basically disappeared from the international political agenda during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, during these two decades, there was not even any serious discussion at any United Nations fora on the necessity or desirability of organizing a global consultation on water-related issues, 20 years after Mar del Plata, as was done for many other issues that were still considered to be important, i.e. food, population, women and human habitat.

Unfortunately, however, there was not only no serious and comprehensive review of the global water situation 20 years after the Mar del Plata megaconference, but also there was no serious discussion at any United Nations agency on the need, importance and relevance of organizing such a consultation. In retrospect, somehow, water simply no longer was considered to be a priority political issue by the international community during the 1990s.

A few people that were directly associated with the UN System (for example, Rodda, 1993) have argued that water was indeed an important issue during the UN Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, since the Chapter 18 of Agenda 21 was on water. Regrettably, however, several factors negate such delusions. First, very few water professionals from developing countries seriously participated at the Rio Conference, or during its long preparatory process, which were almost exclusively dominated by the officials from the national Environment ministries. Equally, the heads of states that were present during the Rio deliberations did not refer to water as an important environmental issue. The only exception was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, who only referred to the complexities of the water sharing arrangements of the River Ganga with India. Not even one single head of state referred to the water problems the world was facing, or likely to face in the future, or the importance of good water governance. In addition, the Chapter 18, even though it was the longest chapter of the Agenda 21, had one of the poorest frameworks. It also lacked any serious intellectual or technical gravitas. In all probability, water developments all over the world would not have been any different at present, even if the Rio Conference had not taken place. Thus, the claim that Rio was a major global milestone for the water sector has absolutely no factual basis.

However, while the water part of Rio (Chapter 18) did not have any visible and long-term impact on the water sector, the environmental components of Rio most certainly had perceptible impacts on the water sector. In fact, shortly after Rio, countries like Brazil and Mexico put the water-related issues under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Environment, and the environmental aspects of water development started to receive much more attention in the water sector compared to the situation that existed before the Rio Conference took place.

These and other similar developments indicate that any objective and realistic assessment would have to conclude that water as a whole basically disappeared from the international political agenda during most of the 1980s and 1990s. Any

objective assessment will indicate that water was not considered to be a priority global issue during this period.

More than three decades after the Mar del Plata Conference, it is important to objectively and constructively review the progress that has been made during this period in the water sector globally, especially in terms of successes, shortcomings and constraints. It is also necessary to assess realistically the water-related issues that the world is likely to face in the future (Biswas et al., 2009).

The main analysis in this chapter, on the evolution of megaconferences related to the water sector, starts from the Mar del Plata Conference of 1977 and continues until the end of the Third World Water Forum in Japan in 2003.

## 1.2 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 substantive water meeting that has ever been held at a high political intergovernmental level in the entire 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 remarkable 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).

Concurrent to the official UN Conference, there was also another meeting on water at Mar del Plata, which was primarily attended by academics, government officials and NGOs. Overall, the level of participation to this parallel meeting left much to be desired (less than 400 people attended), and the participants were mostly local. In addition, the discussions at this parallel meeting had no relation or impact whatsoever on the official deliberations that took place at the main Conference.

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 as a whole clearly indicates that it was more of a success than most of its ardent supporters believed at the time the meeting was held, or shortly thereafter. A comprehensive review of the Conference achievements, carried out in 1987, a decade after the event, indicated that it had numerous primary, secondary and tertiary impacts, which were for the most part significant and 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, and also detailed assessments of planning needs and management practices (Biswas, 1978a). It is important to note that the massive documentation that was produced during its preparatory process and its results are still available. This is in sharp contrast to the subsequent water megaconferences like the Dublin Conference and the World Water Forums, whose documentation has been conspicuously absent.

Several developing countries, encouraged by the Mar del Plata event, put in motion processes to assess the availability and the distribution of their surface and groundwater resources, and existing and future patterns of water demands and uses. Most developing countries not only have continued these activities, which were initiated during the preparatory process of the Water Conference, or shortly thereafter, but also have significantly strengthened them progressively during the past three decades. In retrospect, the activities leading to the Mar del Plata, the event itself, and its follow up activities, have contributed significantly more to water development than all the combined efforts made by the UN System as a whole either before the meeting or during the ensuing three decades. By any standard, it was a most remarkable achievement.

A major output of the Conference was the recommendation that the period 1980–1990 should be proclaimed as the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. The objectives of the Decade included that the world should be forcefully reminded that hundreds of millions of people did not have access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and accelerated political will and investments were essential to dramatically improve this unacceptable situation. Even the most confirmed critic of the international system will have to accept the fact that the Decade significantly changed the quality of life of millions of people all over the developing world in terms of access to clean water and sanitation. In spite of this remarkable progress, the task, of course, is far from complete for a variety of reasons including population growth and continued mismanagement of water resources. Equally, and most certainly, without the Water Conference, the progress in this area would have been much less than what can be observed at present.

In retrospect, the Water Conference also had an important impact on the United Nations System as a whole. During the 1970s, the rivalries between the various UN agencies working in the water area were intense. The work initiated

by 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 have gradually given way to extensive consultations but, unfortunately, still with limited real cooperation, between the agencies concerned during the past three decades. The absence of real cooperation has meant that the considerable synergy that water programmes of the various United Nations agencies could have produced has simply not been realized.

Viewed from any direction, the Mar del Plata has to be considered to be an important milestone in the entire history 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 mostly became popular only a decade later.

Looking back, three areas should have received additional attention: financial arrangements, modalities for the implementation of the Action Plan and management of water resources shared by two or more countries. On the first issue of realistic financial arrangements needed to implement the Action Plan, regrettably this aspect has never received the attention it deserved at any UN megaconference thus far, starting from the Stockholm in 1972. Thus, not surprisingly, the ambitious Action Plans of these Conferences have never been satisfactorily implemented. Mar del Plata was no exception to this overall general situation. It was a systemic problem of the United Nations, which, most unfortunately, continues even to this day, some 36 years after the Stockholm Conference.

It is also a sad and regrettable fact that United Nations System has never critically analysed the efficiency of the processes used for organizing these megaconferences, their relative strengths and weaknesses, and the impacts of the final outcomes in terms of their implementation. Consequently, many of the mistakes made have continued from one conference to another. How the agreed to Action Plans could be realistically and cost-effectively implemented is one area that has consistently received inadequate attention during all the high-level UN megaconferences, and also in terms of serious discussions, both before, during and after these events, and within the UN System itself. The Water Conference was no exception to these practices.

For a variety of reasons, the management of international waters was not considered as comprehensively as it should have been at the Mar del Plata. In an objective and retrospective analysis of the Water Conference, its Secretary General candidly observed that this area was “not tackled satisfactorily at the Conference” (Mageed, 1982). He further 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 excellent suggestion was never considered seriously by the UN System.

Even more unfortunately, the International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE), which was convened in Dublin, in January 1992, by the United Nations System as a prelude to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), all but ignored the achievements and the impacts of the Mar del Plata, or the process that was used for its organization. So far as the organizers of the ICWE were concerned, not only they ignored totally the results,

or implications and experience of the Mar del Plata Conference due to some inexplicable reasons, but also, most regrettably, it was a deliberate decision. This was because some of the people associated with the preparatory process of the Dublin meeting argued that they should bring “new blood” and “new ideas”. In reality, not only any new usable ideas surfaced during the Dublin meeting but also the institutional memories of the United Nations System related to the Mar del Plata somehow disappeared completely during the preparatory process leading to the Dublin Conference and then at Dublin itself. This deliberate but most unfortunate decision to ignore the results and the contributions of Mar del Plata was one of the important reasons as to why the meagre impacts of the Dublin Conference were in sharp contrast to the significant achievements of the Mar del Plata. Some of these issues will be discussed next.

### **1.3 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 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Most development and water professionals had expected that the UNCED would not only revive the spirit of the 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 considered to be 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 needs to review very carefully. While some institutions and people have deliberately glossed over this unsatisfactory situation, the water profession can no longer ignore the facts and the reasons as to why the megameetings of Dublin and Rio failed so miserably to put water in the international political agenda, and also to contribute something substantial to accelerate the construction of much-needed water infrastructure and improve water management processes and practices in the developing world. Lessons should be learnt from such failures so that the same errors are not repeated in the future.

#### **1.3.1 Failure of the Dublin Conference**

The Dublin Conference was convened by the United Nations System and was expected to recommend appropriate sustainable water policies and action programmes for consideration by the UNCED. Unfortunately, it never achieved even these modest objectives. Its duration, only 4 months before the UNCED, was ill-conceived and ensured that it had at best marginal impacts on the deliberations at

Rio. Even if the Dublin Conference had come out with a single new idea or concept, which it did not, and had considered critical issues in terms of major programme initiatives, including how much would such programmes cost, where would the funds come from, and how and by whom would such new programmes be implemented, which again was basically ignored, there simply was not enough time available to effectively incorporate any ideas that could have come from Dublin into the Rio programme. In retrospect, the overall planning for the Dublin Conference left much to be desired, in terms of influencing the water-related agenda at Rio, ensuring promotion of efficient and equitable water management in the world, and harnessing new investment funds for the water sector.

Second, the Dublin Conference, for some incredible and inexplicable reasons, was organized as a meeting of experts and not as an intergovernmental meeting. This was in spite of the explicit advice given to the Secretariat by certain governments, notably Sweden, and several knowledgeable water experts, including the author, and the prevailing rules that governed the organization of the UN megaconferences. The distinction between a meeting of experts and an intergovernmental meeting is an important consideration in the context of any UN megaconference, since such conferences can *only* consider recommendations from intergovernmental meetings and *not* from an expert group meeting, as was the case for Dublin. Accordingly, and predictably, certain governments objected at Rio to any reference to the results of the Dublin Conference, irrespective of whatever may have been their importance or relevance, on procedural grounds, since it was *not* an intergovernmental meeting. It is still a mystery as to why the organizers of the Dublin Conference chose the route of expert group meeting approach, especially when they were very specifically warned that the results of such a process could not be considered at Rio because of the prevailing UN rules. Accordingly, and in all probability, the entire Chapter 18 of Agenda 21, which dealt 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 August 1992, shortly after the Dublin Conference, the overall view of the participants was that the Dublin meeting was a failure, especially in terms of outputs and impacts, and that the water profession could not afford another similar major setback in the future (Biswas 1997).

During the 1990s it became “politically correct” for many national and international organizations to speak glowingly of the so-called Dublin Principles as if they were new and they would, by themselves, somehow contribute to efficient and equitable water development. Equally, it was often claimed that the four principles that were derived through an unplanned and *ad hoc* process were the most important ones in the field of water management. The four Dublin Principles were not even included in the Agenda 21 and, for the most part, are simply bland statements of the obvious, which even if they were implemented by a miracle, would *not* create the necessary enabling conditions for efficient water management. Most surprisingly, the principles did not refer to the fundamental objectives of water developments, like poverty alleviation, regional economic distribution or environmental conservation. The first two objectives, most surprisingly, were ignored

at Dublin. This is in spite of the fact that no water development project is viable over the long-term if issues like equity and poverty are basically ignored. Not surprisingly, a scant few years after the Dublin meeting, its Principles became, at best, a brief footnote in the history of water management.

Furthermore, the Dublin Conference basically ignored the issue of water governance, which became a major consideration only a few years later.

An objective analysis may even indicate that in several instances Dublin may even have been a retrogressive step, especially if its results and impacts were compared to what were achieved at Mar del Plata. For example, one of the four Dublin Principles stated that water should be “recognized as an economic good”. In contrast, 15 years earlier, Mar del Plata had specifically urged to “adopt appropriate pricing policies with a view to encouraging 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. Dublin emphasized exclusively water as an economic good and, most surprisingly, ignored the historical fact that water has always been considered to be a social good. By ignoring totally social aspects of water, including equitable access, it created an unnecessary chasm between water as an economic good and a social good. More than a decade passed before the chasm could be bridged, and the world could return to the earlier paradigm that water is both a social and an economic good.

In addition, the so-called Dublin Principles are generalities, and at best could be considered to be good rhetoric and which mostly reflected the short-term political views of some people of that time. The four Principles 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 at Dublin as to how these vague principles could be operationalized by the decision-makers and water professionals in developing countries, or elsewhere for that matter. Now, some 16 years after Dublin, the die-hard supporters of the Dublin Principles have mostly disappeared, and the very few that are left have consistently failed to show how these Principles can be operationalized in the context of efficient water management in a complex but real world. Also, neither Dublin nor Rio has had any perceptible impact on the water sector which would not have occurred even if these two events had not taken place.

## **1.4 World Commission for Water**

Past experiences indicate that world commissions are generally 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. To its credit, the World Commission for Water did manage to assemble a very distinguished group of individuals, who willingly agreed to serve on the Commission in their personal capacities at a very short notice.



Right from the very beginning, the Commission had a very tight time schedule to organize itself and to produce a report within a period of a little over a 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 consultative process eventually encompassed thousands of individuals from all over the world, representing hundreds of institutions that were local, national, regional or global in nature, and both governmental and non-governmental. In terms of process, it was thus a unique and complex exercise. Never before in the entire history of water, such an exercise was ever attempted, let alone carried out.

The Commission reviewed the results of all the consultations and the discussions to produce a final report entitled: "A Water Secure World: Vision for Water, Life and Environment" (World Commission for Water in the 21st Century, 2000). The report was concise (only 68 pages), and written in a form that was easily understandable by anyone interested in water. Equally, since the Commission was independent, it managed to make several recommendations which may not have been possible through intergovernmental fora like those of the United Nations or the World Water Council where consensus rules the day.

The main thrusts of the report of the Commission can 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 actions.

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.

According to the Commissioners, "the single most immediate and important measure" that they could "recommend is the systematic adoption of full cost pricing for water services." The report suggested that "an essential element will be to use targeted, time-bound subsidies to attract first class service providers who can be paid for the costs of their services and provide users with high quality services." The reasons for this recommendation were the following:

- free water leads to wastage and inefficient use;
- considerable resources are invested in the water and sanitation sectors in developing countries which were estimated at \$30 billion per year;

- governments in developing countries could not even meet the existing investment demands for water services, let alone the very substantial requirements for the future; and
- limited public resources are devoted to public goods, specially environmental enhancement (for example, much of the wastewater produced in Africa, Asia or Latin America are now inadequately treated).

No reasonable person will disagree with the Commission's view that the day when water could be considered to be a free good that would be automatically provided by the governments at very low or zero costs is gradually, but most certainly, coming to an end. However, achieving water pricing will not be an easy task since there are simply 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 predominant during the Second World Water Forum in the Hague (hereafter referred to as the Hague Forum), and to a lesser extent at the Third World Water Forum in Japan (hereafter referred to as the Japan Forum).

This of course is not correct, since water utilities, irrespective of whether they are in public or private sector, will have to charge an appropriate price for water if universal access to clean drinking water and proper wastewater management is to be a reality. It should also be noted that 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 which compares very favourably with any water utility that is run by a private sector company anywhere in the world (Tortajada, 2006). Losses from the Singapore water system, currently about 4.6%, are now one of the lowest in the world. Equally, however, losses from many public sector managed water companies are also now running close to 40–60%, and in a few cases even up to 80% (Biswas, 2000). The performance variations of the public sector companies are simply far too diverse to draw any definitive conclusions. The performance of private sector companies has been equally variable. Accordingly, dogmatic views on the performances of the public or the private sectors are not universally valid. Each case should be considered on its own merits and constraints, and the prevailing local social, economic and institutional conditions. It should also be noted that the performances of the public or the private sector utilities may vary with time, sometimes quite significantly.

In the future, the main focus will unquestionably be to encourage public–private, public–public and public–private–civil society partnerships in many different forms, depending upon specific local conditions (Asian Development Bank, 2007). It should no longer be the continuation of the simplistic arguments like public sector versus the private sector, or whether water should be priced, or free, or heavily subsidized. Similarly, not a single public or private sector model, or water pricing model, will fit equally well to all countries, or even within one

country. Furthermore, all these models will continue to evolve with changing social, economic and political conditions, public perceptions, technological developments and governance situations.

In retrospect, the overall impact of the report of the Commission (the author was a member) on the water sector has been minimal. Probably its main contribution was to encourage a large number of water professionals from different parts of the world to work together to develop visions for water. However, all these visions were poorly formulated in the sense that not even one of them identified how the world may look like in 2010, let alone a decade or more later (they were all supposed to be for 2020). Basically, most visions were similar, irrespective of the geographical areas concerned, and their social, economic, political and institutional conditions. In addition, they were very broad, general, linear and somewhat simplistic. They were also unusable in terms of formulating specific national policies that could be implemented.

Accordingly, and not surprisingly, all these visions were basically ignored by the governments of the countries concerned, and now have become primarily historical documents which are likely to be of very little use, either to the practitioners, or to the academics, or even to the people who formulated these visions. In addition, the regions selected often contained countries with very different levels of water availability, climatic and other physical conditions, management and technical capacities, institutional and legal frameworks, and varying levels of socio-economic development conditions. For example, the South Asian vision included both Bhutan and India. The visions and expectations of these two countries, one very large and the other very small, have to be very different. Not surprisingly, the South Asian vision was dominated by the large countries: unique features, accomplishments and expectations of a small country like Bhutan were mostly ignored. Such broad visions, developed exclusively by water professionals for very wide range of conditions, seldom have any practical value. This is a lesson, most unfortunately, the organizers of the megaconferences still have not learnt.

## 1.5 First and Second World Water Forums

The World Water Council organized the First World Water Forum in Marrakech, Morocco, 1997. The Council was new at that time, and was trying to carve out a role or niche for itself. The initial idea was to have a series of World Water Forums “with movers and shakers” of the water profession, somewhat similar to the World Economic Forums of Davos. This however proved to be an impossible dream for many reasons. First was the lack of finance. The Council had very limited funds which meant that a Davos type of forums was simply out of its reach. Second was the absence of good, long-term planning capacity, which simply did not exist. Third, the Council simply did not have the clout to bring together the movers and the shakers of the water community. Fourth, the different Council members had different views and agendas, sometimes polar opposite, which were

simply not possible to be reconciled. In addition, political infighting within the Council by some members to push their own personal and institutional interests was intense which ensured that the decisions taken were seldom optimal, either for the Council or for the water profession as a whole. The decisions were reached with considerable tradeoffs between the various parties and interests which meant that they were often reduced to the lowest common denominator in order that these could be made acceptable to the Council as a whole.

The first Forum was attended by a few hundred water professionals. It was mostly a low-keyed affair, which consisted of continuous speech-making, from morning to late evening, with virtually no time for discussions and consultations. The Forum did come out with some recommendations, but how these were arrived at, or who prepared and promoted them, are still a mystery even to this day. These were mostly certainly not discussed in any fashion within the Forum framework.

On the positive side, the Forum did produce documentation containing some selected speeches (Ait Kadi et al., 1997). This simply did not happen for the Second, Third, or Fourth Forums.

The Second World Water Forum was organized in the Hague, the Netherlands, 17–22 March 2000, and its centrepiece was the Report of the World Commission on Water. The Forum was strongly supported organizationally and financially by the government of the Netherlands. According to the organizers, some 4,600 participants from all over the world participated in this event. It was thus a far bigger meeting, at least in terms of the number of participants, compared to the first Forum or the Mar del Plata Conference. However unlike the Mar del Plata, the Forum was sponsored by the World Water Council, a NGO, and not by an inter-governmental body like the United Nations. The large number of participants who attended the Forum confirmed a new global trend of the 1990s for the water sector. The important international roles played by the UN System during the pre-1980 period had started to decline, and this vacuum was then filled by new institutions like the World Water Council, Global Water Partnership, Stockholm Water Symposium and Singapore International Water Week. This general trend will probably continue well into the next decade. However, the UN System is now trying to carve out more visible roles for itself, especially within the context of the World Water Forums and the Stockholm Water Symposiums.

The Hague Forum was different from the Mar del Plata Conference at least in five important ways. First, unlike the continuous speech-making at the plenary sessions of the UN-sponsored megaconferences by the ministers and the other senior officials from all the countries present and by the heads of the intergovernmental organizations, the Hague Forum constituted over 100 sessions on a variety of topics, which included issues as diverse as water and energy, next generation of water leaders, water vision for Mexico, senior women water leaders, water and religion and business community (CEO) panel. Some of the sessions were well attended, but others had only 10–20 participants, including their organizers. Second, participation to the Forum was open to anyone who wished to participate and had the financial support to participate from their institutions or the donors. This was in contrast to Mar del Plata, where participation was very strictly restricted only to

the official representatives of the governments and the appropriate intergovernmental organizations.

Third, framework and issues considered at Mar del Plata emerged from carefully structured and organized regional meetings, which had considerable technical and intellectual underpinnings. Also, its Secretariat commissioned think pieces from the leading international water experts. The Hague Forum was structured mostly on an *ad hoc* basis. Several hundreds of papers were presented at the Hague, without any real peer review or quality control. Thus, for the most part, the papers presented at the Hague or the Japan Forums were somewhat poor and were mostly of SOS (same old stuff) type (Biswas, 2006).

Fourth, the Mar del Plata Conference resulted in an Action Plan, which was accepted by all the governments that were members of the UN. The Hague and the Japan Forums did have Inter-Ministerial meetings which were restricted to senior government officials. Active participation of the ministers, however, was patchy at best, and very few of them took the process seriously. At both of these Forums, there were Ministerial Declarations that were not only very general but also they broke no new grounds, had any innovative idea or had any subsequent impact. A prominent Mexican journalist wrote that the results of the Inter-Ministerial meeting at the Hague was “like water: no odour, no colour and insipid”. Finally, the two Forums gave no thought as to how the information that was presented could be disseminated to the interested water professional for possible use or implementation after the event was over. This was in sharp contrast to the Mar del Plata, where information dissemination, before, during and after the Conference was considered to be very important, and taken very seriously. A cynic, however, may argue that not much useful knowledge or results came out of the two Forums which were worth disseminating.

Much of the Hague Forum activities were conducted peacefully. There were heated discussions on a few issues, especially on privatization and large dams. For the most part, these were carried out in a civilized and democratic manner. There were some difficult moments, however. The Plenary Session was disrupted by a group of protesters who were protesting against the construction of a Spanish dam and privatization. Two of the protesters, a man and a woman, took off their clothes on the podium, and others chanted slogans or simply made loud noises, as a result of which the opening session had to be postponed. The “colourful” disruptions were obviously planned carefully well in advance, and ensured that their activities received extensive global media coverage, but because of wrong reasons. The proceedings finally restarted after a courageous personal intervention by the Prince of Orange.

Similarly, the session on water and energy, which was specially organized for the World Water Council to review the linkages between water and energy policies, was hijacked by a small group of 3–4 anti-dam activists from Narmada Bachao Andolan and International Rivers Network, who were interested only in a single issue (no large dams should be built anywhere in the world irrespective of their needs and benefits), which had nothing much to do with the main focus of the session. They unfurled banners, and their disruptions ensured that any civilized discussion on the focus of the session was impossible. This was indeed most

regrettable since the water profession had basically ignored energy in the past, even though water and energy policies and uses are closely interlinked. These interlinkages all over the world have steadily increased since the year 2000, and are likely to increase even further in the future. Fortunately, the security in the Forum was increased very significantly after the first day, and this effectively eliminated unwarranted disruptions. Similar problems, very fortunately, did not happen during the Japan and the Mexico Forums.

Significant credit for the independence of the Forum must be given to the Dutch Government, who ensured that it remained a public event, where people could express their views and opinions without any governmental interventions or interference. Accordingly, when the National Water Commission of Mexico formally asked the Forum organizers to “modify the programme” so that *only* the “officially designated representative” of that country could present the official “vision” of the country, instead of the representatives of the Mexican civil society as was planned for the Forum, the request was politely but firmly declined by its Dutch organizers. This is a most welcome step that simply would not have been possible, had the Forum been organized under the aegis of the United Nations, or other similar intergovernmental institutions.

## 1.6 Bonn Conference and Johannesburg Summit

The main global water megaconference after the Hague Forum was the Freshwater Conference at Bonn, held in December 2001, which was expected to send a message on water to the World Summit on Sustainable Development that was later 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 Conference look even weaker now compared to the Dublin discussions. Not only did it not break any new ground in terms of ideas, targets, investments or programmes, most of the discussions were equally of SOS type and some times even grossly out of date. In fact, a cynic may be excused for arguing that many of the Bonn statements have been heard repeatedly during the previous two decades! Except for the discussion on corruption, “political correctness” was the order of the day! Thus, and not surprisingly, the so-called “Bonn keys” simply disappeared from the collective memory of the water professionals within less than one year of the consultation!

The Ministerial Declaration of Bonn was equally vague and insipid as the Hague or the Kyoto declarations. In addition, 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 world as a whole. The primary focuses were on water supply, sanitation and water quality. This highly skewed outcome was most probably due to the interests of the organizers of the Bonn discussions. One can legitimately argue that the Bonn discussions focused more than 75% of their attention to less than 25% of the global water problems!

So far as the Johannesburg Summit is concerned, its overall impact on the water sector has been somewhat amorphous. On the positive side, certainly significantly more water professionals participated in this event, compared to the Rio Conference. However, this participation occurred only outside the framework of the intergovernmental discussions, where the main issues were discussed and the actual decisions were being taken. Thus, the overall impact of a larger non-governmental participation was mostly marginal on the final conclusions and declarations of this Summit. Realistically, the conclusions and recommendations on water-related issues would have been very similar irrespective of whether the non-governmental discussions had taken place or not. The Summit also broke no new grounds in the area of water, nor did it spawn any new definitive programme on water, or bring any new additional investment funds to the water sector. It reiterated the water-related Millennium Development Goals, and added one in the area of sanitation, which was a most positive development.

The global views on the achievements and impacts of the Johannesburg Summit have not been auspicious. Consider the following headlines from prestigious media from different parts of the world on the results of this Summit:

World Summit falls flat – *Asahi Shimbun*, Japan  
Dialogue of the Deaf – *Daily Telegraph*, London  
Big Agenda, little action – *International Herald Tribune*, Paris  
A long way to go for little success – *Financial Times*, London  
The bubble-and-squeak summit – *The Economist*, London  
Was the sustainable summit a wash out? *The Economist*, London

These headlines probably reflect accurately its overall impacts on the water sector as well.

## 1.7 Third World Water Forum

The Third World Water Forum was held in Japan in March 2003. According to the official statistics, this Forum attracted significantly more than four times the number of participants compared to the Hague Forum. It had nearly three times the number of sessions. However, as any perceptive observer of the Forum may have noted that if there were so many participants, certainly significantly more than one-third were NOT present during the actual discussions on any day at Kyoto, Osaka and Otsu. Furthermore, whereas the Second Forum was held in one city, the Third Forum was held concurrently in three cities, Kyoto, Osaka and Otsu, which contributed to high levels of fragmentation. The large number of participants and sessions, spread over three cities, meant that no single participant or institution, including the Forum organizers, had a clear and overall view of what was happening during the Forum, and what, if any, were the main messages that came out of these discussions. Whereas the Second Forum had the binding thread of the Report of the World Commission on Water, the Third Forum basically constituted a mixture of some 350 independent sessions, which were impossible to integrate. It

was simply an impossible task to distil the overall messages from all these diverse sessions in three locations.

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 has had no impact on water management and development practices in the world. The draft Ministerial Declaration was initially formulated primarily by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, without adequate consultations with the national governments before the meeting took place. Some governments did take the Declaration seriously and sent detailed comments, which were mostly ignored. The whole process to prepare the Declaration was somewhat opaque and non-participatory. Equally, ministers present did not take the Declaration seriously in terms of its possible implementation later.

A special aspect of the Third Forum was a very genuine and praiseworthy effort by the Japanese organizers to ensure good and real participation by the water professionals as a whole in the event. There was a very genuine attempt by the Japanese Secretariat to make the Forum inclusive. This ensured that institutions and individuals could at best make marginal attempts to promote their interests and agendas. This, must regrettably, was not the case for the Fourth World Water Forum in Mexico.

Even though the Japan Forum turned out to be an expensive event, its impacts on the water sector have been somewhat marginal. In retrospect, it can probably be best described as a large “water fair”, with large number of participants.

Based on these results, it is essential for the water profession to critically and objectively assess the impacts and the cost-effectiveness of the various major water-related global megaconferences. The existing implicit thinking that the number of people, or countries that participated in a megaconference, or the total money spent, can no longer be considered to be important, or even relevant, indicators of their success.

## **1.8 Comparison of Three Forums**

So far as the Marrakech, the Hague and the Japan fora are concerned, an objective evaluation indicates that the Marrakech Forum had only speeches but no discussion. In contrast, the Hague and the Japan fora discussed numerous water issues, without any clear underlying philosophy linking or binding them. There were also several sessions on very similar topics. Due to the vast choices of the sessions organized, participants mostly went to the ones that interested them, and where their individual ideologies and views were most likely to be supported. A good example was the many 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 is a crime against all humanity! At another session, a different speaker suggested that dams are absolutely essential for poverty alleviation in the developing world, and thus many more dams must be built. Although the two statements were diametrically opposite, no one challenged



such statements. Thus, both the speakers and the audience present at the two sessions probably returned to their homes thinking that the Forum participants had basically accepted their views.

Accordingly, a major constraint of the second and the third Forums was the inadequacy of any sustained attempt to link the various sessions on similar topics, or related topics. Furthermore, the papers and discussions of the Hague and the Japan Forums are now irretrievably lost, since no effort was made to collect, synthesize or disseminate them. What is available is a set of somewhat general and superficial summaries which are not of much use to any serious water professional or institution. Regrettably the problems were very similar for the Fourth Forum in Mexico City as well.

The situation was better in one way at Japan, compared to the Hague. If the dam issue is considered, at Kyoto, a constructive debate on this subject was organized by the International Hydropower Association and the International Rivers Network. The views on large dams of these two institutions are diametrically 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 were somewhat neutral and open-minded on the issue. While this debate was a plus for the third Forum, on the issues of dams, the sheer number of sessions held at Kyoto ensured that very few participants, if any, had an integrative view of the relevant discussions on the dam-related issues. In addition, the overall views on the needs for and the impacts of large dams at different sessions were different, sometimes totally different. These views were often ideological and not based on facts or objective analyses.

All the three World Water Forums had another major shortcoming. Not even one seriously discussed or raised the water issues of the future, say, beyond the post-2010 period, let alone to 2020 and beyond. All the three Forums consistently argued that "business as usual is not an option," but then behaved as if it was the only option available. The world is changing rapidly, and real visionaries are urgently needed to develop future water visions of the world. All the visions presented at the Hague, at national and regional levels, as well as sectorally, were far too general for any possible practical use. Thus, and not surprisingly, in Japan, all these visions simply disappeared from the Forum agenda. Accordingly, continuity and interlinkages between the second and third Forums left much to be desired. In fact, there have been no real interlinkages between the four Forums held thus far. For all practical purposes, all the four Forums held thus far have been individual and discrete events, with no real interlinkages, or continuing discussions on priority issues, where the results or the conclusions from one event was taken and followed through in the next. This shortcoming is one of the main causes which has ensured very low impacts of these four megaconferences.

A significant percentage of the sessions at the Third Forum was similar to those in the Hague, in terms of topics, overall poor quality of the presentations and absence of quality control. The discussions were exclusively past and present oriented. No new innovative idea came out from the three World Water Forums, no new ground was broken, and no new commitments were made by the governments

present in terms of new investments, or water-related activities that would not have happened without these events.

It is interesting to note that the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, Agnes van Ardenne, said categorically at Kyoto that large-scale megaconferences like the World Water Forums have no future. The view of the Dutch Government is noteworthy since it hosted and financed the Second World Water Forum. Her views, and the reasons thereof, should have been carefully considered by the water profession in general, and the World Water Council in particular, prior to the hosting of the subsequent forum in Mexico City.

The questions that must be asked at present are as follows: Are these megaconferences worth their costs and the efforts needed to organize them, especially in terms of their eventual and overall impacts? 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. Everything considered, the time has come to stop being politically correct and claim everything is fine with these megaconferences. Past performances should be objectively evaluated in order to develop a cost-effective and a high impact road map for the future.

It is thus essential for the water profession to critically and objectively assess the overall impacts of the past water-related global megaconferences. This must not be a pseudo-evaluation, carried out with rose-coloured glasses and by the people who have been directly associated with the organization of these events, as have mostly been the case in the past. Nor should the results of these evaluations be kept confidential: otherwise future progress can at best be incremental, and the overall governance process will neither improve significantly nor be transparent.

The evaluations must be independent, objective, comprehensive and usable. The results of such evaluations should be used to define what other alternatives may be available in the future to obtain significantly better results and impacts, but in a more cost-effective and timely manner.

Because of the absence of any reliable assessment of the global water-related megaconferences of the past thus far, the Third World Centre for Water Management, with the support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of the United States, initiated a project which objectively and realistically examined the past events in order to identify their contributions to ensure a water-secure world for the future. This was not a pseudo-evaluation, as were carried out for some of the past events, but a serious attempt to evaluate objectively the impacts of the past megaconferences, and also try to see if there are better and more cost-effective alternatives. The results of this evaluation are outlined in the book. It clearly shows that all is not well with the megaconferences of the water world.

## **1.9 Concluding Remarks**

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 early

part of the 21st century, our profession really had 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 consider 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 “business unusual” solutions within the short timeframe available to us. One of the main lessons of the past has to be that the time for rhetoric and using one minute sound-bites is now over. We must develop urgently new and cogent paradigms and solutions which can be operationalized in developing countries and in the fields. Conceptual attractiveness alone is no longer adequate. Activity can no longer be considered to be equivalent to progress.

Globally, water is likely to become an increasingly critical resource issue for at least the next two decades in the developing world. Equally, forces of globalization, urbanization, population growth, food, energy and environmental securities, technological developments and information and communication revolution are changing the planning and management 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 new mind-sets and knowledge are needed to resolve increasingly complex and interrelated 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, or at best only limited guidance, during this period of explosive change and increasing complexities, uncertainties and unexpected turbulences. The stakes are high, but equally they give us new opportunities to improve water management practices very significantly like never before in human history. These complex trends and changes have to be identified and successfully managed. The opportunities are clearly there, and the tasks are doable. Accordingly, the water profession as a whole must rise to meet these challenges successfully and in a timely manner. These are priority issues that future water-related megaconferences must address firmly and squarely.

In terms of megaconferences, one very fundamental question that needs to be asked and answered is how can these events be carefully planned, organized and structured so that they can make meaningful contributions to ensure a water-secure world of the future. The present effort to assess the outputs and actual impacts of the megaconferences is a step in this direction.

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