

RESEARCH
REPORT



WORLD WATER FORUM:
IN RETROSPECT

Asit K. Biswas

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RESEARCH REPORTS

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- The water management processes will become increasingly more and more complex in the coming years.
- Tomorrow's water problems cannot be solved on the basis of analyses of yesterday's problems and using day before yesterday's solutions.
- Increasingly many of the emerging water problems and their solutions will come from outside the water sector and the water profession.
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The Centre welcomes comments on its activities, outputs and publications.

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WORLD WATER FORUM: IN RETROSPECT*

Asit K. Biswas

INTRODUCTION

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

Generally, for a variety of reasons, water disappeared from the international political agenda. Apologists have argued that water was one of the issues that was considered 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 arguments. First, very few water professionals from developing countries participated at the Rio Conference, which was almost exclusively dominated by the officials from the Environment ministries. Equally, the Heads of States that were present at the Rio deliberations rarely, if ever, referred to water as an important environmental issue. Chapter 18, even though it was the longest chapter of the Agenda 21, was also the most poorly formulated. In all probability, developments in the water sector would not have been very different at present, even if the Rio Conference had not taken place.

These and other similar symptoms indicate that any objective and realistic assessment would conclude that water basically disappeared from the international political agenda during most of the 1980s and 1990s. It was certainly not a priority issue.

The situation started to change during the late 1990s, primarily through the efforts of the annual Stockholm Water Symposium and International Water Resources Association, the formation of new institutions like the World Water Council and the Global Water Partnership, and the establishment of a high-powered blue-ribbon World Commission for Water in the 21st Century.

WORLD COMMISSION FOR WATER

Past experiences indicate that generally world commissions are not easy to organise and manage. Even more difficult is to establish a World Commission than can produce something useful and worthwhile that could have lasting impacts. There is no question that much of the success of the World Commission on Water could be attributed to a single individual, Ismail Serageldin, Vice President of the World Bank, who as the Chairman of the Commission, assembled a very distinguished group of individuals, who willingly agreed to serve on the Commission in their personal capacities. His Royal Highness, the Prince

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of Orange, was an honorary member of the Commission, and participated fully in the deliberations of the Commission throughout its entire existence.

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

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

The main thrusts of the report could be summarised as promoting:

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

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

- mobilisation of political will; and
- behavioural change by all.

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

It is worth noting that, 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 are the following:

- free water leads to wastage and inefficiency in use;
- considerable resources are invested in the water and sanitation sectors in developing countries estimated at \$30 billion per year;
- governments in developing countries cannot even meet the investment demands for water services at present, let alone the very substantial requirements for the future; and

- far too few public resources are devoted to public goods, specially environmental enhancement, for example, less than 10 percent of wastewaters produced in Asia or Latin America are now properly treated.

In my view, the day when water could be considered to be a free good that would be automatically provided by the governments at very low or no costs is gradually, but most certainly, coming to an end. Achieving water pricing would not be an easy task because there are too many vested interests in maintaining the current practices and also the status quo, too many dogmatic views which are often based on erroneous facts and/or understandings, and too many mind-sets that belong to the past. Equally many people automatically assume that water pricing and making water management practices more efficient would mean automatic transfer of all the functions from the public to the private sector. This was evident during the Hague Forum. This of course is not correct, since both public and private sectors have their strengths and weaknesses. For example, one of the best examples of urban water management is the case of Singapore, where a public sector autonomous company has a superb record. Losses from the Singapore water system, at about 7 percent, is now the best in the world. In contrast, losses from a few public sector companies are now running close to 80 percent. The variations between these two specific cases are simply far too large to make any definitive statement on the performance of the public sector companies. Equally, there are a few instances of private sector involvement which have created more problems than they have solved. Thus dogmatic solutions, one way or the other, are not the universal answer. Each case should be considered on its own merits and constraints, and the prevalent local conditions. In the future, the main focus will be unquestionably to encourage public-private partnerships, and it should no longer be the continuation of the simplistic argument of public versus private sector considerations.

WORLD WATER FORUM

Report of the World Commission on Water was the centrepiece of the World Water Forum. Organised in The Hague, the Netherlands, 17-22 March 2000, the Forum was strongly supported organisationally and financially by the Government of the Netherlands. Some 4600 participants from all over the world registered for this event. Unquestionably, it was the biggest and the most important water meeting since the United Nations Water Conference was held in Mar de Plata in March 1977. Unlike Mar del Plata, however, the Forum was sponsored by the World Water Council, and not by an intergovernmental body like the United Nations, who normally organised similar high-profile fora in the past. The success of the Forum confirmed the new global trend of the 1990s for the water sector: the major roles played by the UN system in the past have started to decline, and these are now being taken over by new institutions like the World Water Council, Global Water Partnership and International Water Resources Association. This trend is likely to continue and may even accelerate, in the present decade.

The Hague Forum was different from the Mar del Plata Conference at least in three important ways. First, unlike the continuous speech-making in the UN-sponsored mega-conferences by Ministers from all the countries present and by the heads of the intergovernmental organisations, the Hague Forum constituted over 100 special sessions on a variety of topics, which included issues like water and energy, next generation of water leaders, water vision for Mexico, senior women water leaders, water and religion, and business community (CEO) panel. Most of the sessions were well attended. Second, participation to the Forum was open to all. This was in contrast to Mar del Plata, where participation was very strictly restricted only to the official representatives of the governments and international organisations. Third, the Mar del Plata Conference resulted in an Action Plan, which was accepted by all governments. For example, one of the outputs of the Mar del Plata was the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, whose impact on the world clearly has been very substantial. In conjunction with the Hague Forum, there was also an Inter-Ministerial Conference, 21-22 March, participation to which

was also strictly restricted. The Ministers, however, came out with a declaration that not surprisingly was very general, and it broke no new grounds. A prominent Mexican journalist wrote that the “results of the inter-Ministerial meeting was like water: no odour, no colour and insipid”.

Much of the Forum activities were conducted peacefully. There were, of course, heated discussions on many issues, especially on privatisation, but for the most part these were carried out in a civilised and democratic manner. There were some difficult moments, however. The Plenary Session was disrupted by a group of protesters, two of whom took off their clothes on the podium, and others chanted slogans or simply made loud noises so that the session had to be postponed. Clearly this disruption was planned well in advance, and it resulted in the suspension of the proceedings for a considerable time, and thus loss of valuable time.

Similarly, the session on water and energy, which was specially organised by the World Water Council to review the linkages between water and energy policies, was hijacked by a small group of people interested only in a single issue, who unfurled a banner and made any discussion on the focus of the session impossible. This was indeed most regrettable since the water profession has basically ignored energy in the past, even though water and energy policies are closely interlinked. For example, in India, hydropower accounts for nearly 22 percent of electricity produced. Equally, a nearly similar percent of energy is used to pump water. The reason as to why groundwater levels in many parts of India are declining rapidly is because of misguided energy policies. The Hague session was specifically organised to review this and other critical water-energy linkages. However, a few activists ensured that this issue could not be discussed by focusing their entire attention to another issue that was the subject of discussion at other sessions, but which had absolutely no relevance to the objective of the water and energy session. Such unwarranted incidences during the Forum, which prevented participants from having a dialogue, were most regrettable. The security in the Forum was increased very significantly after the first day. This ensured that the type of unwarranted disruptions noted during the first day did not occur again.

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

BEYOND THE HAGUE FORUM

Some 4 months after the completion of the Hague Forum, all the signs are that it has succeeded remarkably in bringing people from all over the world to discuss various water issues, share their views and review their expectations of the future. The main issue now is how to maintain, or even enhance, the momentum generated by the work of the World Commission on Water and the Hague Forum, as well as the enthusiasm and interest of the various stakeholders concerned during the post-Hague period to ensure a secure water world for all. This would not be an easy task, but a task that must be accomplished to ensure a better future for all mankind.

The Third World Water Forum will be hosted by Japan in 2003. During the next 3 years, the water profession, and especially the World Water Council which is the prime mover of the Forum, must critically and objectively examine the strengths and weakness of the First Forum in Marrakesh and the Second at the Hague. For example, the Marrakesh Forum had only speeches (for too many of them for

any one individual to listen), and no discussion. The Hague Forum discussed literally every water issue under the sun. Due to the vast choices of sessions available, participants often went to the ones that interested them, and where their ideologies were likely to be supported. A good example was the various sessions on dam-related issues. At one session, a speaker passionately claimed that all dam builders should be prosecuted through the war crimes tribunal since building of dams was a crime against all humanity! At another session, another speaker suggested that dams are absolutely essential for poverty alleviation in the developing world. Although the two statements were diametrically opposite, no one challenged these statements. Thus, both speakers probably returned home thinking that the Forum had basically accepted their views. Accordingly, a major constraint of the second forum was the total absence of integration between the various sessions.

Both the Marrakesh and the Hague Forum were similar in one way. None seriously raised the water issues of the future, say beyond the post-2010 period. The Third Forum must be better focused, and it must be future-oriented. The world is changing rapidly, and we really need visionaries to develop a future water vision of the world. There were far too many visions at The Hague, at national and regional levels as well as on a sectoral basis. None really managed to develop a vision of the future to even 2010, let alone to 2025. The vast majority were far too general to be implemented and also far too past-and-present-oriented to be of any use after 2010.

Irrespective of the above shortcomings. The Hague Forum is likely to be considered a milestone of the water profession in many ways, especially in terms of awareness raising. It would be a tough task for the organisers of the Third Forum to supplicate its success since it would not have the common thread of linking the various activities through the report of the World Commission on Water, as was the case for the Hague Forum. Thus, the World Water Council and its Japanese organisers have a most difficult task in shaping the events of the next Forum in 2003. They should bring together the best brains available in the world as soon as possible to determine what should be done, what can be done and what must be done. Planning a large jamboree with thousands of people, but with no clear objectives and goals, is simply not an option. The Second Forum has created a momentum, but the water profession, and especially the WWC and the organisers of the Third Forum, must not be like a freight train which keeps going because of the momentum. They must give it clear direction, and the possible outputs should be identified well in advance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Globally, water has unquestionably become a critical resource issue for the next few decades in most countries of the world. Equally, forces of globalisation, urbanisation, population growth, technological developments and information and communication revolution are changing the management of requirements of the water sector with stunning speed. The world is moving into a new kind of economy as well as to a new kind of society, where we need new mind-sets and knowledge to resolve increasingly complex and 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 during this period of explosive change and increasing complexities. The stakes are high, but equally it gives us new opportunities to improve water management practices very significantly like never before in human history. I believe that with some luck, we can manage these changes. The opportunities are clearly there, and we must rise to meet these challenges successfully and in a timely manner.

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