

Viewpoint: Korean World Water Forum in Retrospect

Asit K. Biswas | August 7, 2015

The 7th World Water Forum was held in Daegu and Gyeongbuk in April. Over three months have elapsed since the Forum. Asit K. Biswas analyses the impacts of this mega-event on the water sector and also the world.



The Forum is an event organised by the World Water Council every three years. The focus of the 7th Forum was “water for our future.” This is an important issue since there are indications of water stress in nearly all countries in terms of quantity and quality.

Consider some critical facts. The world population is estimated to increase by some 2.3 billion by 2050, to 9.6 billion. Not only safe water will have to be provided for the extra population expected, but also their water-related needs have to be met in terms of food production, energy generation, environmental quality and industrial and commercial activities.

To compound the problem, the number of middle class households is increasing even at a faster rate: from 1.8 billion in 2009, to 3.2 billion in 2020 and 4.9 billion by 2030. This emerging class is more educated, media-savvy and demanding progressively increasing standard of living and quality of life.

Satisfying future water needs of the world will be a truly Herculean task. At present at least 3.6 billion people do not have access to clean water and some 90% of people in the developing world do not have proper wastewater collection, treatment and disposal facilities.

Take India. Nearly 30% of its current 1.28 billion people do not have access to electricity. Another 300 million people have access only to intermittent electricity, severely restricting their economic and social development potential. By 2050, it is

expected to have 1.8 billion people with a strong middle class. To provide electricity to all of them will mean huge increases in water use by the power sector, unless the efficiency is very significantly increased. This is because no electricity can be generated without water.

Thus, the focus of the Forum was very appropriate since future water security of the world is a critical issue. Equally, the Forum, which is the world's largest water meeting, is an appropriate platform to debate the future global issues robustly from multidisciplinary, multi-sectoral, multi-issue and multi-country perspectives.

Sadly even though the Forum was expected to discuss future issues, over 90% of the discussions were on past and present ways of water management. There were very few sessions and presentations that specifically considered how water management would or should change even during the next decade, let alone how water should be managed in an increasingly complex and uncertain world beyond 2030. All the sessions implicitly or explicitly considered that the world will change only incrementally in the future, when unquestionably the reverse will be the case.



Of all the sessions I attended, only two stand out in terms of discussions of future issues. The first one was on the future of the world's water beyond 2030, in Daegu. This session discussed how many current paradigms need to be jettisoned completely or modified dramatically, including integrated water resources management, which even the Ministerial Declaration dutifully endorsed even though it has not worked anywhere over the past 50 years.

During this session, Jeremy Bird of the International Water Management Institute outlined the scale of infrastructure development that will be needed in the future. The world has to consider how to ensure double the level of investment of the past in a quarter of the time. Not only the scale and rate of development needed will

increase exponentially but also this will put greater pressure on the natural capital. None of these issues have received adequate attention so far.

Increased urbanisation and industrialisation will make water quality management challenging. Already water bodies in and around urban centres of developing world are heavily contaminated with serious implications on human and ecosystems health. Unless water quality management receives significantly higher priority, the situation will become increasingly more dangerous.

David Molden of the International Centre of Integrated Mountain Development pointed out that global warming will lead to glacier melt, which will increase flows of Hindu Kush rivers till about 2050 and then decline thereafter. This means water availability will become even a more serious constraint during the post 2050 period when the demands for water will be significantly higher.

Claus Conzelmann noted Nestlé has reduced water use per tonne of product by 40% during the 2005-2015 period and plans to reduce its water and carbon footprints further in coming years. Two of its major manufacturing plants in India and Mexico are now water neutral or even water positive by capturing water which evaporated in the past. The company plans to do the same in all its milk processing plants all over the world.

Ahmet Bozer, president of Coca-Cola International said that between 2004 and 2012, Coca-Cola has increased its water use efficiency by 21.4%. In 2004, it was using 2.70 litres of water to produce one litre of product. By 2020, it expects to bring it down to 1.70 litres. Additionally, by 2020 it expects to return to communities and nature the equivalent amount of water used for its beverages and their production. It has already achieved this goal in India and Mexico.

Private sector companies like Nestlé and Coca-Cola are pioneering a blue revolution primarily because water is becoming a serious business risk and may even be an existential risk. However, we are not seeing commensurable progress in water management by the public sector.

The second impressive session was one organised by Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) on official development assistance (ODA) and water. In this well-attended session, one learnt how ODA is helping to alleviate water scarcity in developing countries, thereby improving quality of life. This session had also one of the best and objective papers that discussed climate change and its potential impacts on water management in developing countries.

In the area of international aid, KOICA often is not very visible. Based on the information in this session, it should take a front seat in global development dialogues. It was impressive to learn to what extent it has played a critical role in improving the reliability and quality of water services in Ghana which have already had remarkable impacts on health and other socio-economic aspects of the people. KOICA is supporting similar projects in Mongolia, Azerbaijan and the Philippines. It is imperative KOICA shares with the world the lessons learnt from these projects so that impacts of other ODA activities in the future could be significantly better. These positive practices are likely to have major impacts on the global water future.



Overall, however, the sessions of the Forum did not provide a realistic indication of what are likely to be the problems of the future and how these can be effectively solved. By focusing on present and past issues and problems, it basically reiterated the discussions that have occurred in the numerous past water meetings.

While discussions of future water issues left much to be desired, the Forum did help in several ways. First, it helped to increase the awareness of past and present water problems among various sectors of the population.

Second, it brought together interested parties to one single location to discuss numerous issues from different perspectives and interests. Third, it provided an opportunity to listen to different opinions on similar problems and issues, as well as their possible solutions.

Fourth, it allowed participants to listen to views of water professionals from different sectors, disciplines and nations to get a better appreciation of water problems and

likely solutions from different parts of the world. Finally, it provided an excellent opportunity for networking with people from different parts of the world. Often one learnt more during these informal networking sessions than what actually transpired at the Forum itself.

The world water management will change more during the next 15 years compared to the past 100 years. The past experiences will often provide no guidance, or at best limited guidance, during this period of explosive changes, increasing complexities, uncertainties and unexpected turbulences as well as to meet the escalating aspirations of a growing middle class. The stakes are high. Equally there are new opportunities to radically improve water management as never before in human history. As Mahatma Gandhi said: "The future depends on what you do today."

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