

Preface

Water-related issues have received increasing global attention during the past decade, certainly more than what existed a decade earlier when global interest in water issues was lukewarm at best. A good indication of this lack of global interest can be gleaned from the proceedings of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992, during which not even a single President or Prime Minister raised in any serious fashion the issue of water in their plenary statements. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh did mention water, but it was exclusively in terms of the country's problems with India because of the lack of agreement on the allocation of the flow of the Ganges River.

By the end of 1990s, and during the early part of the 21st century, the situation did change significantly in many ways. The global interest on water issues increased, and there were numerous discussions at national and international fora on issues like how water would become the most critical global resource issue of the 21st century just like energy was during the early 1970s; how the world would run short of water as a result of which developments in many parts of the world would be seriously constrained, and how there would be increasing conflicts between nations over the use of transboundary water bodies which would lead to water wars. In spite of these discussion and the fact that the media became very interested in the idea of global water scarcities or water wars, the real situation continues to be somewhat mundane. All the current serious analyses indicate that even in the driest parts of the world, like the Middle East and the North African region, their present and future water problems can be solved by using available knowledge, economic instruments, technology and management techniques. Just like the neglect of water issues in the international socio-political agenda of the late 1980s and early 1990s is difficult to understand or justify, the scare-mongering of the recent years in terms of a looming global water crises of unprecedented proportions or water wars are equally simplistic and unjustifiable.

There is no question that if the world faces a serious water crisis in the coming decades, it will not be due to lack of physical scarcities of water, but because of poor management of this resource. In nearly all developed and developing countries, water management practices and processes continue to be inefficient and suboptimal. They can mostly be improved very substantially. Herein lies the crux of the problem, which the development professionals in general, and the water professionals in particular, have failed to appreciate, as have most international institutions.

The water problems the world is facing are multidimensional in nature, their complexities are increasing with time, they often vary with time and space, and there are no global solutions for a highly heterogeneous and rapidly changing world that will be equally applicable to all the countries. Thus, the idea that people from different parts of the world, from different sectors and disciplines, and with different interests, could meet periodically to discuss the extent and nature of the problems, their potential solutions, successes, failures and constraints to implement the proposed solutions and anticipate the future water problems and solutions of the

world because of changing population dynamics, migration, societal expectations and aspirations, management practices, and increasing globalization is a very attractive concept. Conceptually at least, people could meet periodically which would facilitate North–North, North–South and South–South knowledge, experience and technology transfer. *Prima facie*, this appears to be a very effective option. At such gatherings, one could find out which solutions have actually worked, where, why and under what enabling conditions, and then consider their potential replicabilities to solve the water problems one is facing elsewhere. Furthermore, at least conceptually, it should be possible to find out which solutions are not working, where and why, irrespective of their earlier promises. These types of discussions and knowledge dissemination should have considerable potential to improve water management in different parts of the world.

Accordingly, megaconferences in the water sector, where thousands of participants from different parts of the world can meet to exchange ideas, views and experiences is, at least on the surface, a very attractive concept. During the last two decades, the number of megaconferences in the water-related sectors has proliferated. The question therefore is, are these megaconferences improving water management practices and processes so that objectives like economic efficiency, improved quality of life, poverty alleviation and environmental conservation are being better fulfilled compared to what may have been the case if they had not taken place? Or have these, as some critics have claimed, become “Woodstock” of water, where a good time is had by all under the pretext of a conference, where one’s expenses are covered by someone else?

Unfortunately, none of the water-related megaconference has ever been evaluated in terms of its usefulness, cost-effectiveness and overall impacts to give any definitive answer to the above questions. As a result, how useful they have been to promote efficient water management in different parts of the world is simply unknown. Equally, while reasonable estimates can be made of the costs of convening these megaconferences, including their opportunity costs, their benefits and overall impacts are mostly unknown and never estimated. Whatever information may be available on the extent of their benefits, or nature of their beneficiaries, is primarily anecdotal in nature, and thus of very limited use.

As our analyses show, all is not well with the global megaconferences in terms of their outputs, impacts or cost-effectiveness. There is near unanimity among the water professionals surveyed from all over the world that most of the megaconferences are having only marginal impacts on the water sector. There is no question that an overwhelming majority of our respondents felt that the organizational processes and the structures of these meetings need to be vastly improved to substantially increase their outputs and impacts. However, there was no such unanimity when the issue came to how the organizational processes and structures should be modified to ensure significantly higher levels of impacts, and/or what are the alternatives to the megaconferences.

In order to fill this gap, the Third World Centre for Water Management, with the financial support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of the United States, carried out a study on the impacts of the megaconferences on the water sector. The present book is the result of this evaluation. On behalf of our Centre, we would like to express our appreciation to Mr. Keiji Iwatake, Director of Sasakawa Peace

Foundation of the United States, and Dr. Seki Akinori and Dr. Sim-Yee Lau, President and Programme Advisor of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, respectively.

The first-ever attempt to seriously evaluate the impacts of megaconferences on the water sector on a global basis is a complex task under the best of circumstances, not only for the methodological issues involved but also for the reliable information obtained on which such assessments could be based. We are thus most grateful to eminent international water experts like Gourisankar Ghosh, John Lane, Anthony Milburn, Morris Miller and Robert Varady who accepted our invitations to prepare think pieces in terms of their own personal assessments of the impacts of these megaconferences on the water sector. Their assessments are included in the book. Together, all these personal assessments cover Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America.

The book also includes specific country or regional assessments. These were undertaken by equally eminent water experts like Mr. ATM Shamsul Huda (Bangladesh), Prof. Mikiyasu Nakayama (Japan), Dr. C.D. Thatte (India), Dr. Anthony Turton (South Africa) and Prof. Olli Varis (Scandinavia). Their assessments are much appreciated.

The thinkpieces and country/regional analyses were discussed at a special invitation-only workshop at the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok. All the participants were invited in their personal capacities for a free and frank discussion of the commissioned papers and analyses. Following the discussions at Bangkok, the authors finalized their papers which are included in the present book. On behalf of the Third World Centre for Water Management, we would like to thank all the authors, all of whom participated at the Bangkok workshop, and also the other specially invited guests for their constructive comments and contributions to the meeting.

Last but not least, we would like to express our appreciation to Andrea Lucia Biswas Tortajada for helping us with the analysis of the global questionnaires, and Thania Gomez for formatting the book and other assistance in terms of the preparation of the final manuscript. Andrea Lucia presented her analysis of the questionnaire survey at the Stockholm Water Symposium for which she received a special award.

We are confident that the publication of this book will significantly contribute to increased discussions of this issue which has been totally neglected by the water profession thus far.

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