

FROM MAR DEL PLATA TO BARI: RHETORIC AND REALITIES

ASIT K. BISWAS (*)

The United Nations Water Conference was convened in Mar del Plata, Argentina, from 14 to 25 March 1997. It has been the only world conference in the area of water that has ever been held at a very high decision-making level. More than 1500 participants attended this Conference, representing 116 governments, various United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organisations and national liberation movements.

It would be serious error to consider this world conference to be an unique event of the 1970s. It was an integral part of a series of global mega-conferences that were convened under the aegis of the United Nations during that decade. Accordingly, the Mar del Plata Conference was influenced to a considerable extent, both in terms of process and substantive results, by the world conferences that were convened before it, within which water was an important theme, especially UN Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 1972; World Food Conference, Rome, 1974; and the UN Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver, 1976. The Water Conference, in turn, influenced the UN Conference on Desertification, Nairobi, 1977, which followed it.

The present meeting at Bari is being convened, exactly twenty years after the Mar del Plata Conference. It is thus an opportune time to objectively and constructive-

ABSTRACT

Major changes have occurred in water management and development all over the world during the past two decades. A retrospective analysis indicates that Mar del Plata was a remarkably successful world conference, more effective than it was realised in 1977. In contrast, irrespective of some of the current rhetoric, the contribution of the Dublin Conference leaves much to be desired.

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 run-up to the 21st century, our profession really has 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 continue 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 solutions within the short timetable available to us.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours de ces deux dernières décennies, des changements majeurs se sont produits au niveau de la gestion et du développement des ressources en eau. Une analyse rétrospective nous apprend que la Conférence de Mar del Plata a eu un succès remarquable, plus efficace que celui de 1977. Per contre, au-delà de la rhétorique, la contribution de la Conférence de Dublin laisse beaucoup à désirer.

Aujourd'hui, la gestion des eaux doit se confronter à un problème d'une grandeur, d'une complexité et d'une importance qu'aucune des générations précédentes n'a jamais connues. Dans cette période qui précède le XX^e siècle, nous avons deux choix: continuer comme d'habitude à considérer le problème de la gestion une "affaire comme toutes les autres" en essayant de résoudre les complexes problèmes futurs se basant sur l'expérience acquise des problèmes plus simples du passé, ou continuer en déployant des efforts sérieux, sincères et plus marquants pour identifier les problèmes réels de l'avenir et relever les défis dominants carrément et d'une manière collective, moyennant des solutions efficaces dans le peu de temps qui nous reste.

ly review the progress that has been made during the past two decades in the water sector globally.

MAR DEL PLATA IN RETROSPECT

It is worthwhile to recall the main objective of the Mar del Plata Conference. It 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 most 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 de-

velopment 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).

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

(*) Chairman Programme Committee, World Water Council, Instituto de Ingeniería, UNAM Ciudad Universitaria, México, D.F., México.

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 clearly indicates that it was more of a success than its most ardent supporters believed at that time. A comprehensive review of the Conference achievements in 1987, a decade after, indicated that it had numerous primary, secondary and tertiary impacts, which were for the most part 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 as well as reviews of planning needs and management practices. Several developing countries put in motion processes to assess the availability and distribution of surface and groundwater resources, and existing and future patterns of water demands and uses. Many developing countries not only have continued these activities, which were initiated during the preparatory process of the Water Conference, but also have significantly strengthened them progressively during the past two decades. In retrospect, the activities, leading to Mar del Plata, and the event itself have contributed significantly more to water development than UNESCO's International Hydrological Programme during the ensuing two decades, even though the latter effort has spent resources several tens of times more than the former.

A major output of the Conference was to recommend that the period 1980 to 1990 be proclaimed as the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. The idea was to indicate to the world forcefully that millions of people did not have access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and accelerated political will and investments were essential to improve this unacceptable situation dramatically. Even the most confirmed cynic of the international system would have to accept the fact that the Decade unquestionably changed the quality of life of millions of people all over the developing world. Clearly the task is not yet complete since much more needs to be done. Equally, without the Water Conference, the progress in this area would have been much less than what it is at present.

Looking back, the Water Conference had an important impact on the United Nations systems as well. During the 1970s, the rivalries between the various UN agencies working in the water area were intense. The work initiated by the Secretary General Mageed on the po-

tential modalities of collaboration between the various UN agencies went a long way to smoothen the interrelations between them. The intensive rivalries of the 1970s gradually gave way to extensive consultations and cooperation between the agencies concerned in the 1990s. This unquestionably has been an important result.

Viewed from any direction, the Mar del Plata has become an important benchmark in the area 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 became popular only a decade later.

Looking back, two areas could have received additional attention: financial arrangements and the modalities for the implementation of the Action Plan, and the management of water resources shared by two or more countries. On the first issue of the financial arrangements needed to implement the Action Plan, regrettably this aspect has not received the attention it deserved in all the UN mega-conferences starting from Stockholm in 1972. Thus, not surprisingly, the ambitious Action Plans of these Conferences have never been properly implemented. It is also a sad and regrettable fact that United Nations system has never critically analysed the efficiency of the processes used for organising these world conferences, their relative strengths and weaknesses, and the impacts of the final outcomes. Consequently, many of the mistakes made have continued from one conference to another. How the agreed to Action Plans could be effectively implemented is one area that has consistently received inadequate attention in all the high-level UN mega-conferences. The Water Conference was no exception to this process.

For a variety of reasons, the management of international waters was not considered as comprehensively as it should have been at Mar del Plata. In an objective and retrospective analysis the Water Conference, its Secretary General pointed out that both the above areas "were not tackled satisfactorily at the Conference" (Mageed, 1982). He also 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 suggestion was never considered, and even more unfortunately the International Conference of Water and the Environment (ICWE), which was convened 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 of Mar del Plata. It is evident that the institutional memories of the United Nations System somehow disappeared during the preparatory process leading to Dublin and at Dublin itself. Thus, not surprisingly, some of the results of the Dublin Conference were in reality retrogressive steps



compared to the achievements of Mar del Plata. Some of these aspects will be discussed next.

ABSENCE OF WATER INTERNATIONAL AGENDA AND FAILURE OF DUBLIN CONFERENCE

15 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). It was hoped that UNCED would not only revive the spirit of 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 a "bit" player largely confined to the wings. (Biswas, 1992). The omission of water from the international political agenda, as was noted in Rio, and the subsequent developments are important but regrettable facts which the water profession need to consider very carefully. While a few institutions and individuals are glossing over this situation, our profession can no longer ignore the fact, and the reasons why, Dublin and Rio failed so miserably to put water in the international political agenda.

Failure of the Dublin Conference - The Dublin Conference was convened by the United Nations System, and was expected to formulate sustainable water policies and action programmes for consideration by the UNCED. Its timing, only four months before UNCED, was ill conceived. Even if the Dublin Conference had come out with a even single new idea or concept, which it did not, and had considered critical issues like major programme initiatives, including how much would such programmes cost, where would the funds come from, and how and by whom would the programmes be implemented, which again it basically ignored, there would not have been simply enough time to incorporate such ideas effectively in the Rio programme. Overall, the planning process of the Dublin

Conference left much to be desired.

Second, the Dublin Conference, most incredibly, was organised as a meeting of experts and not as an inter-governmental meeting. This was in spite of the advice given by certain governments, notably Sweden, and certain really knowledgeable experts on water and the rules of the UN mega-conferences. The distinction between a meeting of experts and an intergovernmental meeting is a critical one in the context of any UN World Conference, since such conferences can only consider recommendations from intergovernmental meetings *and not from an expert group meeting*. Accordingly and predictably, certain countries objected at Rio to any reference to the results of the Dublin Conference, irrespective of their importance or relevance. In retrospect, Chapter 18 of Agenda 21, which deals with water, in all probability 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 1992, the participants unanimously felt that the Dublin Conference was a failure and the water profession cannot afford another similar major setback in the foreseeable future. In recent years it has been "politically correct" for certain international organisations to speak glowingly of the Dublin principles as if, by themselves, they could contribute to rational and efficient water developments. It is high time to realise that the so-called four Dublin principles, which incidentally were not incorporated in Agenda 21, are basically bland statements of the obvious, which if ever implemented by a miracle, *will not provide sufficient conditions for sustainable water development*. It even basically ignored a fundamental objective of water resources development that has been accepted universally since the 1960s, the concept of equity and regional income distribution. No water development project can be sustainable if the issue of equity is completely ignored. In addition, an objective analysis will indicate that in several instances Dublin was even a retrogres-

sive step compared to what was achieved at Mar del Plata. For example, Dublin principles stated that water should be "recognised 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. The limiting nature of the Dublin principles can be easily noted if they are compared with the principles that have been stipulated by the Brazilian water law of 1997. In addition, to the above principles, the Brazilian water law specifically stipulates the following conditions as

that of land use; and

- integration of river basin management with that of estuary systems, and coastal management.

Accordingly, those developing countries that are contemplating development of new water management regimes will do well to go beyond the Dublin principles: otherwise these regimes are highly unlikely to be sustainable. Equally, much of the so-called Dublin principles are generalities and good rhetorics, which probably will suit the agenda of the donor agencies best. They are likely to be of limited value to developing countries which are searching for sustainable water management policies and programmes. Furthermore, no thought was given in Dublin as to how these vague

principles could be operationalized by the decision-makers and water professionals in developing countries. Even more than 5 years after Dublin, the proponents of the Dublin principles have failed miserably to indicate how these principles can be operationalized in the context of water management in a real world.

CONCEPTUAL CHANGES, 1977-1997

During the 1977-1997 period, some significant conceptual changes occurred in planning and managing water resources systems. The major changes were in the following areas.

i) Environment. Environmental considerations have become an increasingly important consideration during the past two decades. Environmental impact assessment (EIA) has become a mandatory requirement for approval of all new water projects, both nationally and internationally. For example, no major external support agency will provide funds without adequate environmental assessments. However, the EIA process, as it is used at present, has changed very little methodologically during the past 25 years. There are clear evidences that the present EIA process is having only

marginal long-term impacts on proper environmental management of the water projects. The entire process needs to be critically examined to ensure the results are beneficial to the environment and the society as a whole. During this period also a new "anti-dam" lobby emerged, especially in the United States, where all the major dams have, for the most part, already been con-

Dublin

1. Freshwater is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment.
2. Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels.
3. Women should play a central part on the provision management and safeguarding of water.
4. Water has an economic value in all its uses, and should be recognised as an economic good.

Brazil

Water is a limited natural resource which has economic value.

The management of water resources should involve participation by the Government, the user and the communities.

(See item 1)

5. Water is a public property.
6. When there is shortage, priority in the use of water resources is given to human consumption and the watering of animals.
7. The management of water resources should always allow for multiple use of water.
8. The river basin is the territorial unit for the implementation of the National Water Resources Policy and the actions of National Water Resources Management System.

"General Guidelines for Action":

- integration of water resources management with environmental management;
- coordination of water resources planning with that of the user sectors and with planning at the regional, state and national levels;
- coordination of water resources management with

structed. The current debate on dams and the environment is often biased and skewed. The discussions are often based on incomplete, erroneous and anecdotal data, irrespective of whether one considers the opponents or proponents of the dams (Biswas, 1997). A real and objective debate based on actual and verifiable costs and benefits has yet to begin, especially as authoritative studies on the actual environmental impacts of large dams, both positive and negative, after their construction and operation, are conspicuous because of their absence.

ii) Resettlement. Resettlement of people from the reservoir areas become a major social and political issue during this period. Studies indicate that the resettlement experiences from the dams already constructed leave much to be desired. The reasons for this unsatisfactory experiences are now well-known, and there is no reason why future resettlement practices cannot be significantly improved. All resettled people must have a better lifestyle compared to what they were used to before. Resettlement has been one of the main controversial issues for some of the recent major large dams, for example, Sardar Sarovar Project (Narmada) in India, Three Gorges Dam in China and Arun III Project in Nepal.

iii) Economic instruments for water management. During the 1990s, many countries started considering economic instruments for efficient water management. Among these instruments are appropriate levels of water pricing, cost recovery, effluent disposal fees, actual collection of user fees, and water markets. These instruments have not been universally welcomed either by all countries or the general public. However, the tide is clearly in favour of using pricing to manage demands and to improve water use efficiencies. Generally water pricing has made considerable progress in the area of domestic and industrial uses. However, the main user of water, the agricultural sector, has been basically ignored so far in terms of instituting appropriate levels of water pricing, and collection of these levies. Water charges levied on the agricultural sector do not even pay for operation and maintenance costs, let alone recovery of capital costs. This situation prevails in nearly all countries of the world, irrespective of whether they are developed or developing.

iv) Private sector involvement. Water resources development and management has always been a capital-intensive effort. Traditionally all these developments were financed by the public sector. However, as governments all over the world became strapped for funds, and it became increasingly evident that the records of the public sector in managing water resources have left much to be desired, private sector involvement became an important consideration from the early 1990s. At present, in many countries, private sector companies are responsible for constructing and managing water supply and waste treatment facilities, and this trend is continu-

ally gathering momentum. While there have been some problems, the overall global experience in private sector involvement has been generally positive.

The private sector is also now handling major dam construction projects on "build, operate and transfer" basis, e.g., as in Turkey.

v) Public participation and emergence of non-governmental organisations. An important change in the water sector in recent years has been the demand for more public participation and involvement in the planning and decision-making processes. While it has complexified the water planning and management process, the current indications are that such public involvements are an essential component of sustainable water development. The question no longer is whether public participation is necessary, but rather how can this be efficiently carried out.

The emergence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has also forced many governments to consider public involvement as a prerequisite to water development projects. In most parts of the world, NGOs have used the media very effectively to lobby against the various water projects. These activities have had both positive and negative impacts on the long-term social welfare of the people and also on the environment.

vi) Capacity building. Education, training and research were important issues that were specifically considered at Mar del Plata, primarily in terms of human resources development. However, during the early 1990s, a new terminology became popular in this area: capacity building. It included not only the traditional human resources development component of all aspects of water resources management but also the strengthening of the capacities of the institutions within which efficient water management could take place (Biswas, 1996). It should be noted that institutional strengthening is not a new concept: it was always an issue that had to be considered. What is new, however, is that capacity building effectively integrated human and institutional capacities together. ●

REFERENCES

- Biswas Asit K. (1978) - "United Nations Water Conference: Summary and Main Documents", Pergamon Press, Oxford, 217 p.
- Biswas Asit K. (1988) - "United Nations Water Conference Action Plan: Implementation over the Past Decade", International Journal of Water Resources Development, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 148-159.
- Biswas Asit K. (1993) - "Water Missing from the Agenda", Stockholm Water Front, No. 2, pp. 12-13.
- Biswas Asit K. (1996) - "Capacity Building for Water Management" International Journal of Water Resources Development, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 399-405.
- Biswas Asit K. (1997) - "Water Resources: Environmental Planning, Management and Development," McGraw-Hill, New York, 737 p.
- Mageed Yahia Abdel (1982) - "The UN Water Conference: The Scramble for Resolutions and the Implementation Gap," Mazingira, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 4-13.