

## THE ALTERNATIVE WATER FORUM Bradford, May 2003

### Introduction

The Bradford Centre for International Development (BCID) has recently made its contribution to the worldwide debate on the management of global water resources. In the past two years, many thousands of people have attended the Bonn Freshwater Conference (December 2001), the World Summit on Sustainable Development (September 2002) and the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto (March 2003). Whilst such meetings serve many useful functions and provide excellent opportunities for networking and exchange of experiences, they also tend to work from common assumptions and generate a set of stock responses, which are then published in formalised statements or declarations.

Aware of these shortcomings, staff from BCID convened the Alternative Water Forum in Bradford at the beginning of May 2003. Some 55 participants attended, comprising academics and practitioners from the whole spectrum of water development issues. From the presentations and the ensuing debates, four broad themes emerged, the water consensus, water as a scarce resource, water and the poor, and managing water wisely.

### Is there a consensus?

A number of continuities can be identified from the policy statements emerging from recent international conferences. These relate to the need for improved water governance, capacity building, financing mechanisms including cost recovery, participation and the need for integrated water resource management. These broad principles have been translated into policy statements and implemented through programme and project approaches. The ubiquity of these policy principles lends support to the idea of a general water consensus.

However, some of the principles of the consensus are contradictory, some rhetorical, some contested. Many of the critiques of the consensus concern the ways in which policy is transformed into practice and the need to reinterpret over-simplified global policy statements into context-specific ways of working. Many of the papers presented in the Forum address these concerns either directly or indirectly.

For example, **Merrett** listed six specific assumptions which he suggested underlay the international water consensus: water should be managed on the basis of demand not supply; all water use should be priced; public utilities should be open to private participation; integrated water resources management (IWRM) is best practised at the catchment level; irrigation schemes should be managed by farmers; large dams are bad (small dams are good). Undoubtedly other water professionals could devise slightly different lists of key principles but many of these would be similar in their concerns, for example participation could be extended from farmers to domestic water users.

Merrett went on to dispute these principles and the assumptions on which they are based. This questioning of the 'consensus' continued through the presentations at the forum. For

example Berkoff noted that significant changes in the consensus had developed between the Second and Third World Water Forums, particularly in relation to the priority given to water for food (irrigation).

### **Water – a scarce resource?**

**Mehta** argued that planners and policy makers often adopt an over-technical view of water scarcity, which blinds them to other social and political dimensions of competition for water. Adopting a more complex view of scarcity would involve understanding people's livelihood adaptation to water-poor conditions, the cyclical nature of availability and how power relations shape water allocation.

**Barker** discussed the importance of the maintenance of environmental flows as a basis for the sustainability and availability of water resources. Smith and Berkoff looked at irrigation from different viewpoints. **Smith** argued the case for continued development of irrigation in the appropriate context, based on its powerful contributions to rural economic growth and poverty reduction. **Berkoff** argued that irrigation expansion in most cases is not an economically efficient way to ensure food security, and that responses to crop prices can generally ensure output growth. For him irrigation in limited water systems becomes the water user of last resort, and is generally used much more efficiently than commonly supposed.

**Hope** addressed some of these issues from a different standpoint. He argued for the importance of 'green' (transpired) water as opposed to blue water (water managed for crop growth) which he argued was undervalued in international approaches to water management.

The Forum tended to focus on the broad issues of water allocation between sectors and a number of papers focussed on managing irrigation water. There was comparatively less discussion of municipal and industrial uses of water. Technical solutions to water scarcity such as storage were raised in discussion but not addressed directly by any of the papers.

### **Increasing access of the poor to water.**

**Joshi, Fawcett and Lloyd** tackled this issue head-on with a lively presentation on the interlinking of different dimensions of disadvantage (poverty, gender and caste) and how this impedes access to water. Their paper showed that even projects based on 'best practice' do not necessarily lead to socially inclusive results.

**Tod** and his colleagues addressed some of these same issues by asking how projects can be designed to be sensitive to the needs of the poor. Tod's paper highlighted the importance of understanding patterns of access to resources, including land ownership. The case study showed that attempts to recognise the contribution of poor people by paying them for their labour to develop water supplies nevertheless disproportionately benefitted richer households.

**Mulenga and Fawcett** used the case of applying demand-based management to urban sanitation to highlight the shortcomings of this approach in increasing access to services for

the poor. For example demand based management cannot work when there is low priority given to the service offered or low willingness and ability to pay. In this respect demand-based management may not always be compatible with the provision of wider social benefits.

Several of the papers raised the need to better understand the place of water in complex livelihoods and the limitations of project approaches focussing on high coverage and limited timescales in this respect.

In discussion, participants noted the lack of papers detailing experience of implementing willingness-to-pay approaches, and the limitations of these.

### **Managing water wisely**

There were a wide variety of papers which covered the institutional and capacity building issues of water governance.

**Mtisi** suggested we should question the assumption that local governance is necessarily 'good', and the result more efficient and accountable. He identified a need to scrutinise new institutions better to ensure that they function to the benefit of a broad constituency, not simply local power brokers.

**Cleaver and Franks** addressed some of the same issues in looking at the appropriateness of institutional design principles and the way they are implemented in river basin management, in relation to boundaries, authority, sanctions and scaling- up. The problems of scaling up from the local level to the scale of the whole catchment was also explicitly addressed in the paper by **Castillo** detailing NGO experience in India and Peru.

**Khanal** questioned the advocacy of Water User Associations for irrigation, something he sees as a direct corollary of a neo-liberal approach. He argued the need to move beyond instrumentalist blueprint approaches to local governance towards social learning. This involves an understanding of different water control dimensions, legal and political support processes and capacity building of local organisations. **Anand**'s paper illustrated the importance of understanding the political processes of water allocation, but at the larger scale of inter-state disputes. **House** investigated a specific aspect of capacity building in incorporating considerations of gender and equity into organisational thinking. **Grimble** discussed the issues involved in adopting an integrated approach to the planning and management of groundwater resources. The debate that ensued round this paper highlighted the constraints and opportunities to take account of the many issues raised in the Forum in realising sustainable water development.

In summary the Forum formed a constructive environment for the participants to debate and analyse the issues in depth, and to develop new insights free of formulaic declarations. The full list of papers follows. These can be found on the web at [brad.ac.uk/acad/bcid/GTP/altwater.html](http://brad.ac.uk/acad/bcid/GTP/altwater.html).

Frances Cleaver and Tom Franks

**Alternative Water Forum**  
**PAPERS PRESENTED**

P.B. Anand	Making sense of the Cauvery River Water Dispute
John Barker	Global Water Crisis? Views from the River Bed
Jeremy Berkoff	Prospects for Irrigated Agriculture: Has the International Consensus got it right?
Frances Cleaver & Tom Franks	How Institutions Elude Design: River Basin Management and Sustainable Livelihoods.
Robin Grimble, Peter Baur & Samantha Wade	How may an Integrated Approach to Planning and Management of Groundwater Resources be Achieved?
Rob Hope & John Gowing	Managing Water to Reduce Poverty: Water and Livelihood Linkages in a Rural South African Context.
Sarah House	Easier to say, Harder to do: Gender, Equity and Water.
Deepa Joshi, Mary Lloyd & Ben Fawcett	Voices from the Village: An Alternative Paper for the Alternative Water Forum.
Puspa Khanal	Participation and Governance in Local Water Management
Lyla Mehta	Contexts and Constructions of Scarcity
Stephen Merrett	Virtual Water and Occam's Razor
Sobona Mtisi & Alan Nicol	Appropriate for whom? Challenging the Discourse on Decentralisation – Lessons from Zimbabwe
Martin Mulenga & Ben Fawcett	Impediments to the Implementation of the DRA Methodology in Urban Sanitation Programmes in Zambia and South Africa.
Laurence Smith	Assessing the Contribution of Irrigation to Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Livelihoods.
Ian Tod, Akhilesh Parey & Ragubendra P.S Yadav	How can we Design Water Resources Interventions to Benefit Poorer Households?