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Water policy: A critical review

I salute the Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development for displaying courage in publishing the draft National Water Resources Management Policy (NWRMP) even though it needs substantial review.

The process of water policy development in Sri Lanka has a chequered past. The current policy development process can be traced back to 1992 with the completion of the Irrigation Management Policy Support Activity (IMPSA) project and commencement of the Asian Development Bank supported "Comprehensive Water Resources Management Project" (CWRMP). The impetus for policy formulation began with the recommendations from CWRMP. The two key recommendations, that water must be managed holistically and water must be managed efficiently, paved the way to the process which unfolded in the formulation of policy and legislation for *water resources management*. Although the country has more than 50 pieces of legislation and 40 institutions to deal with the subject of water, none exist for water resources development and management. Therefore it was a felt need identified with the best intentions.

Since the early 1990s there were many projects, institutions,

resource persons, reports, seminars and workshops conducted all over the country to solicit views of stakeholders to formulate a water resources policy. The public may remember how the water policy became an issue at times of elections in the past. Various interested parties used the water policy to attack their opposition in the name 'draining the life blood of the country'. Those who followed the debate on water policy in the past may remember that incumbent governments at various times did not attempt to counter some of the malicious allegations presented against the water policy. The primary reason for this situation was the inability to understand the principles, contents and logic presented in the policy. However, I should emphasise here that many issues presented in the 'National Water Resources Policy and Institutional Arrangements', approved by the cabinet in March 2000, reflected poor understanding of the local context and the language (even in English) was

unpalatable. Since 2000, there have been many changes to the policy and a number of new institutions were established (and subsequently closed), international assistance sought and national dialogues held.

In spite of all these interventions we still find there is lack of understanding on the principle, contents and logic presented in the policy. What was published on 9th October 2006 in the *Daily News* is a reflection of this state. It is unfortunate to say the least that, what was published for public consumption is a draft of October 2005, which was essentially meant for internal circulation and review. The only difference I see in the paper supplement is in the title. The draft carried the title "National Water Resources Policy" while the paper supplement has added the word "management", which I think has some logic!

Concept

The justification given in the draft policy clearly identifies the

need to formulate a water resources management policy. The demand for water is increasing. The number of water users has increased and the quantity of water extraction denies the right for some at the expense of others. There is disproportionate water extraction by some water use sectors. The growing demand for water due to improvement in livelihoods, industrialization, population increase and protection for environment and biodiversity, creates a greater demand on limited water. What this means is that there has to be a *rational allocation mechanism* considering demand for water and the environment. Often we find statements to say "when Sri Lanka had a predominantly rural agro based economy with few industries and only a limited population; Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) was not a pressing problem". It is fashionable to use such quotations where IWRM is presented as the panacea for all water use problems. Once Mahatma Gandhi

said that there is "*enough water for one's need but not for one's greed*", thus it is how one manages the limited quantity of water that matters in the future.

Increasingly, IWRM is being proposed as the way forward. I have no qualms about IWRM as a 'concept'. Technically it is possible to accept IWRM as a means to manage limited water resources but is it practically possible? Integrated water resources management is nothing new to Sri Lanka, however, the current trend in IWRM began in the mid 1990s with the Global Water Partnership (GWP) taking a lead role to promote IWRM in the international arena. The meaning of IWRM will be known to a few water professionals but to the public at large it is something new. The GWP defines IWRM as "a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, in order to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital

ecosystems". The definition appears broad, all encompassing and impressive but little can be said about its practical applications.

One of the key concerns in IWRM is consensus among stakeholders. The concept assumes consensus, openness and inclusiveness in decision making with respect to rational allocation of water among stakeholders. It all sounds good in theory. Practically it is the most difficult. Especially in the South Asian context even intra-institutional consensus is difficult not to mention inter-institutional agreements. This was evident in the very high temple of the GWP in South Asia. The GWP South Asia regional office had to be discontinued because of poor consensus, understanding and inclusiveness among its own stakeholders. Therefore, it is always good to understand the issues in water resources management and relevant actors before boarding the IWRM bandwagon.

Contents

The success of a policy depends on its contents and the consultation process. I will not discuss the 'process' as the draft policy deals only with the contents of the policy.

The scope of the original policy (March 2000) was designed to include only fresh and brackish water, the current policy includes rainwater as well.

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