

# Water resources management - issues and realities

World Water Day falls today

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**WATER:** The international observance of World Water Day is an initiative that grew out of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. The United Nations General Assembly designated on March 22 of each year as the World Day for Water by adopting a resolution. This World Day for Water was to be observed starting in 1993, in conformity with the recommendations of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development contained in chapter 18 (Fresh Water Resources) of Agenda 21.

'Coping with Water Scarcity' is the theme for World Water Day 2007, which is celebrated all over the world today. All the countries have been invited to devote this day to implement the UN recommendations and set up concrete activities as deemed appropriate in the national context. It is timely to explore our key issues related to the management of our water resources in Sri Lanka and discuss how we can embrace the global theme while soliciting our own issues as priorities. One such imperative would be to survey the causative factors behind the poor outcome responses of investments on water resources in Sri Lanka and initiate possible resolutions to mitigate the circumstances.

We have been extremely plagiarized in adopting the global water resources themes to determine our priorities for our very limited resource allocations. The water resources sector in the country is overshadowed with a group of so-called 'water professionals' who are very competent in adopting global themes into our arena irrespective of its relevance. One such effort is related to a recent global theme named as integrated water resource management which has been introduced to Sri Lanka wiping out our great historical water management strategies which are inherently based on the concept of integrated approaches. In fact, water related problems in Sri Lanka could only be resolved considering our unique ecological, hydrological and agricultural envi-

ronments while also offering due consideration to our cultural and social realities. With respect to our technological problems related to water, solutions cannot be entertained by down-scaling the global models at varying resolutions and making unrealistic assumptions for model validation exercises.

In Sri Lanka, the water demand is mainly for the sectors related to water use in agriculture, domestic, industrial, environmental and recreational use. Poor impact on water use efficiency which affects the water security of the nation in spite of multimillion investments made in the water sector is a question which needs to be answered by the so-called custodians of the water sector in Sri Lanka.

One of the main reasons attributable to poor performance in the water sector is that a large group of privileged individuals who have no realistic understanding or genuine interest in water security of the nation lead the water professionals in the country.

In addition, some foreign scientists employed by water related international institutions located in Sri Lanka believe that they have a legitimate right to be the voice of the water users in Sri Lanka although they are totally alien to the ground realities of the country. However, because of the global accreditation of their agencies and specific involvements in trans-boundary issues at the regional level invitations for participation at international forums are always extended to these individuals and global funding resources are generally reserved for these individuals. However, both these above groups have no justifiable claim to share the sentiments of the water environment today since they have never instigated a true dialogue with the local stakeholders in the sector.

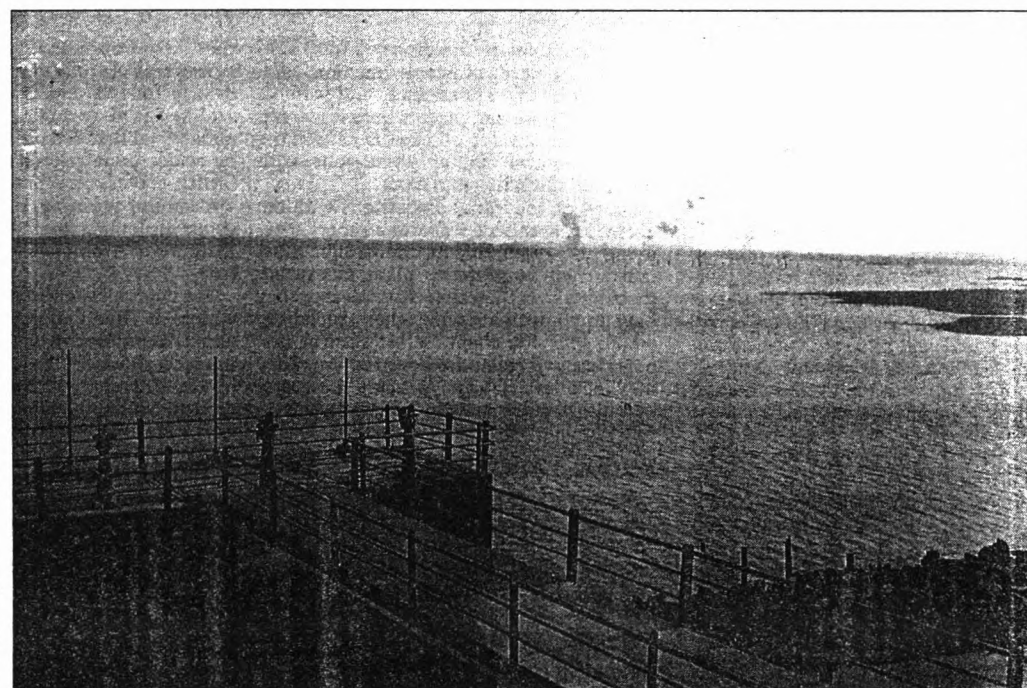
A large number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are associated with bogus water professionals in exploiting research grants and aid packages from international donor agencies. These aids and grants are mostly supposed to be received by the government. It is very important to investigate whether international water and

environment related agencies located in Sri Lanka have benefited unduly from foreign grants and to evaluate the end user impact of their local programmes.

Water professionals should focus on observations, measurements and data recording which finally provide the true status and magnitude of the water problems in the country during their field visits. They should meet the local stakeholders and have discussions at the field level. However, most of the bogus water professionals have no time to investigate water related problems in Sri Lanka since their most visited place in Sri Lanka is our international airport. Their discussions mostly take place at the airport lounge with likeminded individuals who are destined to be international travellers during the most of their professional careers.

The next group who are responsible for the dire state of water security in Sri Lanka is the majority of university academia involved in water resources research. They strive hard to resolve high level academic research problems hypothesized through their own ideologies. These research questions are hardly found at the field level. Further, the university academia develop research themes from their fantasized water related problems and provide the discussion agenda for the self proclaimed water professionals at the global donor meetings of the water sector where millions of dollars are awarded to conduct research on irrelevant themes and borrowed ideas.

Gender and water has been a popular theme for several developing countries in Asia and Africa where opportunities in the water sector are gender biased. In Sri Lanka, such a situation does not exist. With vested interests, some of the voices of advocacy in water related disciplines make an attempt to include the concepts of gender equality issues in our curricula in the wake of supporting curriculum revision in water resources subjects. Water pricing, water economy and virtual water trade are some of the other key areas which are targeted by the advocacy campaigns.



**A LARGE RESERVOIR: Prudent management of water resources vital**

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The fate of field level officers and water users who have really experienced the problem related to water security in the country are left with no proper support from those who conceptualize the water problems of Sri Lanka in terms of colour labels such as blue water and green water. However, it is very unfortunate that this group of so called water professionals have not even seen the true colour of our rural waters.

It must be noted here that the so-called water professionals in the international water trade representing Sri Lanka always use

their financial strength and personal relationships to influence government policy and regulatory framework on water. Pricing of water in terms of virtual water trading is one of the fantasies of this group, which was grossly rejected by the patriotic politicians and officers.

In order to improve the water sector in the country, we need to initiate an effective dialogue involving all the real stakeholders. The field problems related to water distribution and allocation and water quality from the reservoir to end user level should be recorded.

Water Professionals Day initiated by Geo-Informatics Society of Sri Lanka in 2003 and held on October 1 every subsequent year provides an ideal platform to share the true sentiments of the stakeholders and propose technological, institutional and other solutions. Further, a proper national level research coordination should be initiated with the participation of industries, organizations in agriculture sector, NGOs and international agencies having a stake in the water sector. Overseas training and participation opportunities should be extended to the true stakeholders and their inputs should be counted in the formulation of national policies and strategies.

Finally, it should be reiterated that on the 'World Water Day', we should determine to defeat all international conspiracies to deprive our water resources to the real owners of this resource.

*(The writer is Founder President, Geo-Informatics Society of Sri Lanka)*