WATER WATER EVERYWHERE, BUT NOT A DROP TO DRINK
"Pricing the priceless water" - Impact on society.

by

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Introduction

The consultation draft of the water resources law is now ready, and its enactment into law by parliament is expected in the first quarter of this year. It is said to be based on the national water resources policy approved by the government in April 2000, after preparatory work conducted since the mid-nineties based on the so-called Dublin Principles of Integrated Water Resources Management. (Wickramage 2000)

The Dublin Principles are (Wickramage 2000):

* Water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment, which should be managed in an integrated manner.
* Water resources management and development should be based on the participatory approach involving all relevant stakeholders, and making decisions at the lowest appropriate level.
* Women play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.
* Water has an economic value in all its competing uses, and should be recognised as an economic good, taking into account affordability and equity criteria.

The objectives of the national water resources policy are 'to ensure the use of water resources in an effective, efficient and equitable manner, consistent with the social, economic and environmental needs of present and future generations.' (WRC, 2000)

We will attempt to examine, using information available in the public domain, the extent to which these principles have been followed, with emphasis on the social implications of the water policy.

Integrated water management

Integrated management practices should not be limited in any manner. It has been shown (Cairns, 1995) that fragmented management with single purpose objectives carried out without consideration of the larger ecological context in which they occur at best are unlikely to succeed and at worst are likely to cause tremendous difficulties that are nearly always more expensive than the original problem. Examples abound round the world, and one that comes readily to mind in the Sri Lankan context is the Nilwala flood protection scheme, which in addition to ecological problems also created innumerable social problems.

Even though the water resources policy claims to be an instrument for integrated management, the mechanisms chosen seem to be based overwhelmingly on one criterion, that of "willingness to pay".

No justification of this approach can be found within the policy document, but seems to have been taken as axiomatic. We can find in the background a vast literature, mostly emanating from the international lending institutions, which support this premise. For example, prerequisites for efficiency in the implementation of integrated water resources management are given as (Munasinghe, 1992)

* Efficient production of water, by ensuring supply at the least-cost through the optimisation of investment planning and water system operation.
* Efficient consumption of water, by providing efficient price signals that ensure optimal water use and resource allocation.

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The showcase example for market driven investment in water resources is the United Kingdom. How does its sector-wise water needs compare with ours?

Across England and Wales on average, only about 2% of the total water abstracted is used for irrigation and agriculture, compared to approximately 50 % for public supply. On the other hand, in India, about 80% of water is used in irrigation, while domestic, energy and industrial sectors use approximately 5% each (ICID, 2000). Comparative figures for Sri Lanka are not available, but it is likely that a large proportion of available water is used in agriculture and irrigation, unlike in Britain.

Solutions that may work in one situation cannot be applied successfully in totally different circumstances. Optimisation of investment and "correct' price signals will only ensure optimisation of profit, and not the rational use of water in accordance with the criterion laid down earlier.

Participatory approach

"An extensive participatory and consultative approach with all stakeholder representative groups has been adapted in policy development" (Wickramage, 2000).

Who or what are these "stakeholder representative groups".

"The members of the Water Resources Council, Inter-Agency Co-ordinating Committee, Working Groups and representatives of all water related public sector agencies, Provincial Councils and administrative units such as District/Divisional Secretariats, Local authorities and private sector / non-government organisations who have been actively involved..." (WRC, 2000)

It is clear from the above that the Government has been talking to itself (and its parasitic agencies) for more than four years, in drawing up the water resources policy! In societies that are more open, all relevant information including the results of tests, simulations and research studies are made available to the public so that they may be better informed in "participating".

It is very unfortunate that our government should look at public participation with suspicion. It is not only the government that is at fault, the scientific and technocratic community is also equally at fault. Due to a number of reasons related to their training and the resultant alienation from their own society, the scientific community has become incapable of learning from the people.

At the 2nd World Water Forum held at the Hague in March 2000, case studies were presented from Aboriginal (Australia), Cree (Canada), Fijian (Fiji), Hopi (USA), Ibaloi-Igorot (Philippines), Karen, Thai (Thailand) and San (Namibia/Botswana) communities. Participants pointed out that indigenous peoples have sophisticated knowledge and practices relating to water, its use and management. (WWF Session 69, 2000).

It is not only the peoples rights that are lost by rejecting participation, their knowledge is also lost.

The central role of women

Gender issues have been totally misunderstood. Let me quote from the National Water Resources Policy document:

"Water resources will be managed in a way which recognises the distinctive roles and needs of men and women. Priority will be given to activities which facilitate traditional gender roles and strengths. In particular, the interests of men and women in vulnerable positions within marginalised groups of population (such as low income, female-headed households or migrant workers) will be supported in all aspects of water resource management. The water resources policy should be interpreted in a gender sensitive manner." (WRC, 2000).

What is meant by "activities which facilitate traditional gender roles"? Does it mean that the water resources policy intends to reinforce the subordinate role of women that exists in a degenerate society? In any case, it is difficult to find a single instance where the policy has been "interpreted in a gender sensitive manner".

In the next section, we will see how women have fared under projects for the construction of large dams, even in the 90s, when governments all over the world have been making declarations similar to those in the present policy document.

Affordability and equity criteria

In respect of large dams world-wide, including those constructed in the 90s, the World Commission on Dams has noted (WCD, 2000):

... That the poor, other vulnerable groups and future generations are likely to bear a disproportionate share of the social and environmental costs of large dam projects without gaining a commensurate share of the economic benefits.

It has further found (ibid.) that:

* Indigenous and tribal peoples and vulnerable ethnic minorities have suffered disproportionate levels of displacement and negative impacts on livelihood, culture and spiritual existence.

* Affected populations living near reservoirs as well as displaced people and downstream communities have often faced adverse health and livelihood outcomes from environmental change and social disruption.

* Among affected communities, gender gaps have widened and women have frequently borne a disproportionate share of the social costs and were often discriminated against in the sharing of benefits.

These problems will be further aggravated by the proposed market-driven practices, in total opposition to the stated objectives of the policy.

Water allocation and food

We noted earlier that irrigation and agriculture are major users of water in countries such as ours; even in India, which has a strong industrial base.

The main mechanism of ensuring efficient use of water proposed in the policy document is, as was noted earlier, "willingness to pay". This is to be implemented through a complex scheme of water allocation.

The policy document (WRC, 2000) states (italics added):

The objective of this water allocation policy is to promote the wise use of Sri Lanka's water resources through secure and orderly allocation of water, equitable access to water by all users, preservation of water supply for environmental and social / cultural priorities, and voluntary transfer to higher valued users.

The catch lies in the last phrase: voluntary transfer to higher valued users.

In our context, irrigation and agriculture are essential for food security. When poor farmers (farmers are poor in Sri Lanka) find that they are unable to live "for today", they will be severely tempted to trade their water allocations for a mere pittance, to "voluntarily transfer them to a higher valued user". The higher valued user could be anybody, a playboy who wants to have ample water for his swimming pool, or the operator of a tourist hotel. The farmer may also transfer his/her allocation to a commercial plantation, which grows cash crops for export. These are all short term "higher value users". What happens in the long term? We would have destroyed our traditional paddy farming community and their farmlands in one stroke! (This was of course one of the explicitly stated objectives of the recommendations of the World Bank on non-plantation sector agriculture.) With that would have gone our food security.

We have already instituted "transferable deeds" for our paddy lands, and now we are proposing transferable water rights. We seem to be determined to starve in the 21st Century!

There are other issues of importance relating to the use of water in agriculture that need to be addressed. Water is used not only once, but stays in the ground to create a total environment. How this could be measured and charged to one user is beyond comprehension.

Water modelling

Models used for water studies effect policy by their implicit assumptions, both stated and unstated. This is one area where the biases of the scientific and technocratic establishment and its unwillingness to learn from the experiences of the people have lead to bizarre outputs.

The session on Socio-political impacts of Water Modelling at the 2nd World Water Forum WWF Session 30, 2000) concluded that:

1) Water resources systems are complicated beasts and one needs decent models to understand them and to prepare interventions;

2) Models should be multidisciplinary to avoid an overemphasis on a single aspect (e.g.economy, civil engineering etc.);

3) In the development of water resources management plans, an early implementation ofstakeholders is essential. Stakeholders should already be involved in the process of thedevelopment of the analysis tools;

4) In the process from vision to action, water models may play an essential role. To bring about changes on the political level, water models are just an ingredient.

Work that is already in progress under the Mahaweli rehabilitation project, in anticipation of the enactment of legislation on water entitlement. These seem to be based on inadequate models that ignore the reuse of water in agriculture.

The issues involved are complex, and a separate study on these aspects is warranted.

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