

Water Across Boundaries/Peter P. Mollinga and Nimal Gunawardena in conversation with Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

Guest Editor Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Peter P. Mollinga of the ZEF Center for Development Research and Nimal Gunawardena, Executive Director, SaciWATERS in Hyderabad discuss strategies for changing the conventional mindset of water resource development and management.

KLD: Tell me a little bit about yourself and your work on water: how did you get involved and what sustained your interest? Were there others who inspired you? Did you build on existing strengths or filled in a gap?

PM: I became involved in water issues in South Asia through the decision to do a PhD on large-scale irrigation management in Asia. I did my graduation on irrigation at Wageningen University in 1984. I spent some time in the UK doing 'development studies' more broadly, and it is there that my specific interest in India emerged – colonialism still casts shadows as we know. My first visit to India was in October 1989, and since then I have worked on issues of water resources management, first primarily irrigation, now more broadly on water. I came to India with the conviction that the understanding of water resources management needed an interdisciplinary approach – and developing that has been the ongoing project in my academic work. I also believed strongly that for research to have any impact it is necessary to engage in a long-term commitment. Though not planned beforehand of course, my activities have moved from individual PhD research in the early 1990s, to more policy-oriented research and engagement in water policy debate, to the establishment of SaciWATERS and the design of the Crossing Boundaries project.

After the WWF at The Hague, the Dutch government pledged funds on water management, part of which was made available to the Irrigation and Water Engineering group at Wageningen University, where I was based at the time. I successfully applied for a project called SaciWATERS. The project later on became an NGO. The idea for the organization came from several activities in the 1990s. One important event was the 'Politics of water in South Asia' conference held at Madras Institute of Development Studies in 1995, where many of us met. Among several other things, one factor was Ford Foundation-sponsored PhD programme called 'Matching Technology and Institutions' at Wageningen. This programme helped us to train 10 PhD students from India and Nepal who also were instrumental in generating the idea.

NG: I graduated in 1979 from University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka specializing in Agriculture Engineering. I still work as a Professor in the Department of Agricultural

Interview with Peter P. Mollinga and Nimal Gunawardena

Engineering, University of Peradeniya, although my PhD was in Soil and Water Engineering in 1987 from the Cranfield University, UK. During my first sabbatical in 1994/1995, I went to University of Athens, GA, USA as a Senior Fulbright scholar. I have been the Project Director of Crossing Boundaries Project at SaciWATERS since 2006. During my teaching and research on hydrology, soil erosion, irrigation water management, agricultural drainage, watershed management and integrated water resources management, I noticed the great need of a paradigm shift amongst water resource engineers. As a Member of the Technical Advisory Committee to the Global Water Partnership of South Asia, or the Country Coordinator of the CapNet – capacity building project in IWRM funded by UNDP – and Country Representative of the Soil and Water Conservation Society, this belief was strengthened.

KLD: What are your opinions about the civil society groups working on water issues in South Asia? Do you consider them as having a collective voice that need to be heard? Are they offering viable alternatives to the mainstream thinking of water management?

PM: SaciWATERS as an organization addresses water scholars and professionals active in the fields of education and capacity building. Individual consortium members have of course much wider ranging sets of activities. The explicit objective of the organization is to come together on 'interdisciplinary water resources studies'. The CB project and its activities have students of water resources as a specific target group. Female water professionals are also a specific target group in that project. The main message has to do with a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary perspective on water resources, from a human development standpoint.

One of the privileges to work as a foreigner in India is that it has such a vibrant civil society community, and high level of academic scholarship. My criticism of a lot of civil society activity is that they tend to be stuck somewhat in polarized debates pitting against each other the state and the village, the global and the local, the large and

the small (see my paper 'Sleeping with the enemy' on this issue). This is a structural characteristic I think of the India public water discourse, and tells something about the way the political system works – among other things. There is, however, a trend to come to other approaches. My comment is thus not about offering alternatives – civil society offers a lot of very valuable alternatives to the present mode of water management, my comment is on strategy to achieve the widespread use if these – making them 'business as usual', internalizing them in mainstream policy. There not much progress has been made in my view.

I do not observe a coming together of civil society organizations in a 'movement' of some sort. There is insufficient alliance-building with other forces in society to be able to effectuate structural changes – or so is my assessment.

NG: In general, civil society groups are trying to do a good job in terms of providing an alternative view to what was going on according to the globalization/privatization agenda. The success of civil society action varies depending on the countries/sectors, etc. Civil society groups in Sri Lanka were successful in preventing the proposed water resources policy, which was considered detrimental to the interest of the majority. Gram Vikas in, Orissa, India has provided total sanitation to 320 villages covering a population of 29,000. However, you will also find civil society organizations set up to provide livelihood for few. In my opinion, the success of civil society groups depends on the credibility and commitment of those serving in such institutions.

I am not sure whether they have a 'collective voice' as such because each organization works within their own mandate and does not really work hard to get all the like-minded organization to come together and raise a collective voice.

There are good organizations which provide alternatives to mainstream thinking. However, the reactions of majority of the organizations are negative and one dimensional. They protest and do not come out with viable alternatives. Perhaps they do not have the required expertise and resources to do that.

Development 51(1): Upfront

KLD: In important dimension of these civil society groups is sustaining their agenda. Have they been successful in this regard? Are they merging or coming close together – in what areas (IWRM?) and what are the implications?

PM: There is an endless list of major challenges – what is major depends on one's position/location. A more answerable question would be what would be strategic issues to address, what are 'sticking points' in moving towards a different approach to water resources management. It is still difficult to answer. Personally, I think that the first challenge is the internalization of political ecology concerns by mainstream water policy/water bureaucracies, and second is that of establishing institutional arrangements for negotiated water resources management at the 'meso' level (region, sub-basin, district – in between the state and village level). One can also ask, what will be the trigger that will make the changes happen? If international experience is any guide, this is likely to be water quality/water pollution and its impacts, that is, the environmental question related to water.

NG: Yes, they try to sustain their 'general' agenda, but entertain issues which keep on coming to the top of the global/regional agenda. Some of the leading civil society groups are successful in sticking to their agenda.

I am not sure whether they are merging or coming closer. The implication is that the global agenda will move ahead irrespective of little resistance coming from here and there.

KLD: What do you think are the major water issues and challenges in South Asia?

PM: When you refer to the Dixit/Ahmed/Nandy manifesto, that is available on our website (together with other such documents) and it is re-published in my edited book from Sage: *Water for Food and Rural Development*. These documents give an overall perspective and problem analysis of the water situation in South Asia. The overall thrust of it continues to inspire SaciWATERS activities.

NG: South Asia has all the water issues that you could think of. However, intensity and relevance

change depending on the country. Low productivity of water use, low coverage of drinking water supply and sanitation, water pollution, floods, droughts and environmental degradation are the major issues. All of these issues are directly or indirectly linked to poverty in the region where 75 percent of the population earns less than US\$ 2 per day.

Eradicating poverty and providing sustainable livelihood for the people in the region is the main challenge. Integrated water resources management is an important approach to meet the above challenge. Technological innovation and increased investments in the water sector alone cannot solve these problems without major institutional reforms with improved water governance in the region.

KLD: How far do you think the laws are up to date with current needs and practices? Do they need to be revisited and if so by who and under whose leadership?

PM: There is no groundwater law in India for example. Legal changes by themselves often change very little in practice. What is more important are the social carriers of such laws: is there a coalition of interest groups in society supporting and driving it? The more difficult question is how to achieve such societal alignments (advocacy coalitions if you wish), more difficult than designing water laws as such. In this respect, the 'alternative voice' has been put, in India at least, on the defensive in recent years in my judgment by the 'inter-linking of rivers' initiative (plus the SC judgment on Narmada). When in the 1990s the environmental voice and other critical voices seemed to be making some headway in reshaping policy, that ground seems to be partly lost now. I think this is a temporary setback, as the force of the actual problems related to water resources management will increasingly make themselves felt – problems and disasters will only increase. But in the mean the social and environmental cost will be enormous. Many accidents are likely to happen on the way.

One legal revision that is necessary I would say in India is to rethink the Water Disputes Tribunal Act. In my view the legalistic approach to

Interview with Peter P. Mollinga and Nimal Gunawardena

resolving inter-state issues is outdated. Other ways of negotiation are needed – as the Cauvery case for instance illustrates. Also the scope of the Tribunals is far too limited: it only looks at surface water, not at groundwater, which has become a serious omission with the explosion of groundwater use; it works with yearly quantitative allocations at 75 percent dependability – with closing basins dynamic rules and processes are needed for effective decision-making that can respond to scarcity and to deal with the timing element.

NG: The relevance of legal structure to address current needs and practices varies from country to country. Sri Lanka has a much better legal and institutional structure to manage its water resources compared to India. One can argue that India is larger in size has more people. But equity of land and water resources is far better in Sri Lanka compared to India due to pro-poor policies adopted by the former. In Sri Lanka water availability is assessed, allocated, distributed and monitored with a feed back mechanism at the national level. Once allocated, water is being managed at the local level through stakeholder participation.

This is unthinkable in the Indian context. I strongly feel that water resources should become a union subject and the centre has to assess the resources available and allocate water based on national priorities. Once that is done, state can develop their own mechanism to manage water within their jurisdiction. Civil society involvements have to be properly internalized at the local level to make sure that equity issues are addressed and basic requirement for water supply, sanitation and livelihood requirements of the poor are met.

Looking at the sensitivity of the subject and the difficulty of the task, leadership has to be taken by the politicians who have the power when it comes to decision-making and facilitating the implementation. However, this will not happen in a vacuum. Civil society organization (which ideally should have activists, professionals, academics, researchers, etc.) should create pressure for political leadership to take such actions.

KLD: How do you envision the water future of South Asia?

PM: It is a plausible prediction that problems will be increasing for some time to come, some ‘time bombs’ are also being created – like groundwater pollution by chemical and pharmaceutical industries. Even if approaches change tomorrow, some problems will take decades to resolve – like in many other places in the world. Water problems will not be solved ‘in themselves’, in isolation, but are intimately linked to broader questions of political economy (poverty, distribution, welfare, growth strategies, etc.) and of democracy. Water resources policy and management is likely to be shaped more by developments in these domains than the other way around. Nevertheless, India (I can speak less well informed about other countries, and therefore don’t do it) definitely has the resources (intellectual, financial, human, etc.) to effectively address water resources management problems, and there is an array of initiatives that give concrete pointers on how to move forward. So that is where the hope lies. The mobilization and mainstreaming of that capacity and potential is the central political question.

NG: I see an escalating trends of conflicts associated with water between people, states and countries. Rich and the powerful will continue to take hold of scarce water resources marginalizing the poor. Establishing sustainable institutions which could address these equity issues are very important. I believe that river basin as a unit for water management is important especially for water scare situations so that limited water resources can be equitably allocated among stakeholders while guaranteeing environmental flow for long-term sustainability, though there are differences of opinion on promoting river basin management. This is also the only way to handle transboundary water issues where more than one country shares water from a same river. I am of the opinion that water will become a major political issue and may secure a higher place in the SAARC agenda. Countries/States/Provinces have to be mature enough to sit together and agree to come out with acceptable strategies based on the principles of equity and fairness to manage the limited water resources in the region for common good.

Development 51(1): Upfront

SaciWATERS South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies, SaciWATERS (www.saciwaters.org), was formed as a project after the 2000 World Water Forum at The Hague. SaciWATERS produces new knowledge to address the pressing problems in the water sector in South Asia through education, action research and advocacy. It has created a new group of professionals and experts through its Crossing Boundaries Project which aims to contribute to the paradigm shift in water resources management in South Asia.

SaciWATERS works mainly with academics and postgraduate students who are working in the water sector. It is changing the technical/civil engineering curriculum by introducing subjects which addresses IWRM, gender, participatory management, equity and sustainability and environmental concerns to enable them to address water issues in a broader perspective. The research programmes in the CB Project are based on existing water problems in respective countries where students are working with stakeholders to address the problem. Crossing Boundaries Project is a capacity building project in Integrated Water Resources Management, Gender and Water in South Asia funded by the Netherlands Government.