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## Book Review

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#### **Impacts of Megaconferences on the Water Sector**

**by Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada**

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Heidelberg 69121, Germany, 276pp**

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Global interest in water issues has increased considerably during the past decades, as highlighted in the preface of the book *Impacts of Megaconferences on the Water Sector*. Scientists, government officials and world leaders have come to realise that water is a key resource whose availability, quality and effective management are central to health, prosperity and peace. Along with the increasing consciousness on water issues, the number of megaconferences on water has proliferated in the past decades. The editors, Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada, point out that the proliferation of water-related megaconferences has both contributed to the awareness of water issues as well as led to people wondering whether the frequency of such events is really meaningful. According to the editors, a global solution to water management is unachievable as water problems are bound to space and time in the highly heterogeneous and rapidly changing world. The following question is thus posed: What is the potential of the proliferating number of global conferences in improving water management practices?

Accordingly, an evaluation of the benefits, effectiveness and impacts of megaconferences is needed since their usefulness and cost-effectiveness have never been estimated. The book presents results of a survey carried out to assess the impacts of water-related megaconferences as perceived by water professionals from all over the world. The book is divided into two parts: the first part estimates the impacts of megaconferences on the water sector according to selected water professionals and the second part presents the results of specific country and regional assessments.

In the first chapter, the author Asit K. Biswas introduces the reader to the history of the conferences and the respective impacts by reviewing the progress in the water sector along with the evolution of megaconferences from the Mar del Plata Conference in 1977 until the Third World Water Forum (WWF3) in Japan in 2003. The Mar del Plata Conference was perceived to be the most successful of the conferences: it approved an action plan that included recommendations for water management and established an International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. It also produced an abundance of new knowledge and information as well as country- and region-specific analyses in the preparatory process. Unfortunately, according to the author, the extensive results, implications and experience of the Mar del Plata Conference were both ignored and unattained in the succeeding conferences. The conferences organised in Dublin in 1992 and in Bonn in 2001 preparatory to the major UN conferences, the UN Conference on

Environment and Development in 1992 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 failed to recommend appropriate sustainable water policies and action programmes, leaving no possibility to influence the water-related agenda. The author states that also the series of World Water Forums (WWFs) organised by the World Water Council have failed to impact the water sector and the political scene. The sheer size of the WWF2 and WWF3, gathering a large number of participants in a number of sessions, produced only fragmentation and inhibited them from finding a common message. Thus, the author concludes that to avoid organising more costly and ineffective megaconferences, an objective evaluation of the impacts cost-effectiveness of the past events is needed.

In the following chapters, several water experts discuss their personal views on the impacts of megaconferences. The author of the second chapter, Morris Miller, explores the effectiveness of the policies formulated in large-scale broad-scope UN conferences and the institutional challenges for achieving the objectives of the megaconferences. Also, two case studies are presented, the Millennium Summit and the UN Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy in 1981. In the third chapter, Robert G. Varady and Matthew Iles-Shih examine the collective activities and impacts of the numerous global water initiatives (GWIs) in the world. The questions are explored by carrying out questionnaire surveys to key leaders and experts about the impacts and effectiveness of selected GWIs. One question posed in the chapter is whether the large number of GWIs constitutes a well-defined network with a unified purpose or whether the initiatives are independent, poorly connected and even competing. The fourth chapter, authored by Jon Lane, includes personal reflections on global water conferences during the period 1997–2003. In the fifth chapter, Anthony Milburn offers a tentative approach to looking at international water conferences and the water sector reform. More than looking at the successes and failures of conferences, the paper concentrates on them as part of a process occurring in the latter part of the 20th century, which actualised in the huge expansion of information generation and exchange. In the sixth chapter, the author Gourisankar Ghosh discusses his personal experience of megaconferences, on the side of carrying out an objective evaluation of the costs and benefits of the Dakar Global WASH Forum organised in 2004 through a questionnaire survey and interviews with the conference participants.

Generally, the authors find that the megaconferences in their current format have not had a sufficient impact on the water sector and call for more sharply focused conferences. Jon Lane and Gourisankar Ghosh agree with the editor Asit K. Biswas that the future could include fewer megaconferences and more regional and sectoral meetings to share lessons and monitor progress. According to Anthony Milburn, the apparent failure in the water sector has been the lack of institutional reform as well as not being able to clearly articulate their arguments for securing larger investments to the field.

In chapter seven, the editors present the results of a global questionnaire survey assessing the personal views of a select group of experts of the outputs and impacts of water-related megaconferences. The strengths of megaconferences primarily were perceived to include increasing awareness, knowledge dissemination, idea exchange and networking. However, the conferences were considered to lack focus, implementable outputs, follow-ups, consensus and commitment to implementation. The conferences were considered to be of too large scale, having low quality papers, providing too little time and commitment for discussion and not carrying out appropriate dissemination and documentation of the papers. Especially, the WWFs were under a considerable amount of

criticism. In general, the water professionals were found to be sceptical of the benefits of megaconferences in their current form and thought they should rather be more focused and output-oriented.

In the second part of the book, a specific country-based questionnaire survey and analysis was carried out focusing on India, Bangladesh, Japan, Scandinavia and Southern Africa. The strengths and weaknesses identified were primarily the same as the ones found in the global survey. Developing country representatives thought generally that the cost of attendance was too high, which stands in the way of the aim to expand their influence. Many respondents thought the conferences were less about forging a common front against the global water crisis and more about hidden agendas and financial interests of developed countries. Again, in case water conferences are held in the future, the respondents thought they should have a clarified theme, be of smaller scale and lead to concrete actions and outcomes. As a conclusion, the megaconferences in their current form are suffering from lack of credibility, though some are more appreciated than others. Based on the survey in Nordic countries, some key challenges regarding global water conferences were interestingly identified by the authors Olli Varis and Terhi Renko. The challenges included: handling documentation and openness with expanding exposure; balancing between global and local as well as sectoral and multidisciplinary approaches; managing diverging awareness levels of water professionals regarding the water-related megaconferences; growing social dimension of the events and clarifying the mixture of politics and science.

The book takes the first and essential step in attempting to evaluate the impacts of megaconferences. It presents very interesting views on megaconferences and a noticeable global consensus on their role in the water sector. The survey results indicate that megaconferences have not managed to influence the water sector in the last decades despite the fact that there have been numerous pursuits. The large number of respondents makes the findings in the book notable, though also weaknesses of the methodology are well articulated in the book. First of all, the results presented represent people's personal view and are thus conjectural in nature. Considering the large number of water professionals in the world, there are likely to be also a corresponding number of personal views on the matter. It was highlighted that the conference attendance has an obvious effect on the respondent's conception on the conference, while attending more conferences makes it easier to make the link between subsequent impacts and a specific conference and non-attendance might make it hard to trace down the later changes to a certain event. It was also pointed out that the questions in the survey may have had an underlying hypothesis on the impacts of megaconferences, which may have directed the answers accordingly. In addition, the authors of the Japan survey thought that the different conferences should have been evaluated as a series rather than been evaluated as separate events. The impacts of megaconferences are impossible to measure and determine accurately, as the impacts are both direct and indirect in massive and varying scales and the interpretation of the impacts depends much on the estimator's view.

The clarity of the book suffers slightly from lacking a clear presentation of the structure of the book and the methodology used before the seventh chapter. Also, the readability of the book is affected by the similar results of the country-based surveys being repeated over and over again, making the book somewhat repetitive. A short round-up of the results of the surveys as well as some conclusive remarks would have provided a sharper message to the reader. The quality of the country survey reports varied substantially, as some reports provided an in-depth and sharp analytical examination of

the survey results while some settled for simply listing the results. Another issue with the book is that the WWF3 in Japan is the most recent event included in most chapters. Since then, also the WWF4 in Mexico City and the WWF5 in Istanbul have been organised and could have been included in the analysis.

Many of the authors wanted to highlight the fact that they want to present the survey results as a contribution to the debate about the nature and future of megaconferences and spark further discussion rather than provide conclusive remarks with recommendations for the future. This is exactly what the book offers: analytic views of experts that provide a very good background to the discussion surrounding the megaconferences, though no specific conclusions can be drawn from the findings. Overall, the book presents a collection of papers on a topic that is of substantial importance in the growing need of immediate action regarding the management of the world's water resources. It also provides practical suggestions on how such events can be improved and thus the book can be recommended to all water professionals who are working on achieving a global water sector reform.