

Managing Our Water: Making Best Use of This Precious Resource

The other name of water is life. It is so essential for keeping us alive. But when this precious but apparently abundant resource is mismanaged or not managed on one hand and gets polluted on the other it takes its toll of the economy and valuable lives as well. So the imperative for its appropriate management and augmentation for the benefit of agriculture, navigation, pisciculture and also for keeping it safe for domestic uses.

With a view to seeking expert opinion on better management and best use of this precious resource *The Daily Star* organised a **ROUNDTABLE** on June 26 participated by a wide range of experts in the field and different stakeholders. They stressed the need for striking a balance between use of ground water and surface water. The abundance of water in monsoon and its scarcity in dry season was identified as the major challenge for management. They opined that there's need for new thinking in National Water Management plan. Following are their deliberations on problems and prospects in managing and augmenting our water resource for its best use.



Given these conditions we felt that a serious in-depth discussion on how to manage our water is necessary. We have in a sense a long history of having dealt with this problem. This is not the first time that water has come into focus. There has been studies done by us, by foreign agencies and there is abundance of knowledge on the issue. But where are we with that knowledge, have we made use of it? Do we think that the knowledge is appropriate? Should we go for new studies or should we now focus on utilising that knowledge? These are the questions that we hope to address here.

As a starter we have with us Dr. Rashid Faruque, Principal Economist of the World Bank, a man with long experience in the field. We would like to invite him to start the discussion with an overview of where we are at the moment.

Dr. Rashid Faruque: What I would like to do is bring forth some of the issues and present status of the water resources sector. A year ago the World Bank did a report which actually tried to capture the state of our knowledge after FAP (Flood

gation and environment received less attention than required. But now our knowledge base has changed, we have learned more about these issues. The issue of water quality also got less attention at that time partly because this did not become a big topic at that point. Now the arsenic problem has turned into a big issue in

Bangladesh and West Bengal.

The water resource management under two different conditions -- scarcity and flood conditions, are very different. This report tried to look at the major issues of water management under flood condition. It did highlight the problems of river embankments and its management. Whatever we did in the past had some good things, it also had some problems. The river embankment was one of those. In the past we mostly looked to structural solution for resolving the problems, which we now know is not the best way. It has to be a combination of structural and non-structural. There are also problems of river sedimentation because of embankments. Not much was known about the effects of controlled structures and their implications to river morphology. Those were problems in the past.

If we look at the scarcity conditions there are few things that need to be done. The government has already done some of these. It has established priorities and is moving from irrigation focus to a multiple use of water. However, the process is rather slow. WARPO has been set up and strengthened to make a more broad view of water use. Ground water reliance is still important and will continue to be so. There are lots of misconceptions about ground water availability which we might discuss around the table today. Then the issue of water management in relation to water development, what kind of water resource investment to take place and how to increase efficiency -- all these needs to be discussed.

The last part of our work was on institutions. Actually when we wrote this report there was no focal organisation for integrated water planning. However, that has now been corrected. WARPO is there. Maybe WARPO's outlook and mandate or its capability may have to be strengthened further. The existing institutions are more like water structured based, like BWDB, and not on management. This is changing. But the thing that we should discuss is whether the change is coming fast enough or not. Conflict, lack of coordination between major water sector organisations is also a hurdle. Hopefully WARPO with all its composition will be able to address that.

With the Water Policy in place, legal and regulatory framework is there but further follow-up may be needed. The local government system may be a part of integrated resource planning that will involve things like flood forecasting, warning system, providing protection to urban areas, making acceptable level of protection in rural areas, introduction of flood plain zoning and flood proofing. But most important is that people should know more about floods, like experiences from other countries. Operation and maintenance of embankments is something that we will have to push through in the future and also should address the prob-

lem of sedimentation and drainage.

The situation in scarcity condition is very different.

Augmenting water supply from different sources and the conjunctive use of it is a way to go.

Ground water becomes very important here.

There are some issues that

need to be addressed and the

government has already moved

in that direction by formulating a Water Policy. The policy gives the ideas as to how the different users could be having their claim on water resources, principles of inter-sectoral water allocation, allocation of water, water using rights and economic pricing of water, and lastly how to recover cost. On the cost recovery the government hasn't done very well. I was looking at the case study of GK Project. Unbelievable! Only one-eighth of the operation and maintenance cost has been charged and that too has not been collected.

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viding protection to urban ar-

eas, measures for urban and

rural areas had to be somewhat

different because of the den-

sity of population and so on. The

need for flood management

through compartmentalisation

has been highlighted in the

report and I think we should

discuss these.

That complete flood control

is neither possible nor desir-

able as has been learned and ac-

cepted now. So it is flood man-

agement that we are talking

about and one of the experimen-

ts from these FAP studies was

this compartmentalisation.

River bank protection and

river training again is one

emerging thing that has come

out of those studies. The other

thing was that of beneficiary

participation. This has now

been recognised and practiced.

It was perhaps not practiced in

the past.

As I said flood control is

neither possible nor desir-

able. But it is important to man-

age and mitigate floods. This

should be an important organisa-

tional structure that we need for

beneficiary participation. So in

terms of reforms, again based on

these we have to design or

organisational frame in public

sector that can do four things:

Research; Development; Policy

Planning and Regulation.

Now although we have some-

thing in place but if we very ob-

jectively look at our capability I

think there is still lot to do. Co-

ordination for example is an

important factor. All these

structures that you do on the

ground, roads, embankments —

they have implications on wa-

ter flow. How much have we re-

ally done? I for one believe that

there is room for much more

coordination. From that point

of view this Water Council has

a big role to play. Private orga-

nisations and community organi-

sations are also needed.

The report tries to capture

some of the functions that are

needed and which function can

be done by which organisations.

This in my view is very

useful.

When we wrote this we had

basically two things in mind:

Policy institutions to be put in

place and actual management

plan to be prepared.

We have already made quite

a bit of progress. We have the

National Water Policy, Water

Code Rules and Regulations.

Perhaps more are needed to

follow it up which is in the pro-

cess. Dr. Shamsul Huda might

say that WARPO has already

been strengthened, let's also

discuss it, what the issues are,

because we need a focal organi-

sation for the overall coordina-

tion and planning. Other public

sector institutions must re-ori-

ent their objectives. It's already

happening. But have we done

enough? Have we already

reached our goal?

There are some more issues