

# Water, poverty reduction and economic growth: The key linkages

Md SAIFUL HAQUE writes from Stockholm

**W**ATER is central to human existence. It's a key factor in reducing poverty, improving livelihoods, and promoting economic growth. Yet, investments to provide people with safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, to allocate and preserve water resources, and to properly manage wastewater have fallen seriously behind demands.

Investments in water are also crucial to meet the broader MDG targets of reducing poverty, hunger, child and maternal mortality and the incidence of major diseases, and of improving environmental sustainability. Additional investments are needed for irrigation services, river basin management, flood management and mitigation, and wastewater management, to ensure the future of this precious resource.

Clearly, this is a major challenge, and one that is complicated by a wide range of governance, institutional, social, environmental and political issues. Good governance is an issue that, in different forms, is now seen as fundamental to any poverty reduction strategy and cuts across most other issues. It has many dimensions: creating a fair, legal policy and regulatory framework in which the rights of people to access resources are secured; improving the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of government agencies; ensuring the participation of the poor in decision making; enhancing the role of civil society; ensuring basic security and political freedoms; and others.

Many think implicitly water supply and sanitation (WSS) is the only aspect of water management that really matters. This is not the case: water management has the potential to be a key factor in many aspects of poverty reduction and sustainable development beyond WSS.

The need to integrate "gender" as a core issue in any poverty reduction strategy is now generally accepted. Women are as important as men for changing water management practices.

A good regional cooperation is a "must" for sustainable water management from a basin perspective. Failing in this not only runs the risk of not saving and managing water but can also have a negative impact on water quality, drinking water supply, groundwater balance, and downstream human and ecological users.



Recognising this, gender mainstreaming seeks to enable more gender balanced decision making processes for water management in the future and ensures that both women's and men's needs are properly addressed. Water and health are intricately linked. How can the future be better if today's girls must drop out of school for want of something as basic as a toilet?

Adequate water supplies and sanitation mean improved health. Improved health results will play a key role in improving attendance and performance at school, whilst better water supplies will mean

millions of girls do not have to spend study time collecting water, which is time consuming and physically debilitating.

And good health is a key to poverty reduction, directly affecting the quality of life of poor people and an essential pre-requisite for sustainable increases in income. Ill-health is a double burden: it reduces productive capabilities and means limited resources (time and money) have to be spent on caring for the sick. It's the most vulnerable, women and children, the extreme poor, the elderly, the malnourished, who

bear the burden of ill-health most and are the least able to cope with it. Sustainable improvements to health conditions are a key to poverty reduction, and in turn improvements to water management are a key to improving health conditions.

Water-borne and water-related diseases, linked directly to lack of access to adequate quantities of safe water and basic sanitation, are endemic in Bangladesh like in many other regions.

Millions are affected here by diarrhea, dysentery, hepatitis, malaria, intestinal worms, serious skin infections, etc. At some moments in time, cholera, typhoid, and other potentially fatal diseases are rife. Each year witnesses hundreds of preventable deaths, and tens of thousands of people ill from preventable diseases. And in all cases the poorest are the worst hit, which leads them to more ill-health, and more ill-health implies further impoverishment.

In terms of water supply, though the country has achieved success to a certain extent through sinking tube wells, arsenic contamination of groundwater in almost all the 64 districts has pushed it back. And

again the poorest suffer most from arsenicosis here (WHO, 2000). Many arsenic patients are forced to drink arsenic contaminated water and can hardly afford any medical treatment or improved water.

Dependence on groundwater has to be reduced and surface water is the only solution. While most of the developed countries use 70 to 80 per cent of their surface water as drinking water, Bangladesh uses only 1 per cent and 99 per cent of its drinking water comes from groundwater. Moreover, due to overexploitation of groundwater the water table is gradually lowering, which could be disastrous in future.

Unfortunately, the country's surface water almost everywhere is "terribly polluted" by free flowing industrial effluents and toxic chemicals. And most often these polluted industrialists are directly patronised by the ruling bigwigs. So, they don't care a damn about any health hazards, environmental hazards and laws. Even they don't at all think it's an offence. Ordinary people don't dare speak against them.

In sanitation sector, although the government has committed to achieve 100 per cent sanitation coverage by 2010, it considers merely latrines in the households.

However, according to the government estimates, the sanitation coverage has reached 72 per cent (until March, 2006). But this is cold comfort. It's still quite below 20 per cent in metropolitan slums. The slum dwellers "live an awfully pitiable unhygienic life". Many of them even don't have access to safe drinking water, let alone sanitation. They're often forced to drink very poor quality water that causes them various fatal diseases, while the rich benefit from subsidised treated piped water.

I've visited many slums and villages in Bangladesh and found most of the development projects do not reach the poor but the name of "poor" has always been trade name. Government or international aid agencies have hardly any pro-

ject to really improve living quality of the poorest population of the country. The existing projects mainly concern the betterment of a privileged section of society, where the hardcore poor continue to be misunderstood and blamed for circumstances beyond their control.

And the water management is still not being emphasised as a prime sector in national budgets. Also, the WSS sector has been inadequately reflected in the current national budget 2006-07, despite its being a crucial element in the PRSP. The WSS chapter has been put in the budget merely as a sub-sector under Physical Planning, Water Supply and Housing.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) as part of its human welfare activity is ready to double its investments in the water sector for 2006-2010 and it's expected such investments will be well over \$2 billion annually.

Well, but ADB has to ensure that all its investment and welfare benefits reach the hardcore poor.

In conclusion, a good regional cooperation is a "must" for sustainable water management from a basin perspective. Failing in this not only runs the risk of not saving and managing water but can also have a negative impact on water quality, drinking water supply, groundwater balance, and downstream human and ecological users.

Freelancer Md Saiful Haque is a Member of International Federation of Environmental Journalists (IFEJ).

## Coping with water scarcity

### Needed integrated resource management

Md FIROJ ALAM

**F**ROM December to May, five months in a year the dwellers of Shreepur village under Jamalpur district do not get-driven water from their hand tube-wells. As soon as the deep tube-wells start withdrawing the ground water for agriculture, the water table goes down and causes the scarcity for drinking water for them. It happens there every year invariably. Same is the situation in the draught prone Barind-track zone in the northern part of the country. The ground water based agriculture system is causing desertification and scarcity for safe water in the northwest and north central zone of the country.

In the southwest part, Satkhira, Bagerhat and Khulna have the worst water crisis in the country. To fetch a pitcher of safe water the women and adolescent girls have to trek miles after miles. After that even it is not certain the water they have collected is safe. The safe water sources in this area have been depleted because of the saline water intrusion from shrimp cultivation.

The settlements in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) area are built up on the springs. Springs and streams, the main sources of water in CHT, are now

drying up rapidly. Many of the villagers, mostly the innocent tribal people are now bound to abandon their age-old villages because of the water scarcity.

In the major towns and cities in the country large numbers are

not getting pipe water because of the production shortage of the authorities. For instance, the Chittagong WASA has the capacity to produce only 30 per cent of the total demand, while Dhaka WASA is barely meeting 75 per cent of demands of the city dwellers. One of the major reasons of the water shortage in the cities and the towns is the unavailability of the ground water, the main source.

Besides, except for three hill districts, the ground water of other 61 districts is arsenic contaminated.

In brief, this is our water scenario, and unfortunately this scenario is getting worse day by day. Why does it happen so? The main cause is the injudicious use of our water resources. In operational term, we can say that it is the sheer lacking of an integrated water resource management.

Day by day we are becoming increasingly dependent on ground water for agriculture and household use. This dependency on the ground water can be easily reduced by creating watershed throughout the country. As

Bangladesh is one of the countries in the world having the highest precipitation [206 cm/year], it has opportunity to preserve the rainwater in the artificial and natural reservoirs to use it during the dry season. Visiting the Philippines recently I have found watershed projects almost in each and every village.

The Philippines government under "Community Based Integrated Watershed Management" is patronising it.

Our neighboring country India has set perhaps the best example of judicious use of water resources. Thousands of villages across the India are now under "watershed" scheme. The provincial government of Maharashtra has made a law to make the citizens obligatory to harvest the rain water to raise the ground water table.

The drudgery of the women and the children in the southwest zone knows no bound due to the scarcity of sweet water. The age-old tradition of farming rice and other food crops are simply on

the verge of extinction. The natural vegetation, flora and fauna are at stake as an outcome of absence of any water resource management. Yes, there was a traditional and community initiated water resource management in the southwestern coastal area for hundreds of years. The villagers have been checking the saline water by building earthen dam on the rivers and canals. Presently the situation is just reversed. The greedy rich people going from the towns and cities have inundated the whole area with saline water. Governments along with the big lending agencies like Asian Development Bank, World Bank are encouraging this. Without initiation of an integrated water resource management I see no possibilities of recovering the normal lives and livelihood in this area.

The marginalised section of the population in southwestern zone is simply struggling to live.

While the ground water table is dropping at an alarming rate [3.3 meters/year in Dhaka], the roads and lanes get flooded with the rain water. This rain water can easily be harvested to use at least for toilet flushing, washing and bathing. See the luxury! We are using the water of drinking quality for toilet flushing or car washing. By making law government can make it compulsory for the city people to harvest rain water.

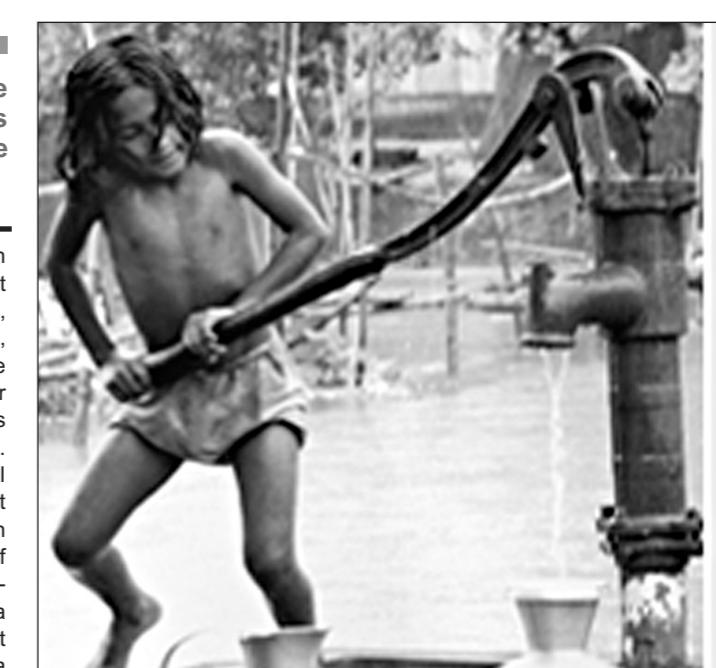
Out of the 1500 rivers, more than 1250 have lost their existence. The rest 250 rivers are simply struggling for survival.

The Ittefaq [July 3, 2004] reported that all 411 haors, 11 baors, and 29 bills located in the north-eastern part of the country were at stake. A newly constructed road that has gone cutting through the historic Chalan bill (Pabna-Natore) will cause the death for this natural water body. The Chalan bill works as a heat-buffer zone for the drought prone adjacent districts.

The one sided and isolated policies in the name of development are responsible for this. Over the last two decades,

scores of big bridges have been constructed over the important rivers including Padma, Meghna, Jamuna, Buriganga, Gomoti, Rupsha, Tista, Dhora etc. These bridges have accelerated our speed, but expedited the process of sedimentation on the river bed. I feel shaky each time when I cross the Jamuna Bridge. Desert like shoal has appeared on both sides in the river as an effect of this bridge. Two big bridges - - the Lalan Shah and the Jamuna bridge -- are already a big threat for this river. The proposed Mawa Bridge over the same river will do the worst for this river.

As a part of implementing the so called Green Revolution agenda in 1960s' and under flood protection scheme after 1988, thousands of kilometers of embankment and dam have been constructed. These embankments and dams are hindering the natural flow of water and causing flood and many other ecological hazards. The constructed culverts and small bridges all over the country are simply innumerable and are caus-



ing death for the many rivers and canals as the water issues are absent in the mind of the designers, constructors and the policy makers.

Lives, economy and culture of the people of this country are deeply attached to the water resources. But we have been misusing it everyday in various ways. To save the water sources integrated water resource management is just a need of the hour. But, unfortunately it is

missing in the water sector development. Though there are some policies already in the sector; we do not find their reflection in the implementation.

Md. Firoj Alam is working on Water Safety Plan and Water Resource Management with WaterAid Bangladesh.



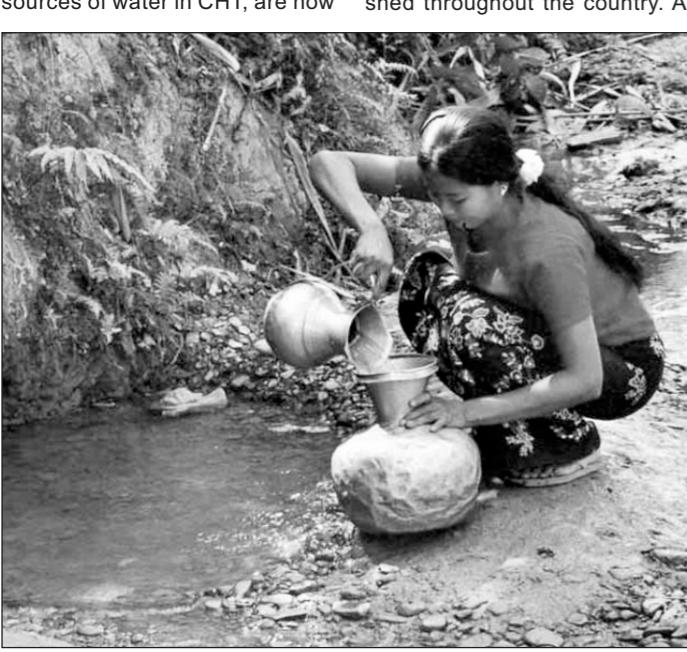
Areas affected by shrimp farming in Satkhira.



A boy quenching his desperate thirst!



An integrated watershed in the Philippines.



A Marma girl trying to collect water from a dried up spring