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Viewpoint – Swimming against the Current: Questioning Development Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT: The water world is dominated by normative policies prescribing what 'good development' is all about. It is a universe of its own where policies live their own lives and feed in and out of each other. As new buzzwords continue to be invented or reinvented, policies continue to maintain their shiny images of how water resources or water supply should be managed. There are many water professionals acting as missionaries in the service of policies but probably fewer professionals acting up against blindfolded policy promotion. It is when water policies are being implemented in the real world that the trouble starts. In spite of their well-intended mission, water policies often suffer shipwreck on the socio-economic and political realities in developing countries. Through cases from India and the Mekong, the author demonstrates what happens when normative water policies are forced out of their comfort zone and into social and political realities. Although policies are made of stubborn material they need to be questioned through continuous analytical insight into developing country realities. But undertaking critical analysis and questioning the wisdom of water policies are easier said than done. It takes a lot of effort to swim against the policy current.

KEYWORDS: Water policies, water resources, water supply, Integrated Water Resources Management, river basin management, India, the Mekong, politics

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I reflect on how water policy concepts are often translated into development interventions without much reflection on how these policies match socio-economic and political realities on the ground. Policies tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies with an inherent logic of 'absolute reason and truth'. Policies are by nature normative as they tend to portray ideal development scenarios. Policy implementation then becomes a question of communicating the policy wisdom through reasoned arguments. In the water world, this has resulted in supply-driven interventions by development missionaries promoting standardised hygiene and sanitation approaches, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) packages, formulas for river basin organisations and, lately, the *nexus* approach. Policy-makers, donor agencies and water experts are often sceptical towards research insights that challenge the collective wisdom of policies. Analysts and researchers, on the other hand, remain comfortably aloof from, or are only following in the footsteps of, development practice. The essay reflects on the advantages gained, and dilemmas faced, by the author having been in both the development and the research camps.

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SWIMMING AGAINST THE POLICY CURRENT

The world of development professionalism and practice has changed over the years. But one thing has remained constant since I started my career as a development researcher in 1982, and later as a development professional for the Danida, and that is the prevalence of normative policies and dogmas for 'good development'. Global policies change from time to time but their impact on development practitioners, and not to forget on the policy-makers themselves, remains strong, sometimes to the extent that policy-makers and practitioners are nothing more than missionaries on duty to implement policies that happen to be in vogue at a given period of time.

My own approach on development has been to raise two main questions on global development policies, no matter how correct they may appear. Firstly, how global policies are established, based on what evidence and lessons learnt. Secondly, whether a policy is realistic and can be implemented in a given socio-economic and political context. Asking these questions means applying analytical thinking that can lead to criticism of both current development dogmas and their application on the ground. I have always found that it was my moral and professional duty to apply such critical analysis whenever I smelled 'something rotten here'. As an academic I felt that my development agency needed some value for the salary they paid me and not just an *apparatchik* accepting any policy message.

Looking back, I must say that there has been considerable freedom and room for manoeuvre for analytical and critical thinking in Danida. I cannot say that I have ever felt constrained or highly frustrated that I could not get things done the way I professionally thought best. Perhaps it is because the freedom of expression is strongly felt throughout Denmark including in government bureaucracies. Perhaps it is because of the respect for knowledge and reason. Perhaps it is because that, in spite of commitments to global policies in vogue, Danida was always more concerned with getting things done on the ground through projects and programmes, whatever it takes. Perhaps it is because Danida management had an open mind. Perhaps it is because Danida, although fully integrated in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and therefore subject to frequent political changes, is also a network organisations where it is always possible as a professional adviser to navigate your case for approval and decision-making. That is, if you have a good case.

In the 1990s, it was my experience in the global water arena that questioning policy can be a delicate matter. A lot is at stake for the bigger donors, development banks and definitely for the UN system where normative policies thrive by mandate. In international meetings and conferences, where normative policies thrive, I have often felt like a salmon swimming against the current. The policy current in Danida has been mild and gentle but the policy current in the international water community has been stronger and at times slightly aggressive.

Water policies, like other sector development policies, tend to be driven by changing global discourses on the 'right development' for developing countries. Although the 'we' and 'them' dichotomy has changed, at least semantically, to 'partnerships' over recent years, water policies are still largely crafted and driven by donors, UN and development organisations, global water experts and NGOs. New policy agendas rarely originate in developing countries. However, developing country governments usually, although sometimes reluctantly, have embraced the globally crafted water policies as their framework to ensure the flow of aid from donors, development banks and NGOs.

Proponents of policies for developing the water sector often argue that the policy formulas are based on knowledge of 'what works on the ground' and 'what needs to be done' to reach objectives. However, a closer analytical look into 'what works' often shows that these ideal policies for developing the sector face difficulties in their implementation. Some policies amount to nothing but wishful thinking when faced with political, socio-economic and cultural realities on the ground.

"MR. JENSEN, YOU MUST MAKE THEM UNDERSTAND"

My first experience of handling a global water policy agenda was during the International Water and Sanitation Decade from 1980 to 1990. The global objective was to increase the global drinking water and sanitation coverage. The strategy to achieve the objective was to dramatically increase the number of drinking water points which in many countries, particularly South Asia, meant hand pumps. As the Decade progressed, it became clear that simply installing hand pumps in rural areas was not enough. Problems of maintenance of pumps and hygienic handling of water surfaced and questioned the effects and sustainability of the massive and largely infrastructure-based efforts. By the mid-1980s in India there was already talk about the Decade producing a 'graveyard of hand pumps' as pumps were either not being used or maintained in response to which the international water expert community along with UNICEF, donors including Danida, and some NGOs invented the so-called Integrated Approach to Drinking Water and Sanitation. It was a holistic package with many new soft components aimed at taking care of virtually everything in the sector, reach the objective of improved health, and allow for new drinking water infrastructure to be used and maintained. But it was a policy crafted by the global expert community and based on demands from neither developing country governments nor needs expressed by rural communities out there.

For my part the Decade held a lesson learned in translating policy into practice within a Danida-supported drinking water and sanitation project in the eastern state of Orissa in India from 1985 to 1987. I was socio-economic adviser in the project that was designed as a flagship project demonstrating the new Integrated Approach under one umbrella led by the Orissa State Department of Public Health and Engineering. The catchword for good development in the 1980s was *integration* and many integrated rural development projects flourished under direct donor or NGO control. Policies and strategies for integrated development were developed based on a holistic perception of 'everything being related to everything'. It obviously carried a large element of tautological truth as it was difficult to argue otherwise from an analytical and conceptual angle. In the drinking water sector, most projects embraced integration by including health and water hygiene, household sanitation, communication and behaviour change. In addition to these soft activities, drinking water projects also included activities closer to the comfort zone of engineers such as groundwater resources development, drilling of deep tube wells, iron removal technologies and operation and maintenance of hand pumps.

The coastal areas of Orissa constitute a romantic display of silky green coconut groves, large village ponds dotted with lotus flowers and open wells made from red sandstone near leafy Banyan trees. Villagers had used these open wells for centuries with access regulated by the caste system. Water from open wells may from time to time have contained bacteria and the lowest castes were often denied access to the village wells controlled by the higher castes. All this had to come to an end. The answer of the 1980s under the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade was the India MARK II hand pump fitted on a deep tube well. The hand pump would replace all the evils of century-old drinking water practices. With this narrative, the Danida-financed Orissa project had decided that in accordance with Government of India policy, all surface water including water from open wells was bacteriologically contaminated and therefore bad water.² The only source of uncontaminated good water came from underground aquifers. Drilling of deep wells was the only engineering answer to provide two million villagers in Orissa's coastal areas with safe drinking water. Consequently, the project launched a drilling frenzy by releasing drilling rigs and local contractors throughout Orissa's coastal districts drilling down to more than 200 metres to tap water from a safe source. This was a very expensive operation and the cost of the deepest well was very high. Calculations on the per capita cost of providing water from the most expensive wells were hushed. The operation was deemed a success by the Orissa government. A lot of money flowed through the project, numerous tenders and many

² This was justified by the Government of India's adherence to the WHO criteria for clean and safe drinking water.

happy contractors. One slogan at the time was that 'drillers do it deeper'. The deeper the drilling, the larger the profit.

Out of the new deep wells in Orissa poured water, free of bacteria and other organisms, to upset people's stomach or seek habitat in their intestines. Villagers should be appreciative and content. But they were not so always. The tube well water often had a strange colour, high iron content and foul taste from minerals and chemistry in or around the deep aquifers. Villagers preferred the traditional water sources: the open well for drinking and the pond or river for bathing. When my team of sociologists went to evaluate the user satisfaction after project completion in a village, they were sometimes scolded and even chased out of the village. People did not like the new drinking water. Moreover, the run-off drainage from the hand pump created a messy swampy area where mosquitoes were breeding. It was a nuisance and villagers resorted to their open wells. When our user satisfaction results reached the Indian project director, his reaction was that this deviant behaviour of rejecting the tube wells was against the project objective and had to stop. He looked at me and said: "Mr. Jensen you must make them understand the integrated nature of our projects, in particular the health benefits of the tube well water. You must change their understanding and behaviours. This is your expertise".

Behaviour change was one of the many new catchwords in the boisterous development lingo of the 1980s. The assumption was that innovative communication methods were the miracle medicine that would change people's age-old practices, understanding and behaviour. It was also expected to be the magic lubricant that would make the ambitious objective of the policy-based project go down with villagers and engineers alike. There was an expectation on the part of the Indian engineer-dominated project organisation, as well as among Danish engineering experts in the project, that the entire integrated policy package of the project could be implemented through the right hard and soft engineering inputs, the latter of which I was responsible for with my team of Indian sociologists. In our analysis of the social and cultural realities in this traditional part of India it was an impossibility to change people's behaviour and practices just like that. In the eyes of villagers, there was no convincing evidence that tube well water had health benefits compared with water from their old wells. Eventually, after a lot of arguments about culture, tradition, causalities, etc, a compromise was reached modifying the project's objectives. In villages where old wells were plentiful and new tube wells produced unattractive water, the latter either had to be abandoned or new tube wells drilled at other locations. Also, the sites chosen for tube wells were being reconsidered as proximity of the hand pump to where people lived turned out to be a problem for two reasons. *Firstly*, the run-off from the hand pump created a mess near people's houses. The use of drainage water for kitchen gardening did not materialise either because the hand pump was on public land or the landowner, typically a high caste family, did not want to eat tomatoes or spinach irrigated with surplus water that potentially unclean villagers had handled. *Secondly*, the policy-based objective (with origins in an African context) of helping women by bringing drinking water to their doorstep, thereby reducing their time and labour involved in fetching water, was not welcomed by the women. They much preferred the morning or evening stroll to the old village well under the Banyan tree at the outskirts of the village. Here they could enjoy their own company, talk about things unfit for the ears of children, husbands or neighbours. Most importantly, they could gossip about men and perhaps even a secret romance. The value of the quality of life of this exclusive space was of very high importance to the women. One elderly woman expressed it very precisely in a conversation: "You are taking away the little freedom we have as women". Again I went through many arguments with project staff and the Indian project director leading to a project practice of consultations with village women before the tube well site was decided upon.

The problems of poor groundwater quality and siting of hand pumps were addressed in the next phase of the project. It was not an easy turnaround as it involved the whole community of engineers to accept that they had not delivered a good engineering product. It also involved tighter control of local contractors who were kept accountable for the water quality they delivered. And it meant that

engineers had to accept that consumer satisfaction matters. They had to do that not only because I was swimming against their current but also because of criticism in the local media and by local politicians – India is a democracy – and the critical comments in Danida reviews of the project.

The Orissa story highlights the difficulties of going against policy currents although these clearly clash with local interests and realities. The story also demonstrates that in order to deliver results, policies need to be adapted carefully to local conditions. But the adaptation itself does not happen without a lot of swimming against the current.

THE IWRM MAELSTROM

Moving from the local level up to the higher policy grounds, the 1990s saw the emergence of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) as an outcome of the 1992 Rio conference and related water processes. IWRM represented a new holistic approach to the water sector. Water resources took the front seat in the sector and drinking water stepped to a back seat as one of many passengers in the IWRM bus. Initially, I was a bit sceptical about this new all-inclusive concept by which governments in developing countries were supposed to reform their water sector through national IWRM plans and water management institutions at 'appropriate' levels like river basins and watersheds. It sounded rather ambitious and would country governments take IWRM on board?

As IWRM was rolled out it became obvious that there were difficulties. Some water experts and academics in the global water community denounced the concept as being too idealistic. Although developing country governments paid allegiance to the concept in international conferences and included it in their national water frameworks, it seemed to be more rhetoric on paper than reality. I maintained that IWRM had its strength as a framework for understanding the role of water and water stakeholders in a given national or river basin context. But based on my work in countries in Asia and with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) over the years, and also lately in Africa, I questioned IWRM in relation to water governance and country ownership. IWRM is based on the assumption that water governance is a matter of inviting all water stakeholders to a roundtable and after a discussion there would be agreement on how to share and manage water resources. Supporters of IWRM saw water governance as a communicative process where common understanding can be reached through reasoned argument, consensus and collaboration. According to this communicative rationality, IWRM emphasises establishment of enabling environments (legislation, institutions, policies) by which stakeholders and decision-makers will make rational choices. But something was missing: politics and power.

There is a very strong IWRM current out there in the water world and diplomacy is required when trying to swim just a little bit against the current. In my scepticism and criticism of IWRM I maintain that IWRM has its value but it is not good enough. The strength of demonstrating the ideal version of how water should be managed becomes the biggest weakness of IWRM.

Firstly, because of the IWRM concept's erroneous notion of politics and power as something that can always be negotiated and agreed upon. On this assumption, critics have commented that IWRM concept is devoid of politics. In the Mekong, where I worked as a development professional and a researcher for many years, we have recently seen politics override IWRM principles. Collaboration between the four Lower Mekong countries of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam is guided by an IWRM-based Basin Development Strategy and water developments on the river are supposed to be consensus-based by the four governments under the MRC. The IWRM Strategy and the MRC Agreement assume consensus as the reasoned outcome of water discussions. But the politics of national development are stronger than that. Laos is pushing ahead with a hydropower Klondike on its Mekong tributaries and has also started to invade the Mekong mainstream with dams. The Xayaburi Dam is the first one and is now being built despite controversy between Laos and downstream Cambodia and Vietnam. The decision to go ahead was not the outcome of reasoned discussions and compromises as

prescribed by the IWRM-based Strategy for the Lower Mekong, nor was it achieved within the MRC governance framework. As Laos wants to become the 'battery of South East Asia', hydropower has become a key national interest of much higher political priority than decisions based on compromises and consensus within the MRC. Consequently, the Xayaburi was lifted out of the MRC for a compromise and agreement with Vietnam whose details remain unknown. What may be concluded is that IWRM-based decisions are no match against national politics and regional geopolitics. IWRM runs short of being able to tackle strong political antagonisms between stakeholders, in this case between national governments.

The bypassing of the MRC in the Xayaburi decision-making process brings questions to the doorstep of donors, including Danida, which have supported the MRC since 1995. Will the MRC be able to tackle future water development on the Mekong according to its IWRM-based formula and consensus-based decision framework? And can donor assistance more realistically address water resources development in the Mekong by taking into account the role of power relations and politics? These questions have to be resolved not by yet another remixed prescriptive IWRM package but through a realistic analysis of how national interests and geopolitics are likely to shape future cooperation in the Mekong Basin.

Secondly, water and IWRM are not in the driver's seat when it comes to decision-making on national development. This is obvious from the above Xayaburi example where development of energy drives in Laos and the water sector are supposed to provide water as an input only. The same situation prevails in most developing countries where the recent accelerated economic growth is based on new investments in natural resources particularly extractive industries. Findings from our current Danida-financed research on water governance in the Mekong and Zambezi basins show that there is a heavy draw on water for the new surge of investments in hydropower, mining and land concessions (Jensen and Lange, forthcoming). Seen through the lens of a political economy of water, water is reduced to an input while particularly energy and mining drive development.

Working with the Mekong and the MRC has provided me twice with the opportunity to switch hats between a development professional and a researcher. Up to 2005, I was wearing the development professional's hat which included supporting IWRM as the strategic overlay of the MRC's planning work for the Mekong Basin. One reason for my support to the IWRM approach was its stakeholder participation dimension. It provided a rationale for asking for more involvement of civil society, NGOs and also private developers in decision-making. I was being a bit of an IWRM missionary myself when asking for more stakeholder participation across the entire Mekong Basin as the conditions for civil society and NGOs in Laos and Vietnam were very different from those in neighbouring Thailand. I learned that one size doesn't fit all, no matter how correct the prescriptions for stakeholder participation in IWRM may be. I also learned that no matter how important the IWRM concept may seem in the eyes of a water professional, it would be interpreted by MRC member countries in a way that suited their political priorities. As I stepped out of development practice and took on the researcher hat at Sydney University in 2005-2006 and at the Danish Institute for International Studies from 2010 to 2013, I learned to look at my own doings in Mekong and other water developments. It has been useful learning not least because looking at water resources development from a critical analytical angle provides new perspectives including on what I had earlier practiced without much reflection. Through the analysis of the larger context of water in development (its political economy, key development drivers, water in the back seat, geopolitics, etc.) I questioned whether I had done the right thing in promoting IWRM in the Mekong and elsewhere without much reflection. At the same time dilemmas started to appear. What would then be the alternative to the normative IWRM concept in water development? What can research do other than deepen your analytical understanding of the complexity of water in a larger context? And is research ultimately best at critical dove-tailing of development? These dilemmas are real and I am working on them.

Another interesting finding on the role of IWRM comes from the 2012 Status Report on The Application of Integrated Approaches to Water Resources Management that was prepared by

UNEP/UN-Water for the Rio+20 Summit. I was part of the study team for the assessment that consisted of a group of international water experts with different backgrounds. We did not always agree on the analysis of the data collected and there were different perceptions on IWRM. I would argue that these differences and related discussions served to increase the quality of our work. The assessment had interesting findings on country commitments to IWRM. Generally, the least developed countries have developed stronger IWRM-based legislative, policy and planning frameworks than the middle income countries with emerging economies. The latter category of countries, on the other hand, showed considerable investments in water development, including infrastructure investments, while the least developed countries had much fewer investments in water development. In the discussions over reasons behind these differences, we agreed that there were more than just one reason. My argument was that donors had pushed and paid for the establishment of an IWRM-based regulatory framework in the least developed countries, while in middle income countries the economic growth imperative was more important for national governments than IWRM-based legislation and plans. Moreover, middle income countries receive little or no donor assistance that might otherwise have paid for the processes leading to the establishment of a strong IWRM-based regulatory framework. The water resources management strategy that seems to evolve by default in many middle income countries with rapidly growing economies, notably the BRICS, Vietnam, Mexico, etc., is that after a lot of infrastructure development political concerns on how to tackle the environmental and social consequences begin to click in and there is a need to retrofit development. There may not be consensus around this analysis, neither in our study team nor in general. However, it is reinforced by our findings from the above-mentioned Mekong and Zambezi studies.

Dismal accounts of IWRM being pushed by donors, and therefore implying lack of developing country ownership, are not what IWRM missionaries like to hear. Their usual response to slow IWRM progress is that this is just an even greater call for more pushing of IWRM through support to capacity reform, training and capacity building. A lot is at stake for the international IWRM expert community and some organisations. Taking out IWRM as a global development product would threaten to pull away the carpet from under water experts and water organisations. But all this being said – and it is a very contentious argument in the international water community – perhaps it is about time to lay down the arms in this controversy over IWRM as the water sector may have more serious concerns in dealing with its back seat position in the development priorities of the quickly growing number of emerging economies in the world. Water's back seat position is particularly pronounced in least developed countries, such as Laos, Mozambique and Zambia, where rapid economic growth is driven by extraction of natural resources with mining and hydropower attracting a surge of new foreign investments.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the recently invented *nexus* approach to water, according to which water development is part of a water-energy-food security nexus, holds value in terms of at least giving a wider framework for understanding water in a larger cross-sectoral context. But the concept inherits some of the normative weaknesses of IWRM. It portrays an ideal solution for coordination between sectors implying that harmony and trade-offs between sectors can be achieved through dialogue based on reasoned arguments. But everything is not equal in the nexus. Some sectors are economically and politically more important than others. The water sector may be important for water experts and water nerds but in its political economy context it is merely an input provider with a back seat in the development train. I continue to maintain that without adding politics and power as the dynamic and most often decisive factor in development choices and actions, the role of water in development cannot be fully grasped nor can it be realistically managed and governed. It is about time that the water expert community and its organisations grow out of their harmony notions of consensus around IWRM or other normative development approaches as something that will be achieved through communication, training and

capacity building. As if a blueprint medicine of 'more of the same' has ever worked when the diagnosis of the patient is incomplete? The diagnosis of the challenges for water management needs to start off by being context-sensitive and by taking the politics and power dimensions of development more seriously.

The world's rapidly shifting development contexts, where emerging economies challenge sustainable development, ought to be a wake-up call for global water organisations, donors and the international water community. Organisations need to reconsider blindfolded implementation of existing ideal notions of 'good water management'. A good start is to allow new analytical space for their professional staff by which they can address development realities on the ground, country by country. This is of course easier said than done as most water organisations and donors are under varying degrees of political control and directed by corporate policies. Also, professional staffs tend to be conditioned into routine thinking. But water professionals have a responsibility to be vigilant and be critically alert about the appropriateness of normative policies.

It takes energy and courage to swim against the current.

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