

Leave polemics out of the water policy

Arunabha Ghosh

Process matters, not only in making public policy but also in doing research that informs policy debates. The article by Shiney Varghese ("Turning off the tap on water as a human right", *The Hindu*, February 16, 2012) forgets this lesson. The article accuses the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) of publishing a report that has "likely ... had some influence" on the draft National Water Policy and which promotes the interests of multinationals while marginalising actual water users. Such an accusation is ignorant of the content of CEEW's research, misleading in ascribing intentions to us without evidence, and wrong on the process that was followed.

In 2011, CEEW prepared the *National Water Resources Framework Study* (NWRFS) for the Planning Commission of India, followed by the *Roadmaps for Reforms*. The Ministry of Water Resources prepared the National Water Policy (NWP) and CEEW had no role in it. There is no factual basis for attributing the contents of NWP to CEEW's reports.

The article argues that CEEW's report was commissioned "even while several Planning Commission constituted working groups were preparing reports on...water governance," as if to suggest that something subversive was going on. Quite the contrary, CEEW's draft report was reviewed, commented upon, debated, criticised and praised by the very same Planning Commission working groups. On CEEW's request, the draft report was circulated among working group members, followed by a day-long review session in the Planning Commission. Government and civil society representatives from across India, representing a wealth of experience on water, offered comments that helped to revise the main report and prepare the *Roadmaps* as a distillation of the evidence and arguments.

Note also that CEEW is not a member of the 2030 Water Resources Group (WRG); it is an independent research organisation. The researchers were national and international experts, with over 90 years of collective expertise spanning more than 30 countries. The WRG had no editorial control over CEEW's research and WRG members were not privy to the contents of the report until it was publicly available to everyone.

Independent study

In other words, for a truly independent study, CEEW followed a four-party governance process. The NWRFS report was commissioned by the Planning Commission, written by a team of independent researchers, reviewed separately by Planning Commission working groups, and unimpeded by the funding source.

Now, the substance. The management of India's water resources must

“Debate”

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respond to growing demand falling short of available and planned increases in supply as well as pressures from different uses and users, including the environment. These pressures have to be addressed in a fair and equitable way. The 584-page NWRFS report covers the full range of water-related issues: effective participatory management of medium and large-scale irrigation; sustainable management of groundwater resources; reform and capacity building of irrigation departments; role of water regulators; water utility management; promoting conservation in industry; legal and institutional reforms. Only such integrated analysis can offer solutions to improve governance across all levels of government.

Reforming government agencies

Our research advocates strengthening the government's capability in water management, not handing it over to the private sector. Under a proposed

Shiney Varghese responds:

Mr. Ghosh's letter is extremely welcome. To deal first with "the substance," I am glad that Mr. Ghosh has emphasised that CEEW's "research advocates strengthening the government's capability in water management, not handing it over to the private sector." On this broad principle we are in agreement. But as critics of current water policies in India and elsewhere have said on several occasions, the devil lies in the details. It is entirely possible that the strengthening of government capacity might also work to strengthen already powerful groups – whether corporate houses or agribusinesses. This is why my article was concerned with particular implications of specific steps.

To turn now to the "process." Here, Mr. Ghosh defends CEEW against charges that I have not levelled against it. For one, he insists that CEEW is not a member of WRG. But the article does not say that it is. The article points rather to the convergence between the two, and to the fact that WRG lists CEEW as a collaborator. This was indicated in a four-page document, on Water Resources Group Phase 2, which was



SCARCE RESOURCE: A file photo of the dried-up Himayat Sagar lake in Hyderabad. – PHOTO: MOHAMMED YOUSUF

national water management reform programme, we emphasise reforming government agencies to deliver services that users demand: additional staff-

available on the World Economic Forum website as of February 9, 2012. There is documented evidence that CEEW has been a collaborator of WRG; for example, the water dialogues organised in 2010 by CEEW and the Confederation of Indian Industry in New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore were part of WRG Phase 2 plans. I also agree with Mr. Ghosh that CEEW did not directly influence the formulation of the Draft water policy by the Ministry of Water Resources, India. CEEW's input was to the National Planning Commission, as the article clearly states. As Mr. Ghosh says, there is need for more dialogue and less polemics. Such a dialogue should focus on the substantive issues involved – in this case whether the Draft National Water Policy, as well as initiatives such as those by the WRG or CEEW, make water into an economic good, and do so in ways that adversely affect the most marginal groups. I hope this kind of dialogue can contribute to a more informed debate on a water policy that benefits all users.

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ing and training of a broader cadre of professionals (not just civil engineers), including hydrologists, hydrogeologists, IT specialists, water resources modellers, and social scientists, all within government; improved curricula in universities; comprehensive data collection and analysis; and reformed institutional frameworks such as establishing river basin councils comprising government and non-governmental representatives.

For main system management, the report proposes an Irrigation Services Branch that would make service delivery agreements with farmers so that government agencies are held accountable for services actually delivered, leading to higher agricultural and water use productivity.

Much emphasis has been on building new irrigation systems while not paying attention to maintenance, timely water delivery, and farmers' involvement in water management. Our research shows that Water User Associations (WUAs) are effective when they are supported by adequate resources, skills and capacity development: strengthening Water and Land Management Institutes, establishing field training schools for water users, WUA support units at irrigation circle/divisional levels, etc. None of this suggests a reduction in the government's role.

Lack of system maintenance most directly impacts the poor and disadvantaged, particularly tail-end farmers on the peripheries of irrigation systems. Simply setting charges does not guarantee that irrigation systems will be maintained. Poor links between fees paid and services delivered, payment of water charges into a general exchequer rather than system specific accounts, and lack of transparency on how water charges are spent are all ways in which farmers and other users lose control over access to water.

Holistic approach

On the groundwater crisis, our holistic approach combines energy, agriculture and water management: energy delivery and usage, efficiency of pumpsets, basin-wide assessment of water resources, participatory groundwater monitoring (so that farmers have first-hand information), crop water budgeting, extension services via farmer field schools, and financial support to farmers. Throughout, the report outlines complementary interventions needed to make individual policies effective.

CEEW's recommendations converge in many ways with those who argue that governments have a crucial role in managing and delivering water resources and services. Having followed the due process, we welcome more transparent, evidence-based research, not polemics.

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