

Water for Sustainable Development: Re-thinking Responsible Growth

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The 4th World Water Forum held in Mexico City in March 2006 was unique opportunity to network and reflect on the theme of “*local actions for global challenges*”. The World Bank thematic background paper in this global forum addressed the notion of “*responsible growth*” and the relative need for investment in infrastructure and institutions in the developing world. The question that I would like to raise is “*Do we really need to abandon the concept of sustainable development to what is so-called responsible growth?*” *How to ensure the attainment of "responsible growth?"* this implies to grow while at the same time embracing both environment sustainability and social development.

There is a re-emerging consensus that water resources development and management are essential to generate wealth, mitigate risk, and alleviate poverty. Besides, it is argued that poverty demands that many developing countries will need to make large investments in water infrastructure all levels so as to harness hydrology and not to be a hostage to hydrology. However, it is clear that appropriate water resource development has an important contribution to poverty alleviation and sustainable development, but that inappropriate water resource development may undermine the resource base (or natural capital) that supports the poor, and squander precious opportunities for responsible growth.

This implies a need to evolve and co-create a shared understanding of "how" and "for whom" water resources should be developed, recognizing the array of options available. Past development has too often been framed in term of conquest and control, such as through constructing hydraulic structures to capture water upstream to be used for various uses mainly agriculture. This approach has resulted in unforeseen costs. Hence, I argue that investments should be framed in terms of compatible development minimizing these costs by working within existing social and ecological systems as much as possible.

On the other hand, necessary conditions need to be explored and validated to ensure responsible growth. For example, balanced governance and genuine engagement will be crucial to achieving responsible growth through investments in water infrastructure and institutions. The design and implementation of "*water strategies for sustainable development*" will differ – often significantly – from "*water resource development for economic growth*".

It is evident that water is crucial for development and key determinant of living standards. It is also clear, however, that human interventions in water systems always involve costs as well as benefits. Indeed, many of the "destructive" aspects of water arise from or are exacerbated by human action. Water diversion often reduces downstream water security, agriculture and poor sanitation impact on water quality, industry and mining give rise to contamination. In many cases it is most cost effective

to deal with these issues at source or watershed as a whole, particularly through prevention, rather than seeking to manage or repair them downstream.

This implies that our thinking on water investment needs to recognise that many of the concerns over large scale water infrastructure are well founded. These concerns need to be articulated and shared with stakeholders so as to address the following:

- De facto privatization of a common recourse, frequently transferring wealth from poorer to richer groups within a country through displacing local beneficial use in order to provide benefits to more concentrated interests;
- Displacement of communities and livelihoods, including through flooding of traditional lands, disruption of river transport, reduced access to fisheries and other fresh water resources, loss of forest through inundation, and damage to local social capital and resource governance arrangements;
- Significant reduction in ecological function and natural resource productivity through changes to river flow patterns, water temperature, and sediment transport – reducing river health, fish stocks, and the productivity of flood plains – and through adverse effects associated with new water uses (such as water logging, irrigation salinity and chemical runoff);
- Frequent failure to deliver the promised benefits of development, particularly due to a lack of local benefit sharing, under pricing of water services (leading to overuse and inappropriate industry development), and unforeseen biophysical problems.

These problems have deep roots. Large scale water resource development may not be intrinsically bad for the poor, but it's also not intrinsically good. With the benefit of hindsight, many – or even most – water developments have involved lost opportunities or unforeseen costs, and have done little for poverty alleviation even where overall gains have been larger than the losses.

Achieving responsible growth through water investment will thus involve making a deliberate break with the past; acknowledging the significant social, economic and environmental risks associated with water investments; and actively and systematically managing these risks to ensure a different set of outcomes form the next wave of water investment.

Implementing a responsible growth approach to water security requires a strong connection to poverty alleviation and sustainable development. This might be achieved, for example, by a poverty focused definition of 'water security' - such as "in a country with high levels of water security, water issues will have little or no adverse impact on those in poverty". In many cases, maintaining the health and productivity of ecosystems will be an important part of achieving water security for poor and vulnerable groups.

Investment in water infrastructure and institutions has a key role in alleviating poverty and achieving responsible growth. The challenge is to identify how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past by transferring the spillover effects or externalities over time

or to somewhere else. One way forward would be to seek a 'balanced governance' model that tempers the weaknesses of past processes without allowing the pendulum to swing to the opposite extreme. Such a perspective might seek to ensure that all water investments meet the following conditions: 1) enhance local water related benefits (such as from traditional irrigation, fishing, and 'floodplain cropping and grazing); 2) ensure accountable, transparent and responsive governance that recognizes legitimate local, regional and national interests in water governance and use; 3) maintain long term ecosystem services and resource productivity.