



Conference Report

Workshop on Water Resources Management in the Islamic World

Amman, Jordan, 1-3 December 1998.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC), in collaboration with the International Water Resources Association (IWRA) and the Inter-Islamic Network on Water Resources Development and Management (INWRDAM), organised a Workshop on Water Resources Management in the Islamic World, in Amman, Jordan, 1-3 December 1998. The main objective of the Workshop was to analyse the overall philosophy and practices of Islamic water resources management and how they are influenced by the Islamic principles.

Unlike many other meetings, this workshop was well-planned from the very beginning. In order to select knowledgeable experts both in water resources and the Islamic issues, the sponsors established a clear and transparent process to select the best participants for the meeting. Abstracts were requested, and independent referees selected the best papers, without any reference to the positions or reputations of the authors. Only about 25 percent of the abstracts received were finally selected. This process created an unique opportunity to bring together the best professionals in the area. Only 20 experts from 11 countries were present at the meeting. Not surprisingly, the quality of the papers and discussions made it a most enlightening meeting.

The workshop focused on many critical issues, among which were water demand management, through economic and non-economic instruments, water as a social good, integrated water management, water conservation and reuse, legislation and institutional aspects, and specific case studies from several Muslim countries. Even though the topics analysed represented very much the present world-wide concern in terms of water management, the level and quality of the discussions generated during the workshop were significantly higher than most meetings. The workshop had no hidden agenda, and the discussions were frank, clear and cordial, even when there were disagreements between the participants. The current global trends affecting water management were analysed both from the theoretical and the practical viewpoints, with the clear understanding that the value of any concept depends on its socio-cultural context and on its use and implementation. Some of the present trends that were extensively scrutinised were the actual implementation aspects of water markets and integrated water management.

In Islam, the primary source of the revealed law and knowledge is the Holy Quran, the source book of all Islamic values. While the Holy Quran does contain prescriptions about matters that would rank as legal in the strict sense of the term, they are often based on broad moral directives. The general framework and guiding principles in Islam are clearly defined, but the

specific details and applications may vary in response to changing needs. It was noted that Islam is very flexible and can accommodate all concerns regarding natural resources management, including water. In fact, the Islamic principles for water management are completely compatible with the Dublin and other accepted principles. Furthermore, Islam considers the protection of biological biodiversity, as well as water quantity and quality

Muslim countries are increasingly focusing on demand management practices for water conservation. For example, in 1978, the Council of leading Moslem scholars of Saudi Arabia issued a special “*Fatwa*” (legal ruling on an issue of religious importance) to regulate the reuse of treated effluents for different purposes. Wastewater reuse was made permissible for all purposes, including religious rituals, provided the wastewater was treated to the required level of purity for its intended use and did not result in any adverse public health effect.

The workshop noted that countries like Saudi Arabia, the largest producer of desalinated water in the world, has implemented new water pricing and management policies. At the agricultural level, the government has reduced the subsidy to cultivate wheat significantly, which will result in the reduction of approximately 7.4 billion m³ of water per year. Wastewater reuse has been encouraged at the industrial level, and at the household level, the price of water has been increased, although it still represents a fraction of the real cost for its production and distribution. In several Muslim countries, treated wastewater is considered to be a main resource.

Islam views water both as a social and an economic good, and water equity as a combination of water quantity and quality. According to the Islamic principles, water is a public property. The access to water should be free, and all persons have rights to water resources. The legal system of rights in Islam recognizes market institutions for water transactions, and trade in water is allowable as for any other good. The participants agreed that water cannot be charged for in its natural state since it is a gift from Allah, but the services for collecting, treating, storing and distributing water can be priced, as it is being done in many Muslim countries.

Human beings have the priority in terms of water use, but this does not necessarily mean that water has to be a free commodity for everybody. Following extensive discussion it was agreed that policies on water demand management should include pricing. Allocations could be established for various sectors, and the government should subsidize only poor people. Those who can pay for water should pay for its treatment and distribution.

It was agreed that general instruments of water resources management should be developed based on local economic, environmental, social and cultural conditions, and local practices should not try to mimic foreign ones.

Human resources development and training was recognised as an important component for efficient water resources management. It was noted that there is a lack of qualified and experienced manpower, and appropriate education and training practices should be planned according to the specific needs of the countries, and for different economic and social sectors.

The importance of public awareness in water-related issues is now well-accepted, but so far no effective long-term information and awareness-related processes have been developed. For the Islamic countries, it was noted that Islam plays an essential role in public awareness, which could be used as a tool to promote water conservation and management. Unfortunately, most information campaigns have been for short-terms, and focused on specific geographical areas. They have generally failed in making permanent changes in both water use practices and behaviour of the population. Even though people have become better informed, this has not necessarily resulted in lasting change in attitudes or practices.

In some of the Muslim countries interesting programmes have now been developed to increase public awareness in terms of conservation of water. Water experts are assisting Imaam's (those leading congregations in prayers) to prepare their sermons for the Friday prayers on the importance of water conservation. Publications on water and health education through religion have been published by WHO for several Islamic countries.

Water conservation practices require long-term strategies, which should include not only public awareness campaigns but also appropriate economic instruments. It was agreed that awareness campaigns with reasonable tariffs would be a good policy to ensure water conservation. Policy makers should design water management strategies that are compatible with the Islamic principles and concurrently efficient in terms of water use and management. It was agreed that sustainable water management in the Muslim countries is more likely to be achieved if the management instruments also incorporate alternative incentives such as religion and spiritual-based rewards. Culturally-sensitive demand management strategies require a special effort to develop a link between Islam and water conservation practices. Instruments developed for water management need to meet the needs of the real world, instead of the real world fitting into these instruments. Finally, it was unanimously agreed that the religious precepts of Islam do not represent an obstacle for efficient management of water resources: on the contrary, proper use of the Islamic principles could significantly enhance water management practices in the countries concerned.

Overall, it was a most remarkable and very successful workshop, to which this reviewer was invited as an independent observer. It was the first workshop on the subject that has ever been organised, and it is one of the very few meetings this reviewer has ever attended which added numerous new insights and knowledge to this important, complex and sensitive area. The United Nations University Press will publish the papers and discussions shortly as a book, with Naser Faruqi, Asit K. Biswas and Murad Bino as Editors. Water professionals in both Islamic and non-Islamic countries owe a great debt to IDRC, IWRA and INWRDAM for organising such an excellent and productive meeting.

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