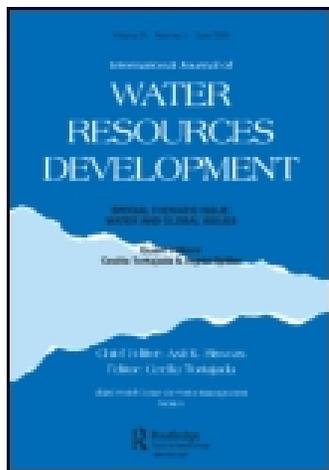


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Publisher: Routledge

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International Journal of Water Resources Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cijw20>

Making the Most of the Water We Have: The Soft Path Approach to Water Management

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Published online: 24 Nov 2010.

To cite this article: Steve Lonergan (2010) Making the Most of the Water We Have: The Soft Path Approach to Water Management, International Journal of Water Resources Development, 26:4, 697-699, DOI: [10.1080/07900627.2010.519525](https://doi.org/10.1080/07900627.2010.519525)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07900627.2010.519525>

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Book Reviews

Making the Most of the Water We Have: The Soft Path Approach to Water Management

David B. Brooks, Oliver M. Brandes and Stephen Gurman (Eds)

London, Earthscan, 2009

There has been much discussion over the past two decades about water as a ‘strategic’ resource, as the likely cause of the next war in the Middle East, and as so integral to the operation of both human and natural systems that achievement of any of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals is dependent on an adequate supply of fresh water. The stories of water diversions for economic and/or political gain or disruptions in water supply make for exciting reading. But the policy response from most of the world is still focused on augmenting supply to meet the demands of an increasing population, moving water in large volumes over enormous distances and again building large dams. Over the past two decades (or longer, in terms of the rhetoric, if not the action), there has been an increased interest integrated water resource management and in promoting demand-side solutions to the problems of water supply. Such solutions might include educational activities to raise awareness about water issues; market-based solutions that include full water pricing and water banking; and command-and-control approaches, such as setting limits on time of use (for watering lawns, for example). The present volume goes beyond merely advocating demand management for water resources, however. It incorporates the contemporary notions of deliberative democracy and rational discourse in coming up with solutions and promotes backcasting—developing future scenarios and then working backwards to examine how best to get there—as a policy and analytical tool using what is known as a soft-path approach to water resource management.

It is with great relief (for me, at least) that we are starting to see publications on demand-side water management that incorporate the soft-path approach from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. In *Making the Most of the Water We Have*, editors David Brooks, Oliver Brandes and Stephen Gurman not only set out the rationale for managing our water consumption, but also draw on cases that highlight successes in both the policy and the applied realm.

Drawing from their past experience in energy-demand management and the so-called soft energy-path approach, the editors present a strong case for a soft water-path approach to managing water consumption. Although dissimilar resources in many respects, water and energy are both excellent examples of how a soft-path approach can be successful in reducing consumption. In their Introduction, the editors note four principles that make soft paths different from conventional planning and management:

0790-0627 Print/1360-0648 Online/10/040697-17

DOI: 10.1080/07900627.2010.519525

- Treating water as a service rather than as an end in itself.
- Making ecological sustainability a fundamental criterion.
- Matching the quality of water delivered to that needed by the user.
- Planning from the future back to the present.

The Foreword, written by well-known virtual water advocate Tony Allan, and the Introduction justify the importance of thinking seriously about using a soft-path approach to water resource management. Following this, the book is divided into three sections: Part I: Soft Paths as a Vision; Part II: Soft Paths as Analytical Method; and Part III: Soft Paths as a Planning Tool.

Part I has excellent chapters by Peter Gleick, Oliver Brandes and Susan Holtz/David Brooks that present the case for developing a soft water-path approach. Gleick addresses the misconceptions about soft-path approaches and Brandes places water management in the broader context of ecological governance. If there are any who doubt the efficacy of a soft-path approach, Part I should put these to rest.

In Part II, the chapter authors provide examples of how institutions and organizations can adopt a soft-path approach to water management. Acknowledging that there is limited experience with the analytical methods used in the soft-path analysis, the chapters present case studies that were conducted under a collaboration between Friends of the Earth, Canada and three Canadian universities to inform the reader about the methods and how they are used. Carol and Tony Maas present their Water Soft Path Scenario Builder (WSP) to illustrate how scenario-based planning and backcasting can be used to develop a learning model of water use. Other examples include applying soft water paths at the urban scale in four cities in Canada (Brandes and Maas), the watershed scale in Nova Scotia (Isaacman and Daborn), and the provincial scale in Ontario (Kay and Hendricks).

Part III is arguably the most important because it discusses how a soft water-path approach can be used as a planning tool. Chapter 12, by Jordaan, Stevens and Brooks, discusses how best to remove the institutional barriers to soft water paths, from changing attitudes and perceptions to providing a plan of action for decision-makers. Later chapters discuss experiences in the United States (Gleick), other developed countries (in particular, England, the European Union and Australia), and developing countries (with notes on South Africa, India and the Middle East). As Brooks notes in his introduction to the chapter on developing countries, the problems in developing countries are multifaceted and these countries often have weak governance structures. Nevertheless, water scarcity is a crucial problem in much of Africa and South Asia. This makes the adoption of soft water paths both extremely important and challenging and requires 'a much more nuanced approach than is the case in industrialized countries' (p. 230).

Edited volumes often suffer from two problems. The first is that the quality of chapters is rarely consistent throughout. The second is that the chapters are often geographically scattered or, at the other extreme, too focused on one region (a similar comment might be made about topics rather than geography). Owing to the abilities of the authors in *Making the Most of the Water We Have*, the quality overall is excellent. Most importantly, the book achieves what it sets out to do: present the case for a soft water-path approach to water resource management and to demonstrate how this can be achieved. As the number of soft water-path studies increases, so will our understanding of the importance of this approach.

The second problem noted above is a bit more apparent in this volume. It focuses largely on Canada, which is understandable given that all three editors are Canadian (albeit living in different provinces). While this in no way detracts from the quality of the writing or of the message, it would have been useful to include more detailed discussion of experiences in Australia (for example), where demand-side management has been in place for many years.

Who should read this book? Unlike most edited volumes, *Making the Most of the Water We Have* stands as a complete volume with good connections between the chapters. Rather than pick and choose among the chapters that one finds most interesting, it is a book that has a consistent storyline from beginning to end. The potential audience is, I believe, quite wide, from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on water issues, to state, provincial and federal officials, to educators at almost any level. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in more effective approaches to water resource management. In my mind, this includes *everyone*. As I am sure the editors will agree, my hope is that it spawns further work on soft water paths so that this approach will soon be central to the water resource-management planning process in all countries.

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Non-Governmental Organisations and Development

Routledge Perspectives on Development (Series)

David Lewis & Nazneen Kanji

Routledge, New York, NY, 2009

The actors considered in mainstream neoclassical economics are ‘consumers’ and ‘firms’, while policies and regulations are channelled through the ‘state’. Organizations that cannot easily be described as profit-maximizing firms are absent from this model. However, in a modern economy there are many organizations that emphasize various kinds of non-monetary (rather than monetary) performance, for example some of those engaged in development work and ‘development assistance’. The latter category of organization has been described as non-governmental, a term used in the United Nations charter from 1945. In this book by David Lewis and Nazneen Kanji we learn that there are thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) globally and that a considerable part of development assistance is channelled through NGOs. In recent years this way of describing organizations in negative terms as ‘non-governmental’ has been challenged. The ‘civil society organization (CSO)’ has been suggested as an alternative term with more positive connotations. Lewis and Kanji mainly use the term ‘NGO’ and discuss the roles played by NGOs in the development discourse, but they also discuss how the concepts of NGO and CSO relate to each other.

Lewis and Kanji point to the diversity of NGOs and argue that it is not very meaningful to attempt general statements about this category of organizations. Instead, they suggest that each NGO has its specific history and recommend case studies as a way of learning about similarities and differences between NGOs. When compared with business