
Report - Analysis

Water for Food: International Narratives Sideline Alternative Views

JOE HILL *

Submitted 23 May, 2014; Revised 5 June 2014; Published: 10 June 2014

Introduction

Despite extraordinary advances in science and information technology, vast numbers of people across the globe still lack access to water for agriculture, other livelihoods, and domestic uses. In recent decades numerous global organisations (both inter-governmental and non-governmental) have claimed to represent the views and needs of the world's water users and/or have posed to present science-based solutions to agricultural problems. These organisations present their work by means of hegemonic discourse. Hegemonic is used to describe the way their discourses are presented as authentic, valid, common sense and rational; to the extent that other perspectives are side-lined or marginalised. This argument relates to the two contradictory positions that recur in contemporary neoliberal capitalism: trade-led and competitive (race-to-the-bottom) economic growth

on the one hand, and attempts to regulate the environmental impacts of economic growth by states and global institutions on the other (Peet and Watts, 2004). Power and control over resources is increasingly unequally distributed and clustered at centres, while economic capital is largely put to work for the production of food and goods for urban consumers, side-lining rurally-situated subsistence communities (ibid.). Global institutions seek to relieve, via conscious and less-conscious strategies, the political and economic tensions between economic growth and environmental degradation.

The 'global water crisis': abstract notions of water and population serving to depoliticise

The discourses propounded by inter-governmental and international institutions change subtly over time.

** Senior Researcher, Department of Political and Cultural Change (ZEFa), Centre for Development Research (ZEF) University of Bonn, Germany; e-mail: jhill@uni-bonn.de*

Hill, Joe. 2014. Water for Food: International narratives sidelining alternative views, *Future of Food: Journal on Food, Agriculture and Society*.2(1): 154-
ISSN-Internet: 2197-411X / OCLC-Nr.: 862804632



However the message remains consistent: we face a global water crisis, and poor countries and poor people will suffer the most and thus must change their ways to adapt to the crisis. The well-to-do and affluent are not told that they must change their behaviour.

The discourse of the 'global water crisis' emerged only towards the end of the 20th century. Linton (2010) critically analyses Gleick's *Water In Crisis: A Guide to the World's Fresh Resources* (1993), and concludes that the constitution of a water crisisⁱ is inevitable whenever the quantification of water as an abstract is brought into relation with the quantification of abstract people. By the year 2000 Gleick began to refrain from using the term 'crisis', and admitted that all the projections and estimations of future freshwater demands made over the past 50 years had invariably turned out to be wrong, because in changing historical circumstances people find new ways of relating with water, discover new forms of resourcefulness, and apply new techniques to mediate their relations with water (2000). The powerful alarmist discourse of a global water crisis, it can be said, is created and maintained by the mixing of abstract notions of water, with people in their abstract statistical guise as 'population'. This discourse is supported by the outputs of global hydrological models run by scientists, some of whom believe their work to be politically-neutral. Population growth and dynamics remain as the most oft-stated and popular 'driver' to the global water crisis. The UNESCO's International Hydrological Programme (UNESCO-IHP) quotation, cited below, makes clear this assumption:

*"Population density and per capita resource use have increased dramatically over the past century, and watersheds, aquifers and the associated ecosystems have undergone significant modifications that affect the vitality, quality and availability of the resource. Current United Nations predictions estimate that the world population will reach 9 billion people in 2050. **This exponential growth in population - a major driver of energy consumption and anthropogenic climate change - is also the key driver behind hydrologic change and its impacts**" (UNESCO-IHP, 2011: 1) [Emphasis added in bold].*

Global institutions repeatedly point their finger at poorer countries, their 'weak' governments, and the pressures their economically poor populations place on natural resources. This conveniently diverts attention from the effects of the global capitalist/neoliberal political economy and the pressures it creates on governments, people and the environment in its production of the affluence that those in power (and living in affluence) have come to consider normal. The UN's World Water Assessment Programme (UN-WWAP) quotation, below, informs us that it is 'our' collective pursuit of higher living standards that drives water crises. Here, all humans are conveniently lumped together as one homogenous 'community' grouping:

"The amount of freshwater on Earth is finite, but its distribution has varied considerably, driven mainly by natural cycles... That situation has changed, however. Alongside natural causes are new and continuing human activities that have become primary 'drivers' of the pressures affecting our planet's water systems. These pressures are

*most often related to human development and economic growth... **Our requirements for water to meet our fundamental needs and our collective pursuit of higher living standards...** Important decisions affecting water management are... driven by external, largely unpredictable drivers – demography, climate change, the global economy, changing societal values and norms, technological innovation, laws and customs, and financial markets.” (UN-WWAP, 2009: xix) [Emphasis added in bold].*

Nowhere is ‘affluence’ listed or mentioned as a driver of water scarcity, nor is inequality in distribution of wealth problematized. These omissions are not made mistakenly. The creation of a water crisis, and the focussing of attention on poorer countries with ‘weak’ governments, provides the groundwork for the promotion of market-based solutions to water problems, with profits to be made by powerfully-placed actors including governmental, intergovernmental, and corporate actors.ⁱⁱ This is achieved by framing problems and solutions in technical and hydrological terms. Such a discourse obscures the alternative (unheard) views of local-level diverse water users and civil society groups (located in diverse geographical, political and social contexts), for rights-based initiatives, or devolution of management and control over natural resources to local water users. On water’s problematic social geography Mustafa writes:

“... to switch focus from the political economic factors that affect access to resources is, in fact, tantamount to turning a blind eye to the injustices at the heart of producing affluence for the few at the expense of scarcity and

misery for the many... The sterile per capita freshwater availability numbers may seem alarming... but they really serve to divert attention from water’s problematic social geography, from its extremely skewed distribution across sectors and across social groups, and from discursive construction by the power elites as a “resource” to be deployed in isolation from its ecological and social roles toward modernist economic development.” (Mustafa, 2007: 486-488).

The World Water Council’s World Water Vision: Orwellian Newspeak

In 1996 a motley group comprising the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, water services industry representatives and water ‘experts’ convened the World Water Council, and in 2000 the *World Water Vision*, and its companion document *World Water Security: A Framework for Action*, were presented at the World Water Forum. These documents, drawing heavily on the fourth Dublin Principle, framed water as a scarce resource and an economic good that must be managed in an economical and integrated way (Linton, 2010). The fourth principle states that ‘water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognised as an economic good’. This contradicts the previous three, which state that ‘fresh water is ...essential to sustaining life, development, and the environment’, that ‘water development and management should be based on a participatory approach...’ and that ‘women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water’.

The idea of water as an ‘economic good’ is troubling, because it is a reductionist way to view a

multifaceted resource; it ignores localised visions concerning water and water resources management, and market forces do not operate in a vacuum, rather they build on existing social and power relations (Mehta, 2000). For example, irrigation studies conclude that water pricing alone is not the solution to improving water usage efficiency, rather it may be a problem (e.g. Hellegers et al. (2007a) for India, and Hellegers et al. (2007b) for Morocco). Mehta points out that the World Water Council (secretariat in Marseille) and the World Commission on Water (secretariat at UNESCO in Paris) have close partnerships with French-based utilities and water companies such as Vivendi, which could be interpreted as the active promotion of powerful corporations in current water debates. The World Bank and such corporations have argued that the state has hitherto been unable to provide basic infrastructure, so market based solutions may be the answer. Mehta concludes that narratives of water 'crises', water wars, and water shortages obscure issues concerning unequal access to and control over water, that there needs to be greater pluralism in polarised discourses and debates over water as a 'human right', 'as commons' and 'as an economic good'. Rather than drawing on vague political, economic or theoretical assumptions which lead to normative, rhetorical, speculative and apolitical discourses, empirically grounded facts and realities ought to be established by critical research at macro, meso and micro levels (Mehta, 2000).

According to the Indian scholar Vaidyanathan (2006), an alternative agenda is being advocated by "a section of opinion in major international lending institutions and

some international research organizations... known for their capacity to influence thinking of third world governments and policy makers". This agenda seeks the "[p]rivatisation of water resource development and management on the basis of well-defined property rights in water guaranteed by law, leaving prices and allocations to be decided by the market" (ibid.: 180). Academic research however, such as the edited volume on irrigation pricing by Molle and Berkoff (2007), challenges this rationale. Water's nature, as a common pool resource, necessitates that its costs and benefits be shared by water users. To Vaidyanathan this requires a socio-political, not a market-based process.

Decentralisation and increased water-user participation, combined with the reduced scope and nature of government's direct involvement in water management could leave a greater role for water-users, NGOs and civil society to address the tasks (2006: 181). However this will not be easy. Assessments of Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT) and Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) programmes suggest that success in irrigation reform can be elusive (Mollinga and Bolding, 2004, Mukherji et al., 2009).

Driving the message home: The poor are to blame

'Driver' is the key term used by international organisations to explain the natural and social processes affecting our planet's water systems. The latest report of the UN's World Water Assessment Programme, *Water in a Changing World* (UN-WWAP, 2009), groups the main drivers that exert pressure on water resources in

the following categories: demographic, economic, and social. Population dynamics such as growth, age distribution, migration and urbanisation create pressures on freshwater resources through increased water demands and pollution, and the need for more water-related services. Growing international trade in goods and services aggravates water stress in some countries while relieving it in others (virtual water). Changes in lifestyle reflect human needs, desires and attitudes, and are influenced by culture and education, by economic drivers and technological innovation.

For example, the section headed 'poverty' states that poor people degrade their environment to survive whatever the consequence, in the process creating scarcity and pollution (p37). The next section is headed 'education', which states that an educated populace has a better understanding of the need for sustainable use of water (ibid.). The report explicitly states that lifestyles and consumption patterns are the sum of all drivers, and that the production of goods to satisfy growing wants is often not possible without the overuse of natural resources. While a point is made that the Chinese are eating more meat, there is no mention that Americans and Europeans eat unhealthily excessive and unnecessary amounts of meat.

The section on drivers concludes by saying that 'raising awareness to bring about behavioural change is one approach, but still an elusive goal' (p39). One is left to wonder if the UN-WWAP report is subtly attributing water problems to the less-wealthy segments of societies residing in poorer countries. What is strikingly absent from the UN-WWAP report is

any mention of over-consumption by affluent segments of societies worldwide.

The behaviour of richer and well-educated countries and their people, of wealthier segments of societies worldwide, and of multi-national companies that actively destroy environments/ ecosystems in their pursuit of material goods and profit, are not mentioned, let alone castigated. The authors are themselves likely excessive consumers of goods and energy, and recipients of huge pay cheques, and hence unwilling or unable to speak out – if it even crosses their mind to do so in the first place.

The recent UNESCO report, *The Impact of Global Change on Water Resources: The Response of UNESCO's International Hydrological Programme* (UNESCO-IHP, 2011), takes a similar stance to the above UN-WWAP report, though is slightly more alarmist, presumably in an attempt to justify its work. The report lists several drivers, though tends to favour the highlighting of population dynamics. The drivers of global change are stated to be: population growth, climate change, urbanisation, expansion of infrastructure, migration, and land conversion and pollution. Aside from climate change in its anthropogenic form, the remaining drivers are processes that have been on-going for centuries; however this is not made explicit.

Nowhere does the UNESCO-IHP report mention the global political economic system that causes these drivers to have negative affects upon the environment (and people). For example, deforestation, mining or the oil industry, much of which provide

cheap timber, metals and fuel to benefit wealthier countries and segments of societies, while creating regional and local instabilities across the globe and in the process destroying local hydrological regimes, get no mention. The report is saturated with images of 'poor' people and degraded environments, but not images of expensive private cars, gadgets and goods in wealthy countries, or luxury tourist hotels in tropical locations (etc.), all of which consume vast quantities of freshwater, often in geographical locations where water is scarce and local populations' impoverished. A well-known example is that of Coca Cola company, which established bottling plants in India's Kerala and Rajasthan states, and drained aquifers causing drinking and agricultural water shortages in surrounding villages. Locals were forced to undertake major campaigns and go to court to shut down the company's operations. In Columbia, Coca-Cola is accused of using mercenaries to kill trade unionists ([www.bilaterals.org/?in-colombia-free-trade-brings more](http://www.bilaterals.org/?in-colombia-free-trade-brings-more), accessed on 21 May 2014)

The UNESCO-IHP report points out that data are sparse in the 'developing world', and rarely shared across ministries or institutions. Yet is this not understandable in a political economic world order dominated by a few powerful countries and corporations, and where states and their people theoretically have the right to self-determination and independence from hegemonic international organisations?

Overall the report presents an alarmist view of freshwater crisis, and from the image thus created states that "since these changes are a global problem, a response to its

impacts must also be international" (UNESCO-IHP, 2011).

Concluding comment

The 'global water crisis' is a discourse created by powerful actors that serves to divert attention from the global, regional and localised political and social circumstances that produce freshwater problems. Solutions are framed in predominantly technical and hydrological terms, which serve to veil certain assumptions, i.e. that economic growth for modern development is the pathway ahead for all humankind, to be achieved through privatisation of all resources (and destruction of remnants of collective structures which impede progress). Many people actually believe such assumptions (a "The Economist" worldview) also indicated by a reluctance to shed the use of the term "developed countries" (economies are formalised, and infrastructure in place, but how developed are the people?). The discourse arguably serves to justify market-based solutions at the expense of alternative views such as right-based and community-led initiatives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Therefore healthy scepticism is required when reading international and inter-governmental agencies' documents (especially when one considers that many of their scientists claim to have no agenda – to be objective – a claim that can hardly be sustained given the scale and gravity of the social and environmental challenges faced by humankind).

This paper concludes with a call for more contextualised regional and local studies of freshwater scarcity and the problems surrounding the distribution of resources. Modelling of

freshwater availability and scarcity at continental and global scales, even national scales for larger countries, serves little purpose other than to fuel alarmist calls. Huge financial sums are being allocated from governments

(and their tax-payers) to global bodies work that ends up being presented in glossy reports and at conferences, however it is difficult to see how the poor and dispossessed, or ecological systems, benefit from this.

References

- Bakker, K. (2005) Neoliberalizing Nature? Market Environmentalism in Water Supply in England and Wales. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95, 542-565.
- Bakker, K. (2007) The “Commons” Versus the “Commodity”: Alter-globalization, Anti-privatization and the Human Right to Water in the Global South. *Antipode*, 39, 430-455.
- Gleick, P. (1993) *Water In Crisis: A Guide to the World’s Fresh Resources*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Gleick, P. (2000) *The world’s water 2000-2001: The biennial report on freshwater resources*. Washington D.C., Island Press.
- Hellegers, P. J. G. J., Perry, C. J. & Berkoff, J. (2007a) Water pricing in Haryana, India. IN Molle, F. & Berkoff, J. (Eds.) *Irrigation water pricing. The gap between theory and practice*. CAB International.
- Hellegers, P. J. G. J., Perry, C. J. & Petitguyot, T. (2007b) Water pricing in Tadla, Morocco. IN Molle, F. & Berkoff, J. (Eds.) *Irrigation water pricing. The gap between theory and practice*. CAB International.
- Linton, J. (2010) *What is water? The history of a modern abstraction*, Vancouver, UBC Press.
- Mehta, L. (2000) Water for the twenty-first Century: Challenges and misconceptions. *IDS Working Paper*, 111.
- Molle, F. & Berkoff, J. (Eds.) (2007) *Irrigation water pricing. The gap between theory and practice*, CAB International.
- Mollinga, P. P. & Bolding, A. (Eds.) (2004) *The politics of irrigation reform. Contested policy formulation and implementation in Asia, Africa and Latin America*, Wageningen University, The Netherlands, Ashgate.
- Mukherji, A., Facon, T., Burke, J., De Fraiture, C., Faures, J.-M., Fueleki, B., Giordano, M., Molden, D. & Shah, T. (2009) Revitalizing Asia’s irrigation: to sustainably meet tomorrow’s food needs. Colombo, Sri Lanka, IWMI and Rome, FAO.
- Mustafa, D. (2007) Social construction of hydropolitics: The geographical scales of water and security in the Indus basin. *The Geographical Review*, 97, 484-501.

Peet, R. & Watts, M. (2004) *Liberation ecologies: Environment, development, social movements (Second edition)*, London, Routledge.

UNESCO-IHP (2011) The impact of global change on water resources: The response of UNESCO's international hydrological programme. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. International Hydrological Programme. Paris. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/water/single-view-fresh-water/news/featured_publication_the_impact_of_global_change_on_water_resources_the_response_of_unescos_international_hydrological_programme/ accessed May 2014.

UN-WWAP (2009) United Nations world water development report 3: Water in a changing world. United Nations World Water Assessment Programme/UN-Water. UNESCO, Paris, and Earthscan, London.

Vaidyanathan, A. (2006) *India's Water Resources: Contemporary Issues on Irrigation*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

ⁱ What Linton calls 'modern water'. Until recently, "water has most commonly been thought of as a resource that could be considered and managed in abstraction from the wider environmental, social and cultural context(s) in which it occurred" (Linton, 2010: 6).

ⁱⁱ To Pierre Bourdieu, neoliberalism proceeds by destroying collective structures which may impede pure market logic. Many water experts hold the view that water management necessitates collective action. Many humans consider collective structures as normal, even natural, and are uncomfortable with the increasing reduction of all human/social interactions to economic, mercantile transactions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bakker (2005, 2007), analyses the commodification of nature, and recommends greater conceptual precision in our analyses of neoliberalisation. Neoliberalism is not monolithic, and it creates political opportunities that may be progressive (2007).