

books

Hydropolitics: Conflicts Over Water as a Development Constraint

Edited by Lief Ohlsson

Zed, London, 1995.

256pp. Pbk. £15.95.

ISBN 1 85649 332 6.

This book addresses the issues surrounding the hydrological cycle, and the conflict that has arisen over distribution, management, and the exploitation of regional water sources. Its objective is to prompt both a change in attitudes to environmental conditions for development, and a new professionalism with regard to water resources and their management. It calls for those involved in developing a strategy to improve water management, and to agree a common water ethic.

Water is an essential resource; it can be harnessed, yet remains elusive. Ninety-seven per cent of the world's total water volume is in seawater. Of the remaining 3 per cent, two-thirds are locked in ice-caps and glaciers, 0.7 per cent is too far underground to exploit, leaving 0.3 per cent in rivers and lakes that constitute the bulk of our usable supply.

The demands made on this limited supply are growing as populations increase and uneven distribution is exacerbated by over-exploitation, pollution, and inadequate management strategies. Conflicts between both countries and regions are becoming more apparent as incompatible up- and downstream river exploitation increases.

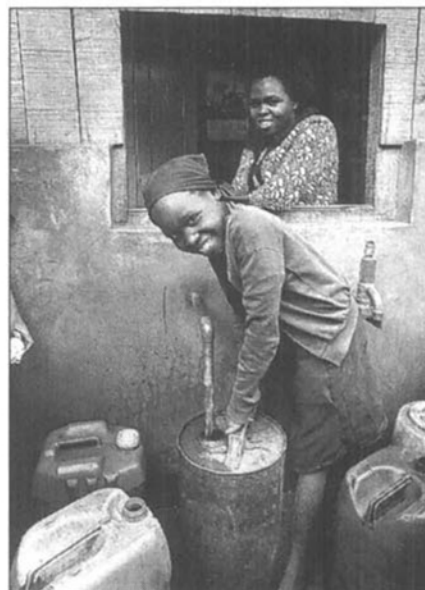
Hydropolitics brings together experts from a range of disciplines: hydrology, international relations, development studies, conflict resolution, and environmental studies to address the development constraints caused by dissociated water management systems, uneven water allocation and distribution, and water scarcity as a source of international conflict. It reflects the findings of the fifth Stockholm Water Symposium in 1995, which focused on water-quality management, and was attended by several of the authors.

The introduction highlights the main issues the specialists cover, and links hydrological issues to changing international water relations. Ohlsson connects these diverse disciplines clearly. Five case studies — making up over two thirds of the book — follow; confusingly, each is presented in a

different format, making comparative analysis difficult. The writers' disciplines are reflected in the subject matter so, in some cases, the emphasis is on an in-depth political analysis of a single country while, in others, a catchment area crossing several political boundaries is analysed. The case studies seem to focus on the Middle East and north-east Africa, with only one on India and the other looking at the Mekong river. Sub-Saharan Africa only merits a passing mention, as do South America, western Africa, and central Asia. This is disappointing, as a large proportion of water and development work is being carried out in these regions.

In the concluding chapter, Falkenmark and Lundqvist discuss the challenge of modernizing water concepts to handle the complexity of water and land management, taking into account the needs of the different stockholders along river systems. They argue for 'the development of new ways of conceptualizing fresh water scarcity, as well as for new ethical assumptions and innovative strategies relating to water management in the future.'

This book is aimed more at policymakers than fieldworkers, and loses some of its appeal through the language, which will prevent a wide section of the water sector from understanding the issues behind developing a common ethos. Additionally, the emphasis is more on the macro than micro level. Very little is said about community management of water, or about awareness-raising among populations, not just policymakers. The



Jorgen Schytte/Still Pictures

Community concerns must figure on any hydropolitical agenda.

range of specialist topics covered makes this a book to dip into, rather than read from cover to cover. There is a comprehensive bibliography which is a valuable resource for those wanting to know more.

Hydropolitics has made some progress towards bringing together different disciplines into one publication, although some of the case studies seem detached from the more holistic introduction and conclusion. At £15.95, I see it as a useful addition to the advocacy section of a water or development organization resource centre, but would not recommend it as a 'must-have' for everyone working in the water or development sectors.

Sarah Gelpke, Overseas Policy and Evaluations Manager, WaterAid

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166pp. April 1996. Paperback. ISBN 1 85339 304 5. £8.95.