
5. THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE WORLD BANK

What the Bank has done in the past

The World Bank has been involved in the water sector in India for 50 years and has lent about \$14 billion for water projects in India¹⁹¹. The very first Bank-financed project, the Damodar Valley Project, approved in 1954, was inspired by the TVA model, and aimed at building water infrastructure and institutions which would provide a springboard for economic growth and poverty reduction in a poor region.

From the Bank's perspective this was (and would be today) an ideal project – it was a vehicle for bringing the best ideas from other countries and adapting them to India; it was a combination of infrastructure and institutional developments.

There were very clear benefits. The project did finance infrastructure which has provided power, flood protection and irrigation services to the region. And the project was instrumental in the formation of the Damodar Valley Corporation in the 1950s.

But there were failures, too. The DVC turned out to be quite different from the TVA, with states clawing back major activities and the DVC ending up as basically a power generation company with little responsibility for water management¹⁹². And there was no demonstration effect, with no other river basin organizations following the DVC model. (In fact not a single river basin authority has been established under the 1956 River Boards Act.)

In many ways the Damodar Valley Project presaged half a century of Bank experience with water development and management in India, an experience in which the defining quality is the contrast between lofty aspirations and modest achievements.

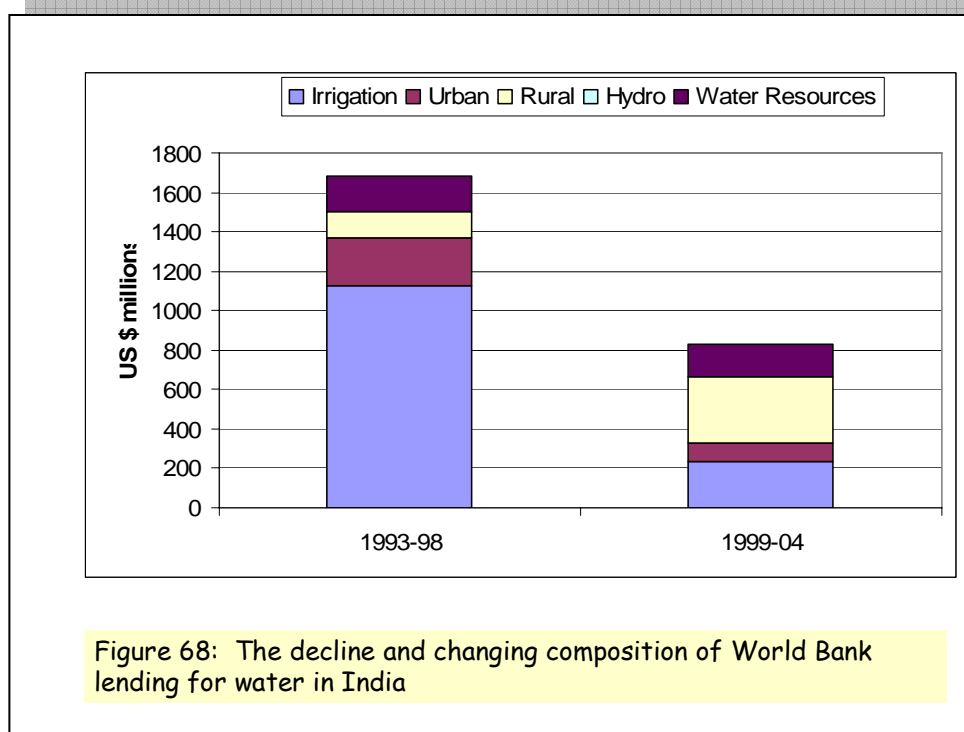
Paraphrasing Akhter Hameed Khan, the great Pakistani reformer¹⁹³, it might be said that the Bank's involvement in water in India has been one in which the Bank "has chased the rainbow of well-functioning institutions and dreaded the nightmare of further institutional decay.... and that only the boldest among us can say that we may not be similarly engaged tomorrow".

Over the last five years there have been two major reviews, one by the Bank in the context of the new Water Strategy¹⁹⁴ and one by the Operations Evaluation Department. In both cases the reviews included major consultations with a wide variety of stakeholders in India. Since these earlier reports are published, and the results presented in detail in the background paper by Malik, in this Report it is necessary only to summarize the main messages and lessons.

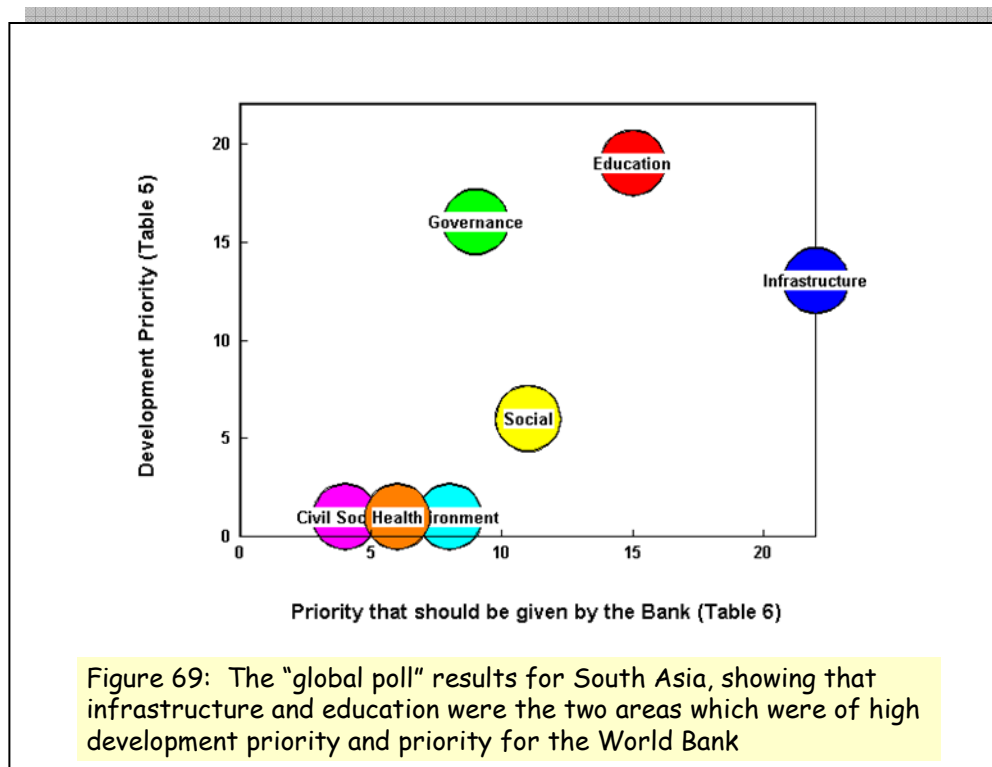
First, there are different perspectives about the influence of the World Bank on the water sector in India. On the one hand there is the view that since the Bank accounts for only between 6% (Sekhar, background paper) and 10%¹⁹⁵ of what is spent in the water sector in India, the Bank is a minor actor. On the other hand, since most of water expenditure by the Union and State governments in India is for fixed costs (especially personnel) the Bank funds a much larger portion of discretionary expenditure and of new investments. And the Bank has been, and continues to be, by far the biggest external donor, accounting for 72% of donor lending and grants for water¹⁹⁶. Where there is general agreement is that, as it should be, the Union and State Governments are the ones who determine what will happen and how it will happen. The Bank's role is necessarily and properly one of trying to put ideas on the table, to be a partner to efforts at improving performance. This is an important role but

necessarily and properly control is in the hands of the elected governments at the national and state levels.

Second, mirroring a similar pattern for World Bank lending worldwide¹⁹⁷, there was a sharp decline (Figure 68) in the proportion of lending going to water projects – from 25% in the early 1990s to about half that amount over the last five years.



There was also a marked shift in Bank lending (see Figure 68) out of complex areas which were perceived to be “reputationally risky” for the Bank (especially in the light of the controversies surrounding the Bank’s engagement with the Sardar Sarovar Project). There was no lending for hydropower (with the last project financed by the Bank being approved in 1987, the 1500 mw run of the river Nathpa Jhakri Project on the Sutlej River). There were sharp reductions in lending for irrigation, urban water supply and stand-alone water resources project, with the only increases being in the uncontentious area of rural water supply. There was great dissatisfaction among government officials in India who believed, as did developing countries throughout the world¹⁹⁸, that the Bank was walking away from the area where the needs were great (infrastructure) and where the Bank had a strong comparative advantage, namely in addressing complex, difficult issues such as water resources development and management. A subsequent major “global poll” of opinion-makers throughout the world reaffirmed – see Figure 69 for South Asia – that this is where countries perceived the greatest need, and the strongest case for World Bank involvement.



Third, these reviews, earlier major analytic assessments by the World Bank in 1991¹⁹⁹ and 1998²⁰⁰ and the assessment in the twelve background papers by eminent Indian professionals have concluded that the infrastructure constructed with Bank funding has made major contributions to India's food security, energy production and urban development, but that all efforts at improving institutional performance have been only modestly successful, at best. A few quotes from the latest OED report give the flavor:

- a) of persistent institutional shortcomings
 - "... performance of completed Bank water projects has been unsatisfactory because of over-optimistic appraisal"
 - "...the states' unwillingness to tackle institutional and financial reform.."
 - "...Much still remains to be done on developing sustainable mechanisms for water allocation and management..."
 - "...sooner or later state governments must address subsidy issues and right-size public sector agencies to increase efficiency".
 - "For fiscal reform to succeed, sooner or later state governments must address reducing the size of public sector agencies and ensuring good governance that allows the private sector, including users' groups, to take a greater stake in water planning and management."
- b) Of recommendations by the Bank that specified large numbers of priorities and did not focus on a practical reform path:
 - "The Bank's 1998 review lays out a very ambitious and detailed agenda that... contains more than 80 national and intersectoral recommendations aimed at the central and state governments, and more than 170 for the main subsectors.
 - "... institutions and practices that have remained unchanged for decades are to be tackled and changed quickly – an approach to institutional reforms that flies in the face of institutional realities and the political will such as they exist in India today."

- “The Bank risks spreading its resources too thinly to be effective. A more selective and incremental approach to key policy and institutional reforms might be more productive.”
- c) of a slow movement away from a normative approach to one which focuses on incentives and the political economy of change:
- “The 1998 review found that little had changed since 1991: “in recent years there has been realization and policy pronouncements regarding the need to address these problems; however the policies have not been translated into action.”
 - “There has been headway on reform of water institutions in the few reformist states where there is political will to change after decades of malaise – but in some the reforms appear to be cosmetic.”
 - “The missing element is how to identify and promote incentives that will lead to sustainable and effective reform. Only then can the critical next step be achieved: agreeing on the three to five short to medium-term priorities on which to focus efforts.”

The Bank’s new Water Strategy

In parallel with these reviews of World Bank engagement in water in India, and influenced by them, the World Bank developed a new Water Strategy, which was approved by the Board of the Bank in 2003, and set a new direction for Bank engagement in water throughout the world. The main messages of the 2003 Water Strategy are:

- Water resources management and development is central to sustainable growth and poverty reduction and therefore of central importance to the mission of the World Bank
- Most developing countries need to be active both in management AND development of water resources infrastructure.
- The main management challenge is not a vision of integrated water resources management but a “pragmatic but principled” approach that respects principles of efficiency, equity and sustainability, but recognizes that water resources management is intensely political, and that reform requires the articulation of prioritized, sequenced, practical and patient interventions.
- The World Bank needs to assist countries in developing and maintaining appropriate stocks of well-performing hydraulic infrastructure and in mobilizing public and private financing, while meeting environmental and social standards.
- the World Bank will re-engage with high-reward/high-risk hydraulic infrastructure, using a more effective business model.
- The Bank’s water assistance must be tailored to country circumstances and be consistent with the overarching Country Assistance Strategies.

The 2004 World Bank Country Assistance Strategy for India

In 2004 the World Bank commissioned a major client survey to help identify areas which were of high priority and where the Bank was particularly effective. Confirming the results of the “global poll” discussed earlier, the “India Client Survey” (Figure 70) again showed the areas associated with water to be of high priority and high Bank effectiveness.

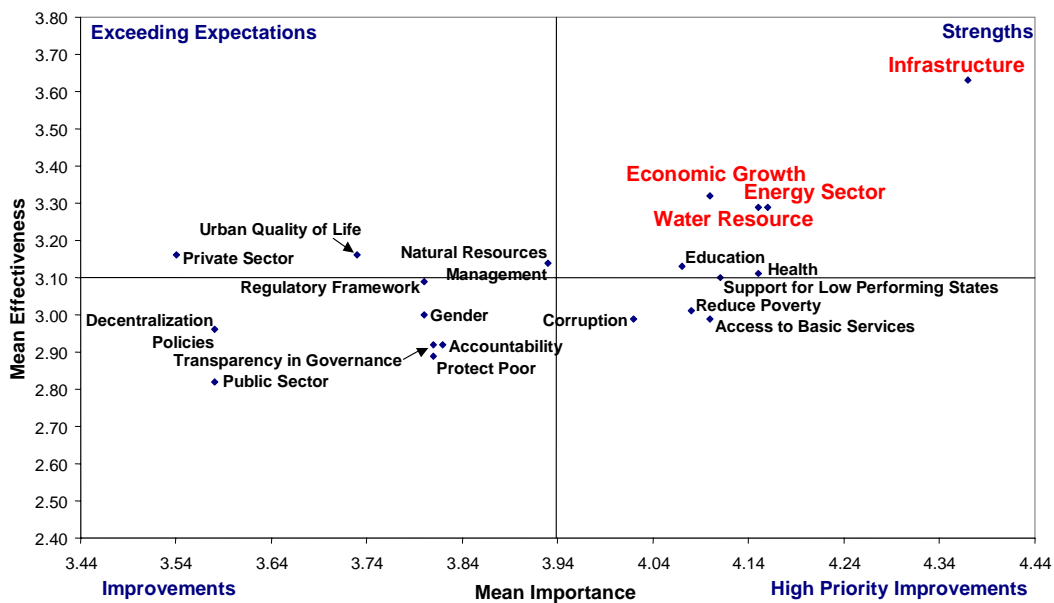


Figure 70: Development priorities and comparative advantage of the World Bank in India

Source: India Client Survey 2004

In September 2004, the Government of India and the World Bank finalized a Country Assistance Strategy, the “contract” which spells out indicative Bank lending for the period 2004-2008. The CAS represents a dramatic change in the Bank’s engagement with water (Figure 71), with overall water lending predicted to rise from about \$700 million over the previous four years to about \$3200 million in the next four years. As shown in Figure 71, too, there are major changes in composition, with the Bank expecting to sharply increase irrigation and water resources lending, and re-engaging with large hydropower projects.

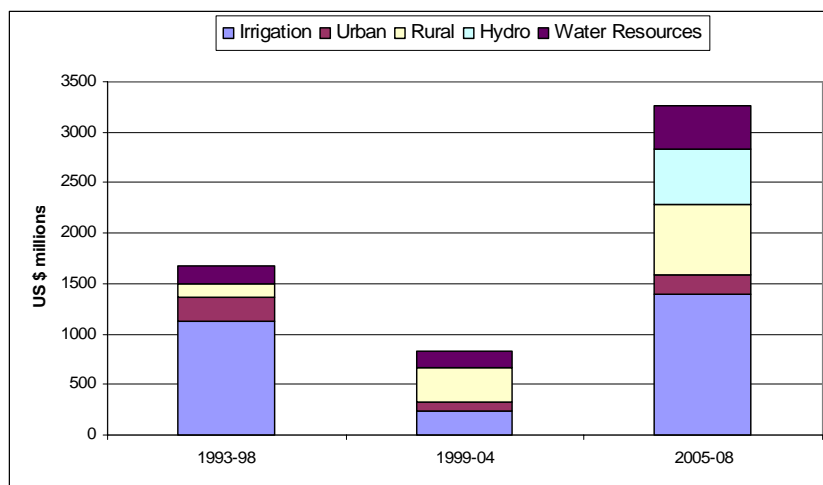


Figure 71: World Bank re-engagement with water in India

The 2004 CAS makes two other important strategic shifts which affect water. In the last CAS period the Bank focused heavily on “reforming states” which were mostly in the south and mostly among the better-off and better-governed. (In this period about 50% of Bank water lending went to the southern states, who contain only 20% of the population.) Now the Government and the Bank have agreed that the Bank will re-engage more intensively with the poorer states (where needs are greater but governance is also worse). This adjustment is understandable, but it also implies even greater difficulties for the institutional reform agenda which lies at the heart of Bank engagement. This is so because it is unrealistic to expect water governance to be good when overall governance is poor; and thus it is likely that the already-difficult task of reforming water governance (which has not been very successful even in the “advanced states”) will become more difficult still. In the current CAS, then “rules of engagement” for different sectors have replaced “focused states” as the primary filter which will determine whether or not the Bank engages. The “rules of engagement” for the various water-related sectors are as follows:

- Irrigation – de-linking irrigation services and water resources management, reform of irrigation agencies, strengthening cost recovery, regulation, beneficiary participation, increased productivity of water, water entitlements.
- Urban water and sanitation: Utility Reform, improving Services to the poor, and private sector participation;
- Rural water and sanitation: Continue demand responsive approach, moving from pilots to scale through Centrally Funded Schemes (SWAPs);
- Hydropower – One element in an overall energy program; Bank will engage with hydro that has limited environmental and social impacts;
- Water Resources – Developing information systems, rehabilitating and modernizing major infrastructure, watershed management, water rights, capacity building.

The analysis in this Report suggests that these “filters” are generally appropriate, with minor adjustments. The first adjustment would be to de-emphasise some of the recommendations on organizational form (such as de-linking agencies responsible for irrigation and water resources management) and putting greater emphasis on (a) instruments, including entitlements, contracts between providers and users, transparent monitoring and benchmarking, and regulation and (b) on charting sequenced, prioritized paths for making pragmatic improvements.

The ongoing evolution of Bank engagement in the water sector in India

As part of the process involved in developing this report, the Ministry of Water Resources held two major consultations with the Ministry of Finance and other Union Ministries, and with State Governments, to discuss the evolving role of the Bank. The second of these consultations culminated in a set of agreed “recommendations”²⁰¹. There was strong endorsement of the re-engagement of the Bank in the full range of water-related issues, including the big and the complex. There was agreement that the government needed to complement its traditional focus on infrastructure with a growing emphasis on management. It was agreed that the Bank needed to continue to emphasize institutional reform, and much discussion (and differing views) of some of the key instruments such as water entitlements and user charges. It was agreed that the Bank would consider a variety of capital investments (in flood control, tank rehabilitation, completion of irrigation projects, recharge etc.) in the context of state projects, with the critical test being the economic and social returns to such investments.

Finally, two comments by senior Government of India officials at recent consultations held by the Government of India capture much of the essence of this Report.

The Member of the Planning Commission responsible for water and energy stated: “when we do address management problems we still think only in terms of instruments of command and control, not in terms of incentives that affect the behavior of uses, and the instruments – usufructory rights, prices, compensation – that affect this behavior.”²⁰²

And the Secretary of Finance stated: “the government will request Bank involvement only where the Bank adds value by bringing new knowledge and contributing to reform processes”

These senior Government of India officials captured well the essence of this Report – of the challenges which face India as it faces an uncertain water future, and the World Bank as it tries to be the best partner that it can be.

ENDNOTES

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