

Book Review

Politics associated with Policy Making

Resisting Reform? Water Profits and Democracy

By Kshithij Urs and Richard Whittell

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The United Nations 2006 Human Development Report was devoted to water and it has argued that with the start of the 21st century, unclean water is the world's second biggest killer of children and left unchecked will derail progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and hold back human development. It has further argued that the ill-health associated with deficit in water and sanitation undermines productivity and economic growth, reinforcing the deep inequalities that characterize current pattern of globalization and trapping vulnerable households in cycles of poverty. The book by Kshithij Urs and Richard Whittell is a reminder of these concerns. If everybody's need for water cannot be reconciled with the desire of some to profit from its sale, the need to provide all with the water they need to survive should get priority over other uses. The water privatization priorities and the financial profit of a few must be subordinate. However, the current reform process in water sector and involvement of private corporations in general make peoples' basic needs subordinate to running economically efficient services. Thus public private partnership is the preferred agenda in the current reform process and discourses in water governance reforms. The manner in which public private participation is implemented over other water reforms leaves out those who cannot pay for these services. These arguments are neither new nor unknown to Indian academia, policy makers and civil society organizations. What is new and unique about the book is the detailed description about the manner in which the private corporation is entering into the water sector undermining and bypassing people's institutions and their elected representatives.

There have been fierce arguments in Indian academia and civil society during the 1990s about water as an economic private, public or common good. It was argued that water comes in many forms; these are typically governed by different legal, economic and cultural framework. However, proponents of privatization have argued that water needs be treated as an economic

good which gives primacy to markets. Critics however, maintained that 'water' is composed of bundle of rights, allowing some aspects of water to fall under private control and/or to be consumed, and withholding other rights 'in the public or common domain'. An alternative conceptualization holds that there is a fluid continuum between what is private and public and often water access may be treated as common pool resources. Thus, if reconceptualization of water as an economic good is sought, how would pricing be used to regulate private consumption of the 'powerful' without endangering other private and public rights in the bundle? There will be little disagreement that, from the perspective of individual human beings, adequate access to safe water must be treated as a right similar to other human rights. Water is the essence of all life and cannot be replaced by any other alternative form to fulfill its role. This is the spirit of this book. *"The privatization is not being advocated because it is intellectually coherent (it is not) or because it has worked well throughout the world (it has not). It is on the advance in India and in Bangalore because it is supported by the variety of powerful institutions, both in and outside the country"*. (p.73,)

The book is not only a critique of privatization of water services and private-public partnership but also a larger political economy of the state and how the state and peoples' institutions are undermined to incorporate the agenda of big powerful lobbies of both inside and outside country. For example, it concludes how democratic institutions are bypassed in the current reform process. *"The neutralization of democracy and the exclusion of popular voice that this leads to is further lubricated by the increasing dominance of parastatal bodies, even at the expense of the powerful ministries of state. Policies, arranged into grand sounding programmes, are designed either at the state or national level or by foreign institutions, and are channeled through a 'nodal agency', invariably a parastatal body. The municipality then functions within the parameters specified by the relevant scheme, and then at the behest of the parastatal bodies"*. (p 33)

The book describes in detail about the politics associated with policy making – why and how certain reform agendas get priority over others and how people resist these changes and how their concerns are ignored. It is must read book by all those who criticize privatization of water and water services as well as those who support it and all those who are involved in reforms in water sector or any other sectors. It cautioned how not to privatize even if one is an ardent supporter of it. Thus the book rightly emphasizes multi- stakeholders approach for progress in water front, which the authors believe, will help achieving the Millennium Development Goals. For this to happen, sustained political pressure need to be built by people.