Analysis of Right to Water Needs Further Depth

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Water Rights in Southeast Asia and India. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Water resources are the source of all life, and yet the increase in demand for water resources is challenging the world’s finite supply. Growing populations, urbanisation, industrialisation, environmental degradation and climate change all have a negative impact on water resources. Increasingly, the human right to water has been recognised, and in 2010 the United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared safe and clean drinking water and sanitation a human right.1 This book, Water Rights in Southeast Asia and India, is a timely account that explores the human right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation in nine Asian countries: Myanmar, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, China, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. The account provides the reader with the general situation of access to clean water and sanitation in each of these countries as well as the applicable national policies and laws regulating the protection of this human right. The book adopts a consistent format for each chapter, providing in respect of each country an overview and discussion of health and human rights challenges, environmental challenges, water policy and law, a water development case study and an interview with a stakeholder. While the author highlights the salient points of water policy for each jurisdiction, he does not provide holistic analyses of the socio-economic and political

1 UNGA Res A/res/64/292 (July 2010).
realities and challenges of water accessibility and security, which renders the account’s linear form somewhat one-dimensional.

The book is current to 2015, a date that coincides with the conclusion of the policy agenda of the UN Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) (MDGs). These consisted of a series of eight development goals conceived by member states at the UN Millennium Summit aimed at eradicating world poverty. The post-2015 agenda – the launch of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030) (SDGs) – followed the MDGs. Both sets of development goals recognize the right to water and sanitation and include specific objectives to increase the number of individuals able to access clean water and improved sanitation. The author, in discussing the country analyses, does not address the SDGs or SDG 6 – the sustainable development goal on water; however, he does mention these in the concluding chapter as the reader is guided to the future.

The introduction sets out the background to the book. The author successfully draws attention to the urgency of the global water crisis and the challenge of providing clean and safe drinking water and sanitation for all, highlighting the need to overcome problems such as physical accessibility, affordability and discrimination as well as to provide clean sources of freshwater that are disease- and pollution-free. The author accurately portrays the tasks facing leaders in addressing the factors affecting the demand and supply of freshwater in the world, appropriately supported with statistics and UN source materials. Rising populations, irrigation for agriculture and industrialisation increase the demand for freshwater. On the other hand, industrial waste, pollution, sewage and chemical contamination all reduce the already stressed availability of this scarce resource, a fact that the author reiterates.

However, the author would do well also to emphasise the crisis of damage to Earth’s natural sources of freshwater and the need for protection of such natural sources. Even though the author accurately states that our planet’s supply of water is finite, he does not mention the fact that certain sources of water (namely, replenishable groundwaters found in rivers, lakes and wetlands) can be refilled if natural processes are encouraged. Also left unaddressed are the related policy implications: if positive national policies and laws are implemented that encourage the natural process of groundwater replenishment, this may secure greater protection of water sources and reverse some of the damage already caused.

From this vantage point, the author’s focus on the finite supply of freshwater which is ever reducing in amount rather than the possibility that the finite supply of freshwater may be reduced at a ‘slower’ rate if positive action were taken, affects the book’s presentation of key issues. For example, the author’s static view of freshwater means the emphasis of the review is only on what