

# Scarcity

**A one-day workshop at the Development Studies Institute,  
London School of Economics**

**Held at the Overseas Development Institute  
111 Westminster Bridge Road  
London SE1 7JD**

**November 19<sup>th</sup> 2003**

Policy debates (especially in developing countries) are still being framed, and technological decisions are still being made, in terms that largely ignore the uncertainty that usually surrounds the nature of the resources concerned. 'Scarcity' – or the predicted rates of resource depletion – is often expressed in matter-of-fact terms by natural science analysis that suggests we know its actual extent. This analysis is often replicated and unquestioned in economic modelling that suggest we know what to do about it. Yet, alternative research, and years of experience of policy failure in developing countries, indicates that social and biophysical realities are quite different to the predictions that are made. There is a need to develop new approaches to understanding scarcity that entail the social meanings or adaptations people adopt in relation to it, yet which allows us to use these lessons in scientific analysis and advice within environmental and technological policies. In particular – in respect of the Science in Society program objectives – the workshop aims to assist in building UK capacity for research on scientific uncertainty, especially in developing countries; it will conduct work on scrutinizing critically scientific assumptions used for policy; it will recognize the plural sources of knowledge and expertise for decision making about scarcity; focus on new mechanisms of communication about scientific or environmental decisions; and will contribute to debates about the international distribution and networking of scientific expertise about these subjects, especially in South Asia.

The objective of this workshop is to look at the concept of Scarcity through the critical stance of social and political analysis. The aims of debate will be to develop approaches to understanding scarcity that avoid the assumptions commonly repeated in natural-science or economic methodologies that scarcity is a uniform and inherently measurable thing, but instead rooted in social and political practices. The workshop will aim, however, to gain uniform principles about the deliberative institutions that govern the experience or, and adaptation to scarcity in developing countries. By so doing, the workshop will contribute to general debates concerning Science in Society by seeking to develop institutional approaches to the prediction and experience of biophysical scarcity, which will provide alternatives to existing scientific and technological practices in development policy.

The workshop will also coincide with, and support, the presence of Dr Dipak Gyawali of Nepal at the London School of Economics as a visiting scholar under the ESRC Science in Society Program, and will combine well with other Science in Society research, notably Dr Lyla Mehta of the Institute of Development Studies, who will attend the workshop. The organizers are planning ways to use the workshop to consolidate the work of participants into new research directions for scarcity, science and society, through special issues of academic journals focusing on water (specifically in South Asia), and deliberative institutions in development policy.

Whilst our 'point of entry' will be the consideration of perceptions of and responses to the availability of water in Nepal, the workshop itself should go beyond water per se, and beyond recent experiences in South Asia, in order to tease out just what is entailed, in terms of learning and unlearning, in taking this more reflexive approach to the notion of scarcity. Indeed, the presence at the workshop of some of the most celebrated writers on uncertainty and Himalayan development (Michael Thompson, Jack Ives, Piers Blaikie, Gyawali), and others will offer the chance to write a new challenge to contemporary approaches to 'scarcity' that my impact on diverse debates within environment and development research. Indeed, the participation of Ian Calder and colleagues (hydrologists), plus Jeremy Berkoff (natural-resource economist working with the World Bank), and members of policy think tanks (e.g. Gordon McGranahan, James Mayers or colleagues of

the International Institute of Environment and Development) should provide a fertile crossing over between disciplines and perspectives.

The workshop will start from the perspective that scarcity is too often uncritically treated as an inherent property of the things themselves – the trees, the grass, the soil, the water and so on – rather than as a social construction that is conferred on them by processes that are social, cultural and political. This is not to say that the physical properties of these things are irrelevant; only that the uncertainty opens up an interpretive space capacious enough to contain more than one valid set of convictions. Those who fret over the depletion of natural resources, for instance, are unlikely to see eye-to-eye with those who insist that there are only raw materials (and that those raw materials only become resources when human ingenuity, knowledge, skill and daring are successfully focused upon them). Frame things just one way and you have inevitably excluded those who see things the other ways, and if they are excluded then so too is all the wisdom and experience that is inherent in those ‘dissenting voices.’ Nor, of course (and this is where we run into the crucial issues of trust and legitimacy) are these dissenters likely to be whole-heartedly in favour of a solution to what they do not see to be the problem!

The workshop will seek to avoid these two pitfalls – the mishandling of uncertainty and the erosion of consent – by looking at the concept of scarcity from the reflexive stance that becomes available to us once we take an institutional approach to ‘contradictory certainties.’ We can then take explicit account of the assumptions that underlie any analytical approach (including those that are part and parcel of natural science and economic methodologies). The same reflexive stance also enables us to make explicit the various assumptions that underlie the various adaptive strategies of those – the citizens – who are on the receiving end of these formal policies and technological developments. Then, by assessing the extent to which these different voices are able to make themselves heard, the workshop will be able to assess how far inclusionary and deliberative processes may be applied to the identification of scarcity, and responses to it such as technology policy.

Topics for debate might therefore include:

- What have been the problems of predictions of scarcity experienced in recent years?
- What institutional arrangements influence the manufacture of predictions of scarcity?
- How are predictions of scarcity coproduced with simultaneous demands for technologies or infrastructure such as dams and pipelines?
- What alternative means of predicting or experiencing scarcity can we call upon?
- And what theoretical frameworks are useful for understanding adaptations to scarcity, or for facilitating alternative choices of technology?

The event will also coincide with the launch of the new, second edition of the book, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, Vulnerability and Disasters*, by Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis, and Ben Wisner (Routledge, 2003). The coincidence of the launch and the workshop means that we can attract more people to each event. We are not asking the ESRC to assist with any funding of the book launch.

## Provisional Program

**November 19<sup>th</sup> 2003**

9.00 Coffee  
9.30 Introduction and welcome: Conference Host: John Harriss, Convener, DESTIN  
Key Introductory Presentations:  
Michael Thompson: Scarcity As Just One Social Construction  
Jeremy Berkoff: Water projects and scarcity  
Lyla Mehta: Naturalizing scarcity, politicizing the solutions

Coffee

Dipak Gywali: Technology and politics for water scarcity in Nepal  
Graham Chapman: The Ganges, water and scarcity  
Mary Douglas: How institutions think about scarcity

13.00 Lunch

14.00 Jack Ives: Reviewing the evidence from the Himalayas  
Ian Calder: Reviewing the scientific evidence for water scarcity  
Tony Allan: Non-watershed solutions to water scarcity: local hydro-political responses

Tea

P.B. Anand: Local responses to water scarcity, India  
Alan Nichol: ODI work on water and governance  
James Mayers / colleague: IIED work on water and governance

### Final session

Discussant: Steve Rayner, Science in Society Program

16.30 **Workshop ends**, to prepare for launch of the book, *At Risk*, by Blaikie, Cannon and Wisner,

**17.0 Launch of At Risk** and informal talk about the book and workshop, Robinson Room, LSE OLD BUILDING, plus refreshments

c19.00 Meet outside LSE main entrance to go to local restaurant for dinner.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

**Conference organizer:**

**Tim Forsyth**  
LSE  
[t.j.forsyth@lse.ac.uk](mailto:t.j.forsyth@lse.ac.uk)

**020 7955 6836**

or

**0776 444 2559**

## **List of attendees who have stated they will come**

(this list may be expanded on the day with local attendees from within London: Please do suggest other people if you wish)

Prof Tony Allan, King's College and SOAS (water, development, Middle East)

Dr P.B. Anand, University of Bradford, water researcher, South Asia

Dr Jeremy Berkoff, Independent Consultant to World Bank and various governments on water

Prof Piers Blaikie, University of East Anglia, environment and development writer, Nepal

Prof Ian Calder, University of Newcastle, hydrologist

Prof Graham Chapman, Lancaster University, South Asia expert, researcher on water

Prof Mary Douglas, University College London, social theorist of scarcity and risk

Dr Tim Forsyth, Development Studies Institute, LSE, researcher of environment and development

Prof Dipak Gyawali, Government of Nepal

Prof John Harriss, Convener, Development Studies Institute, LSE, South Asia expert

Prof Jack Ives, retired of University of California, Davis, writer on Nepal for many years

Dr James Mayers, International Institute for Environment and Development, London (plus may other colleagues)

Dr Lyla Mehta, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, researcher of water

Dr Elaine Morrison, International Institute for Environment and Development, London (plus may other colleagues)

Dr Alan Nichol, Overseas Development Institute, water researcher

Prof Judith Rees, Deputy Director, LSE, adviser to World Bank, natural resource economist

Prof Michael Thompson, Bergen University, analyst of natural resource scarcity and uncertainty

Prof Robert Wade, Development Studies Institute, LSE, South Asia expert, World Bank commentator

## DIRECTIONS TO THE OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Overseas Development Institute  
111 Westminster Bridge Road  
London SE1 7JD

Tel:+44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax:+44 (0)20 7922 0399

ODI offices are located on the south side of Westminster Bridge Road, close to its junction with Kennington Road.

The nearest underground station, Lambeth North on the Bakerloo Line, is only 1 minutes walk away Go out of the station into Westminster Bridge Road, turn right up Westminster Bridge Road and you will find 111 on the left side of the road.

Alternatively travel to Waterloo Station, (Mainline, International and Underground: Bakerloo, Northern and Jubilee Lines). Leave by the Waterloo Road exit onto Waterloo Road. Turn right, walk down Waterloo Road and then turn right into Lower Marsh. Walk to the end then turn left into Westminster Bridge Road. We are on the second floor of the Costain House Building which is number 111 Westminster Bridge Road (opposite side of the road).

<http://www.streetmap.co.uk/streetmap.dll?P2M?P=se17jd&Z=1>

