



ENVIRONMENT

Talk or Action at World Water Forum?

Clean water should be a basic human right, but it wasn't necessarily treated that way at the recent World Water Forum.

By Tara DePorte / AlterNet April 21, 2006

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The hallways of the gleaming Banamex Center fill with a rush of well-dressed people from around the world; the smiling faces of presenters at easy-to-assemble booths wait anxiously for the next visitor; excited students, engineers, and businessmen and women vie for a space in a conference room touting the policies of the World Bank.

At the same time, farmers, angry students, environmentalists and traditionally dressed women march through the smog-heavy streets of Mexico City. Outside, photographers and journalists cling to the spectacle of black-clad anarchist groups; inside, they're found trailing dignitaries, heads of corporations and key environmental groups -- always hungry for a story about the dramas and turmoil surrounding Earth's most precious resource: water.

These scenes are from the recent fourth World Water Forum (WWF) and numerous "alternative water forums" and anti-forum protests. No matter which side of the debate you're on, there's no avoiding the impact of World Water Forums on the world's water-related issues, and thus, on all of our lives. Yet few understand the purpose of the dialogues going on at this colossal event.

Why do water and sanitation need to be our top priority? Simply put, freshwater is increasingly the world's most limited resource, accounting for only 0.4 percent of the world's total water resources. Today, 20 percent of the world's population has no source of safe drinking water, and 40 percent lack access to sanitation as basic as a hole in the ground. The tragic result is the death of nearly 4,000 children per day due to water-related disease and illness. This lack of access also leads to the loss of productivity, reduced school attendance and an overall loss of health, time, and dignity for billions.

The World Water Forum is organized collaboratively between national authorities of this year's host, and an international organization called the World Water Council. This Council is an amalgamation of 323 governmental and intergovernmental water groups, private corporations and nonprofits. The inclusion of these corporations in the World Water Council draws the ire of adversaries, raising questions as to the purity of Forum processes and agendas.

The key function of the meetings is to set the global agenda for water resources management. According to Roberto Lenton, former head of the UNDP Energy and Environment Program and an organizer of the Mexico City forum, the WWF meetings are a good mechanism to keep leaders focused on water and sanitation issues and their critical impact on development. "It's not so much policy development, but reminding people periodically and reinforcing the need to focus attention on the subject."

The global concerns broached at the Forum ranged from global climate change to women's rights and armed conflicts, making it clear that water is not just an "environmental problem."

Hot Topics

With some 20,000 participants comprised of over 300 national and international organizations, this year's Forum emphasized the importance of local actions in achieving ambitious goals. The theme "Local Actions for a Global Challenge" encompassed 205 sessions ranging from "risk management" to "water and sanitation for all" over the seven-day conference.

"The greatest strength of the Water Forum is that there are so many people, so many things going on. This is also, of course, a weakness, in that you can only go to a small proportion of what is going on," remarked Lenton. Harried appearances and glazed-over eyes were the trademark of Forum participants, often seen straining to decide between a discussion of "Service Delivery and Local Empowerment" or "Challenges and Perspectives in Megacities," all while cornering key contacts and deciphering translation services through mini-headsets.

Much of the structure of the World Water Forum is left to the elected host country. The Mexico-based organizers chose to keep sessions and trainings open to all registered participants, but ministerial meetings, as well as opening and closing ceremonies, were closed except for a select, invited few. Even participants who did have access remarked that this exclusivity further detracted from dialogue among water workers. "The process left a bad feeling for everybody," concluded one participant. For many civil society groups, World Water Forums signify a continued push towards water privatization. These groups see the Forum as a corporation-sponsored event -- where big government meets big corporations -- and set the agenda with which communities are forced to comply.

These concerns are not completely unfounded: The official declaration of the third WWF, held in 2003 in Japan, clearly supported the role of the private sector in financing aspects of the water sector. And a look at this year's diverse financial sponsorship -- including the Mexican Ministry of the Environment, Microsoft, National Geographic and Coca-Cola -- does nothing to quell doubts about representation at, and accessibility to, the Water Forums.

The fact that this year's Forum conspicuously avoided the "privatization debate" may be a sign that water privatization is out of fashion. Gemma Bulos, founder of the NGO A Single Drop, attended both the WWF and the parallel alternative forums, and heard little to no mention of privatization. "The omission of the privatization rhetoric may have raised some question as to whether that methodology is considered viable anymore," she said.

While the official Ministerial Declaration of the Forum didn't reference privatization of water supplies, it loomed large among the 20,000 protesters outside of the official gathering. Privatization is a topic that moves the masses -- as evidenced by the civilian uprisings in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2000. In that case, protests and riots forced out one of the largest water corporations in the world, Bechtel, from their municipal water supply system.

Many feel that the zeal behind anti-privatization of water is misplaced and should be directed instead towards finding solutions for the problems that face the billions of people who lack basic sanitation and safe drinking water. Without discounting the importance of keeping a basic human right in the hands of the people, Lenton said concern over privatization often overrode much more challenging issues. "Let's not focus on the easy targets, let's focus on the most important ones," he said.

Often linked to the failures of privatization is the discussion of water as a human right. Despite the passion the issue aroused in groups both inside and out of the Forum, neither implementation nor enforcement strategies concerning the "human right to water" were officially included.

Partly due to delegates' claims that the topic would only produce a potential legal battle, solutions to the debate were scattered. Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela and Uruguay specifically stated in their approval of the Ministerial Declaration the need for guarantees of water as a human right, as well as the need to protect water from becoming part of free trade agreements. Likewise, the European

Union, attempting compromise, suggested a minimum requirement of water per day as a human right, but that idea didn't hold either.

Such resistance was not seen at the alternative forums paralleling the "official forum." Hundreds of water activists, representing over 40 countries, signed a joint declaration of the recognition and enforcement of the water as a human right. Not stopping there, signatories emphasized the need for publicly managed utilities, and the exclusion of water from international free trade agreements, including a time commitment and initiation year of 2006.

The parallel forums are a testament to the feelings of marginalization many groups feel when it comes to discussion of the quantity, quality, use and overall access to water sources. Labeling the official forum as "elitist" and "anti-democratic," many participants in alternative forums claimed that voices such as theirs don't have a chance to participate in WWFs.

With this year's Forum focusing on grassroots actions, it was unsurprising to see NGOs, civil society groups and members of indigenous populations participating as panelists and presenters in sessions, trainings and open dialogues. But many are still concerned that the voices of the majority of concerned participants are overlooked. Working with indigenous groups throughout the developing world, Bulos noted, "[At one of the alternative water forums], the indigenous perspective was definitely revered and featured, where on the contrary, it was addressed in "token" panels at the WWF."

Ana Pinto, a representative in Mexico of indigenous communities in Northeast India, said the excluded and discriminated communities feel like they are contributing to a consensus, but that all too often "the fact that they are present is often used to legitimize a process, which does not include those dissenting views merely by stating that consultancy and consultation has occurred."

With registration costs at \$120 a day and \$600 for the entire seven days of the conference, the "participatory processes" were inherently limited. This kind of built-in exclusion is typical of how the world views water problems, Lenton suggested. Participation in water conferences "should follow the same principle that we advocate [for] water and sanitation," he said. "Those who can pay should pay, and those who can't should not."

The "alternatives"

Openly acting out their concerns with the official World Water Forum process, civil-society groups transformed Mexico City into a stage for "alternative" or "people's" forums throughout the seven-day official processes. Activists like Oscar Olivera, one of the leaders in the Bolivian water movement, passionately spoke to the injustices of populations denied access to clean water, children dying and companies profiting -- all to the nodding heads of devout supporters.

These forums included parallel structures to the WWF, such as workshops, strategy sessions, performances and networking opportunities. According to key organizer Carlos Garcia-Robles, Mexican National Coordinator of the Global Youth Action Network, "We are organizing the international forum that we wanted to see. Not one that was organized by joint national organizations, by corporations, but a forum organized by and for the people." Bulos, who was both presented at the alternative forums and attended the WWF, said, "I think both forums tried to provide the same information, but from very differing perspectives."

Though some activities at the alternative forums addressed how the two movements could coordinate their efforts and work together towards water policy agendas, participants generally perceived this as preaching to the choir. For these participants, the most valuable aspects of the alternative forums were training workshops providing information on efficient, low-cost water purification techniques, low-impact sanitation, and other direct-impact initiatives.

There was also a greater emphasis on, and involvement of, indigenous perspectives and actions. Often based on a more holistic approach to water initiatives, most indigenous people promoted water reverence and water rights for all living beings as their key agenda items. The underlying focus of the alternative forums was the perspective of supporting water as a global commons rather than as a commodity to be bought and sold.

Common ground?

The official outcomes of the World Water Forum included high-profile prizes, speeches and a three-page nonbinding recommendation document. Additionally, the forum included over 1,500 local actions from the Forum in a database focusing on networking and sharing action methodologies concerning water issues. But it is the unofficial networking, lobbying and key dialogues concerning all levels of the management, use and control over water that will have the broadest reach.

There's no question that policy development is a snail-paced process, with dialogues rife with predisposed agendas, many of which hit dead ends. But the dialogues, trainings and networking that occurs in the Forums are fundamental to reinforcing the importance of water issues. "There are large numbers of small changes in mindsets at many conferences -- this one in particular," concluded Lenton.

Marta Benavides, co-founder of the International Institute for Cooperation Amongst Peoples-IICP-El Salvador commented, "What we need, especially from industrialized nations, is for people to be much more aware." Benavides suggested that much of the process is about scale of change and steering enthusiasm and energies toward effective change.

One of the biggest differences between the WWF and alternative forums might just be their approach. "The WWF seemed to focus on changing people's minds surrounding water to promote action. The alternative forums seemed to focus on changing people's hearts to inspire reverence and unified action," Bulos continued. "I believe they (the Forums) are both trying to find best practices, methodologies and policies for water to be shared and utilized, but their focus on who is the major stakeholder and whose needs are provided for first differ immensely."

At the next World Water Forum -- scheduled for 2009 in Turkey -- perhaps the theme should be "Let's actually work together and get something done." Perhaps working together could be achieved by trying to merge participants in "official" and "alternative" forums. As Lenton remarked, "[The alternative forums] do help in shaping policy and are legitimate. Perhaps a way could be found to bring in those external dialogues into the main body of the Forum?"

In Mexico, one problem was that too many in both forums have been overcome by development-speak. Either through political training or through repeated funding applications to international organizations, the jargon is there -- repeated over and over that words aren't followed up by actions. Participants from inside and out seem to be communicating the same things but have few concrete examples and specific contributions to back up expressed ideals.

Questioning whether there are actual shifts in policy concerning water issues, a woman dairy farmer from the Netherlands and member of the group Women for Water Partnerships remarked, "What's important at the Forum is that we make government realize that the beautiful words need to be put into action. What are you really going to do about it?"

It's not only governments who are full of "beautiful words," it's activists, researchers, engineers, corporate CEOs, everyone. The question really needs to be, "What are we going to do about it?" Maybe we all need to start educating ourselves, and caring, about that liquid that comes out of our taps and sustains life on Earth.

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