

Fixing Our Water Crisis Can't Be Done by the Corporations that Are Exacerbating It

By Jeff Conant, AlterNet. Posted April 2, 2009

If we learned anything from the World Water Forum it should be that the privatization model has failed and a grassroots movement is needed.

As the Fifth World Water Forum ended recently in Istanbul, a number of stories came out, each of which might have emerged as the main water story of the week. But in fact, to see the most important story of the Forum you have to look beyond the Forum itself. Here's what happened.

Father Miguel d'Escoto, President of the UN General Assembly, and an outspoken critic of water privatization, had requested a public audience at the Forum -- which presents the appearance of a UN event -- but was denied; in response, Maude Barlow, his Senior Advisor on Water, delivered a statement from him to the alternative, People's Water Forum, where 600 global water rights activists had gathered in an unsanctioned popular event. In this statement, Father Miguel provides a serious critique of the World Water Council and calls upon member states of the UN to implement a process leading to a legitimate global water forum under the auspices of the United Nations.

But a story about the UN General Assembly President being excluded from speaking at the World Water Forum, and his advisor speaking instead to the grassroots forum to ask that the UN step in to replace the World Water Council, this is not the main story. After all, everyone knows that nobody listens to the UN.

The Forum grounds were protected by an enormous security apparatus, both inside and out, which was frequently invoked to suppress dissent. A street demonstration on the opening day turned into a police riot, with 26 Turkish activists arrested and three severely wounded. Payal Parekh and Ann-Kathrin Schneider of the anti-dam NGO International Rivers were arrested for unfurling a banner during the Forum's inaugural speeches, and were summarily deported. There were several reported occurrences of water rights activists being physically removed from Forum sessions. In a particularly odious example of surveillance, Norwegian journalist Rolf Hanssen witnessed police in the Forum Press Center collecting information from the computers used by media covering the event.

But a story about Turkish police colluding with the World Water Council to maintain order and control dissenting voices, this is not the main story. Turkey is, after all, a police state, and the World Water Forum is, in any case, a private affair.

The Forum's Ministerial process -- a series of roundtable discussions among government ministries with the goal of developing a unifying statement -- appeared to be tightly controlled by the Water Forum's governing body, and resulted in a highly contested final declaration, declaring water a basic need, but leaving out the question of water as a

human right. Renee Orellana, Bolivia's Minister of Water and the Environment, pointed out that the statement also failed to address climate change, collective rights, the possibility of community-control of water resources, and indigenous peoples. The Ministries of Bolivia and Venezuela spearheaded an alternative statement, and in the chaos of the final moments of the closing session, 24 governments signed their statement on the right to water and 16 called for the United Nations to take over the Forum in order to promote a democratic water future.

Though it may appear (and may, in fact, be) merely symbolic, the right to water is seen by advocates as crucial to promoting democratic, accountable, transparent water governance. But the courage of a handful of southern-country governments to fly in the face of the World Water Council and build a responsible alternative to the Council's corporate agenda, this is not the main story.

If we were to seek a water story of the week with a slight tragicomic edge, perhaps we could point to the World Water Forum's "VIP toilet problem:" as Maude Barlow and Food and Water Watch's Wenonah Hauter sought the nearest restroom after attending a Forum session, they were rebuffed by security, and told that there were VIP washrooms and common washrooms. If we were to go with this story, we would focus on its metaphoric aspect: the fact that inequitable access to water and sanitation is not merely symbolic of the divide between the wealthy nations of the North and the impoverished nations of the South, but is in fact one of the root causes of this divide. But this isn't a story, because nobody really cares about the 2.6 or so billion people without access to the global VIP washroom.

In fact, none of these is the main story, because the World Water Forum itself is no longer the main story. The World Bank has spent 200 million dollars over fifteen years on privatization policies -- the same policies promoted by the World Water Council -- and by their own admission, these policies have failed.

Two of the world's largest private water operators, Suez and Veolia, the major shareholders of the World Water Council, have received the lion's share of World Bank investments in water and sanitation, and, in their pursuit of full cost recovery around the world, have raised water tariffs and delivered poor service from Atlanta to Argentina.

During the same years that these companies aggressively promoted private sector investment, public financing for water hit an all-time low, leaving millions high and dry. The development model that promotes infinite growth on a finite resource base, that has constructed large dams on 60 percent of the world's rivers and displaced upwards of 40 million people, that has shifted massive amounts of natural resources from the "developing countries" to the "developed countries," is, of necessity, coming to a crashing end. As Oscar Olivera, trade unionist and spokesman for the Bolivian Coordinadora del Agua y La Vida said, "What we are talking about today is a challenge to a whole concept of development, and to the imposition of structures that deny our rights and control our access to basic resources."

"They've run out of money, and the only plan they have is to put a tariff on the poor," said Maude Barlow. "They are bankrupt morally and ideologically, and they are bankrupt in their ideas. They have nothing left to do but take from the rest of us."

"For the water justice movement," said Filipina activist Mary Ann Manahan of Focus on the Global South, "these are the best and the worst of times. The worst because the crisis is so grave; and the best because we now see the clear need for real, structural change."

Perhaps this is the main story: the failure not only of a triennial meeting of corporate water policy advocates, but of an entire development model.

At a press conference convened by the directors of the World Water Forum two weeks ago, I asked, "What gives the forum its legitimacy?" The answer: "It is the world's biggest water event." There we have it: what gives the water forum its legitimacy is, apparently, its size. To be specific, it's bigness. But, as Arundhati Roy and others have said, the age of big is over. This is the century of the small.

Perhaps, then, this is the main story: the initiative of community groups, public water managers, unions, consumer and human rights advocates, small NGO's, indigenous peoples, women's organizations, health promoters, and civil society to build water justice from the ground up.

As Doctor V. Suresh, Director of the Centre for Law, Policy and Human Rights Studies in Chennai, India asked, "When we were approached by the World Bank Water and Sanitation Project we said, well, with such help we will have technical support for water management, and we already have the construction skills -- but will we have the right knowledge of what water is?"

As Omar Fernandez, a Bolivian Senator and the Director of the National Organization of Irrigators, said, "It is the diversity of peoples in our nation that build the basis for managing water." As Steve Bloomfield of Public Services International, a global organization with 620 affiliated unions in 160 countries, representing 20 million workers told me, "If anyone has the experience to address the world water crisis, it is public sector workers -- we are the greatest single body of experience that exists in this field, and we should be given the opportunity to put that experience to the test."

On the last day of the Forum I spoke at length with a reporter from Agence France Press who had come to look for stories of appropriate technology and small-scale, community-driven development -- of rainwater catchment and ecological sanitation and village-level water purification and the revival of traditional water management strategies. He didn't find them. So I pointed him to Rajendra Singh, of Rajasthan, India, whose work with villagers over three decades brought seven rivers back to life. "We learned to value traditional knowledge," says Rajendra, "where knowledge is shared for the good of all people and not for the good of some people to keep others down. Knowledge of the land's contours, of the land's capacity to hold water, and of the people's capacity to manage it -- geo-cultural knowledge. So, we have revived seven rivers in Rajasthan with the

participation of people who were thought of as poor, as illiterate -- and this not only brought the rivers back; it has brought back the meaning to their lives."

I will not pretend, in the instance of this article, to be an unbiased or objective journalist. I attended the World Water Forum as an advocate for human rights and as a member of a broad coalition whose principle goal was to challenge the forum's legitimacy. Why? Because the same private corporations and international financial institutions that caused the world's water crisis should not pretend to take responsibility for solving it.

In over ten years involved with water issues, I've dug trenches for pipe alongside villagers for whom potable water is equated both with self-sufficiency and with life; I've visited deeply impoverished people in many nations -- people often living with an absolute lack of decent sanitation, often confronting toxic dumping, often suffering displacement as refugees of environmental devastation, and often witnessing the wholesale removal of the natural resources beneath their families and their homes. I've seen that, surprising as it may at first appear, the poor pay more for water and are, of course, the first to suffer from its lack. And in all of these places I've seen that, at the root of sustainable community development, whether in Akron, Accra, or Argentina, is self-reliance. And at the root of self-reliance is human dignity. Dignity, which doesn't necessarily wear a business suit or polished shoes. Or any shoes at all, for that matter.

Of course, as the boosters of private sector investment remind us, there are certain facts we must confront. One of these facts, as fundamental as the air we breathe, is that water, like it or not, can be bought and sold. But dignity, it has been said, cannot. And dignity and water are closely related.

For those of us dedicated to promoting access to sustainable, safe water and sanitation to the world's people, the World Water Forum is not the main story -- it is merely a distraction. But it is a dangerous distraction. And at this late date, with upwards of a billion people lacking access to safe water, with the climate crisis revealing new horrors on a daily basis, with the collapse of financial markets replacing terrorism as the greatest threat to global security, and with the same institutions that have been in charge of our money taking continued control of our water, we cannot afford such distractions.

With the convergence in Istanbul of numerous NGO's and social movements from North America and Europe, the African Water Network, the InterAmerican Network for the Defense and the Protection of Water Rights, the broad and diverse water movements of Asia and the Middle East; with the intervention of Father Miguel D'escoto, a Nicaraguan Jesuit briefly at the helm of the UN General Assembly; with the bold words of Maude Barlow who said "today we are witnessing the transfer of power from the World Water Forum to the People's Water Forum;" and of Wenonah Hauter who points out repeatedly that public investment in water is the very basis of public health in the northern nations and should be in the southern nations as well; with the environment Ministers of embattled southern governments like Bolivia and Venezuela present with the social movements in defending the human right to water, the main story of the week is that the time has arrived for people-centered, earth centered practices to be given their rightful

place as the focal point of water policy, both globally and locally, north, south, and everywhere.

But let's hope this is not just the water story of the week. Let's hope it is the water story of the century.