

The Alternative Voices of the 4th World Water Forum

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INTRODUCTION

Since water is the basis of life on our planet and an essential resource for the progress of humanity, undoubtedly one of this year's most important international events is the 4th World Water Forum, held March 16 to 22, 2006 in Mexico City.¹

Its sessions' crosscutting themes were water management for food and the maintenance of ecosystems and water for growth, development and sanitation that we all have

the right to. But what concrete proposals are there for using this resource in this way at the same time that we reduce risks? The sessions were planned taking into consideration the commitments made in past summits to share the advances in the application of measures to improve local water management.

We should ask ourselves about how possible it is for a world forum, whose main goal is to explicitly include the exchange of experiences among a multiplicity of the highest level stakeholders, to really motivate participation and dialogue since locally, people do not share the idea that global accords can directly be implemented successfully given the multiplicity and

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diversity of geographic areas and interests.²

Despite the diversity of conditions and interests, it has been nine years since the first world forum in Morocco and interest in the issue clearly has not declined. On the contrary, more and more representatives from different spheres have come with a broad spectrum of proposals and expectations.³ A large number of non-governmental organizations, scientists, professionals, academics, businesspersons and other members of civil society attended.

It was a big contrast to see sunburned peasants wearing cowboy hats attending the sessions and eating next to high governmental officials, scientists and international delegates. The presence of poor delegates is particularly noteworthy because the registration fee of U.S.\$240 to U.S.\$600 was too expensive for anyone who did not have the economic backing of a public or private organization.

To get an idea of participants' profiles, we should first of all consider that the forum was co-organized and promoted by the World Water Council (WWC) and the National Water Commission (Conagua), the host organization.⁴ The characteristics of both the organizers and the forum make it easy to foresee the exclusion of certain sectors with limited or no presence among

these high-level circles, despite the legitimacy of their interests.

For some local interest groups, for example, the 4th World Water Forum proposes and defends an ideological platform conceived from the highest levels of power. This fact alone brings into doubt the authenticity of its interest in disseminating plural, diverse opinions about water, one of the issues that has some of the greatest political implications capable of generating conflicts of interest on a world scale.

However, it was a great surprise to hear the voices of participants and panelists alike who opposed official positions, and to see anti-forum participants distributing pamphlets and inviting people to so-called local “empowerment sessions”. These people echoed deeper scientific postulations and promoters of social inclusion in demanding an agenda centered not on certainties, but on the great challenges and the difficulties in facing them.

How much were these voices and alternative proposals represented and how were their proposals included? The answer to these questions would allow us to determine whether the positions for and against the spirit of the forum are completely antagonistic or if some level of consensus is feasible that would make convergence and, in the long run, the prevention of conflicts possible. In this article, I explore

this point, based on an overview of the main debates and the profile of the different proponents. Then, I will briefly deal with the issues and challenges that emerged from the sessions, and conclude with the matter of how “alternative” proposals were represented in the final declaration.

THE BIG DEBATES AND THEIR PROPONENTS

This forum's central objective was to share experiences and learn from one another. Despite its simplicity, this idea, present in the inaugural speeches, reflects a strong practical bent and puts forward a difficult-to-achieve goal. That is because learning is complicated by sharp ideological clashes, as Loïc Fauchon, this year's co-president and the president of the WWC, in the inaugural session, pointed out when he said that no issue is as big a concern and matter for disagreement worldwide as water.⁵

In the sessions led by international organizations like the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Global Water Partnership, among others, the discourse was moderate, perhaps given the global strength of groups fighting against the participation of multinational corporations in water management. These discourses that apparently included more opposing opinions touched only tangentially on the controversies that emerged in previous fora since, from their perspective, those discussions limited the establishment of mechanisms for cooperation and the achievement of common goals. An example of this attitude was that these institutions relegated to

second place the debate about whether water should be considered a human right or an economic good subjected to market forces as well as the controversies about whether processes of deregulation, privatization and decentralization are the only means for channeling demands effectively. They also consider the conflicts of interests that these issues are creating in all spheres a secondary matter.

By contrast, the great dilemmas that water management and the conflicts it can create were discussed. For example, David Grey, from the World Bank, spoke about the differences that can exist between local and global interests and between current demands and future necessities. He accepted that they could be legitimate, though counterposed interests, and therefore expressed the need to advance beyond a “minimum platform” of accords. Nevertheless, the effort to include these debating points was unsuccessful: what was considered important was satisfying the global need for financial resources and investment in infrastructure as a means to successfully deal with the vulnerability of many regions exposed to climate change and thus advance in meeting the millennium goals.⁶

This moderate discourse may be understandable in light of an ideology sustained by a great many discourses emanating from international institutions, but also from national agencies, private enterprise and government representatives of Mexico and other countries. Another vein of this ideology may be the WWC view regarding the human right to water:

“The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, phys-

ically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses. An adequate amount of safe water is necessary to prevent death from dehydration, reduce the risk of water-related disease and provide for consumption, cooking, personal and domestic hygienic requirements.”⁷

In view of this, it would seem that the principle of the right to water is limited to covering the basic necessities.⁸ On the other hand, the acceptance of this principle by governments worldwide would seem to indicate that there is consensus that every individual should have access to a minimum amount of water for covering his/her needs. Up to this point, we would all seem to be in agreement. However, when we discuss what the key local action should be for achieving the goal of “water for all,” the voices emphasizing the lack of resources to invest in infrastructure and the strategies for increasing it managed to make themselves heard over those that underlined the need to improve technical and institutional capabilities of local and community inhabitants as the means to strengthen their autonomy in managing their resources without requiring financing of any kind.

People went so far as to say that the debate about counterposing public and private water management was a false

one given the successful experiences in local management when a public, community effort has included private participation. At the end of the day, as the OECD and the World Bank said, it does not matter where the resources come from; what matters is getting enough of them to take the local action required and prevent the risks associated with water scarcity. Nevertheless, the alternative voices disagreed with this position and asked for the public-private controversy about water to be reformulated as a political priority.

In this context, in his magnificent presentation, Erik Swyngedouw suggested that before taking concrete action, the political nature of the water issue should be recognized, as well as the limits of market forces, particularly when dealing with social and environmental problems. Thus, the dilemma between public or private participation was reaffirmed, analyzing both from the perspective of equality, community and citizens’ autonomy, environmental deterioration and the responsibility for it. Therefore, the issue of water and its unequal distribution was also examined from the socio-economic and political standpoint and not just as a matter of geographical, demographic or climate change heterogeneity.

For its part, the “highest-level” discourse argued for a consensus, emphasizing that at the forum, no one was

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trying to impose privatization, since, as Mexican Minister of Environment and Natural Resources José Luis Luege Tamargo said, “This debate is about a dialogue and sharing ideas.” However, at the same time, he welcomed private and foreign investment for sanitation infrastructure. To justify this contradiction, he reiterated that having efficient public bodies and greater social commitment did not solve the problem of infrastructure and the challenges implied in comprehensive management of water resources. Despite this argument, the debates continued at the forum about this supposed public need for infrastructure. However, it is not enough to know that these investments foster development and create jobs. What must be clarified is up to what point taxpayers would be taking on the responsibility for paying for a raw material, water, destined to insure the maintenance of very lucrative private, multinational businesses.⁹

EMERGING ISSUES AND NEW CHALLENGES

Water is a political issue. This means that it can create greater polarization if we consider the participation of broad sectors on all levels, something that could be seen at the forum when new key issues emerged during the discussions that to a certain extent revealed the complexity of social and environmental phenomena that are difficult to see and deal with using current focuses. Although paradoxically it was not recognized in the final declarations, some of these emerging themes are of strategic importance for developing countries and particularly for Mexico:

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- 1) *Transborder water management*. This matter requires further attention in light of free trade agreements given the existing legal vacuum which gives multinationals the power to control all forms of commercialization not explicitly regulated by treaties as currently written.
- 2) *The protection and sustainable management of underground water and water ecosystems*. These are necessary if we consider strategic means to deal with climate variability and environmental deterioration. More than investing in infrastructure, this would imply reconsidering priorities regarding water.
- 3) *Empowerment of communities and the citizenry*. This would give the population autonomy in managing its resources based on a new culture that would make water, conceived as a human right, a priority.
- 4) *The governability of water*. This implies recognizing everyone’s right to water and the obligation to act ethically when dealing with the challenges its management brings with it.

THE BIG CONCLUSIONS: WATER FOR ALL?

Despite the only slight optimism about the forum’s plurality and objectivity, it is true that many voices did make them-

selves heard and the most important debates did happen. However, the people who talked about privatization never managed to dialogue with those who defended access to water as a human right, and vice versa, despite the success stories told by the proponents of both models. Thus, voices were heard affirming that public participation improved access to water and increased communities’ autonomy, but others said that private participation “educated” communities in caring for their resources. Despite this back and forth of ideas, access to water was not declared a fundamental human right.¹⁰

The question remains whether the forum’s organizers considered it a total failure or a resounding success. Given its format and the presence of many interests, it is not out of the question to think that the objective was to consolidate strategies to strengthen the influence and local control over resources and in this way increase profits from investments and minimize the conflicts that could arise from the existence of alternative positions and values that, to our surprise, were also presented at the forum.¹¹

Although these voices could be heard loud and clear, presenting solid arguments based more on fact than theory, at the end of the forum, the doubt remained about whether there could have been greater consensus or at least

if it would have been possible to strike a chord amongst those who were reluctant to learn from others. Unfortunately, there was never enough time to ask these and other questions. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ In recent decades the problem of environmental deterioration linked to social inequality and poverty makes it necessary to reformulate the meaning of the term "progress" to at least question its ethical basis. Thus, for example, we should ask ourselves whether it is ethical to move entire populations from their places of origin or take away their traditional means of subsistence in order to consolidate an economic development project like the construction of a hydroelectric plant or an industrial belt.
- ² I am referring particularly to groups that are fighting to maintain structural living conditions and autonomous organization in their communities, such as indigenous confederations, *ejido* collective farm members and peasants, as well as some sectors of academics and social scientists committed to different causes like the fight against big dam projects.
- ³ Many meetings with alternative proposals and evident social commitment were held in Mexico City parallel to the official forum.

However, I was surprised by the active participation in the official forum itself of activist committees like the one made up of people from Baja California against the relining of the All American Canal.

- ⁴ The WWC was founded in 1996 as a multilateral platform that brings together a variety of high-level actors, including explicit and implicit links to the governments of several countries, the United Nations, the World Bank and different ministries and national, regional and global public and private networks. In September 2005, the World Water Council was granted special consultative status by the UN Economic and Social Council. This special status gives the council the opportunity to designate official representatives to the United Nations headquarters in New York and their offices in Geneva and Vienna (www.worldwatercouncil.org). Conagua is Mexico's autonomous federal body with full authority to manage and preserve Mexico's water resources, and is obviously an active partner in the WWC.
- ⁵ Fauchon heads up one of the main subsidiaries of SUEZ, one of the most profitable multinationals in the water industry.
- ⁶ At the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000, world leaders signed the Millennium Declaration which inspired the eight objectives included in the Millennium Development document, and the 18 goals, including the one that proposes that by 2015, the number of people without access to drinking water should be reduced by half. (www.un.org/millenniumgoals), consulted March 30, 2006.

⁷ Guaranteeing water as a human right continues to be a topic of discussion for bodies like the WWC whose aims favor this principle and are oriented to finding a way to concretize it in rural and urban projects. See *General Comment* 15, CESCR, 2002 at www.worldwater-council.org, consulted March 29, 2006.

⁸ In some sessions, it was even proposed that 30 liters of free drinking water was the minimum amount any individual should have access to. In the case of Mexico City, given the uncertainty about the amount of potable water piped into houses, many people pay between four and ten pesos a liter for purified water. During the 4th Forum, a 500-milliliter bottle of water sold for 15 pesos.

⁹ In North America alone, the water industry's annual profits come to more than U.S.\$115.8 billion in the United States, U.S.\$1.084 billion in Canada and U.S.\$707 million in Mexico. In all three cases, the industry's growth in the first decade of this century will be over 20 percent. See www.datamonitor.com.

¹⁰ The almost 150 countries who were signatories to the final declaration of the 4th World Water Forum did not want to include the access to water as one of the fundamental rights of human beings as Venezuela, Cuba, Uruguay and Bolivia proposed.

¹¹ At the end of the forum, the weakest voices continued to argue for the right to develop their communities, to preserve the quality of their rivers and lagoons and to autonomously decide to carry out economic activities in their lands with better living and health conditions.