



“Bridging Divides for Water”: The 5th World Water Forum (WWF) and the Alternative Water Forum

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The World Water Forum held at Istanbul from 16 to 22 March 2009 marked a further stage in the very heated debate on the actions the international community needs to take for the safeguarding and management of water resources. These actions concern both political balances – wherever hydraulic basins are a bone of contention between coriparian states – and standards of living and social justice, since access to water is one of the principal indica-

tors of the existing gaps between developed and developing countries.

The first World Water Forum was held at Marrakesh in 1997. Its purpose was to set guidelines for hydraulic policies at the planetary level and reinforce international cooperation in the sector. The event is held every three years and witnesses the participation of public and private operators, international organizations, NGOs, and user groups. It provides an echo chamber for major water-related political and social issues, but also an occasion to develop market-conquering strategies for the large multinationals in the sector, such as Vivendi-Veolia and Suez, which by themselves control 70% of the world trade volume. Private sector operators also sit in the World Water Council, an organism which has gained a key role in the funding and organization of the World Water Forums, in collaboration with the Global Water Partnership, an institution promoting public-private partnerships. The stepping in of multinationals in the organization of the Forum has shifted the center of gravity of the world water question from the safeguarding of rights to water to the need to promote economic efficiency in the management of the resource. The final declaration of the Hague Forum of 2000 signaled this reversal in trend. The declaration defines water as a need, not a fundamental right, since a consecration of the right of people to water is seen as too constraining for management policies entrusting the satisfaction of water demands to market mechanisms.

Since then, this duality has marked all the water forums: on the one hand, a concern for social issues and the theme of water security, expressed by the United Nations and its agencies; on the other, the primacy granted to the economic aspects of water management. International financial organisms – notably the World Bank and the International Money Fund – have been constantly calling attention to the need to mobilize funding in this sector to make up for the inability of the governments of the poorer and more indebted countries to meet one of the great challenges of the new millennium: the granting of access to water to a billion 200 million people who are still denied this right.

This year's title of the World Water Forum, "Bridging Divides for Water", has called attention to unequal access to water resources at the global scale. There were six main themes: Climate Change and Risk Management; Advancing Human Development and the Millennium

Development Goals; Managing and Protecting Water Resources; Governance and Management; Finance; Education, Knowledge, and Capacity of Development. Collateral events included a trade show and an exhibition, organized to favor the meeting of operators and present technical innovations. On the political front, the opening ceremony saw the participation, among others, of the president of the World Water Council, the mayor of Istanbul, the Turkish minister of the environment, the Sub-Secretary General of the United Nations in representation of Secretary General Ban-Ki-moon, the prime minister of Morocco, and the Turkish president Gul. During the Forum, the prime minister of the Turkish republic gave awards to exponents of Turkish agencies and press organs that had distinguished themselves for their commitment in the water sector, and Morocco assigned the Hassan II Prize to the director of the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development.

The Forum hosted the presentation of the Third United Nations Report on the world water situation, which highlighted factors that will increase pressure on water resources in the years to come, first and foremost climate change and future transformations in the economy and living standards of emergent countries. The report also stressed that the Millennium objective of reducing the quota of world population lacking access to water and adequate hygienic and sanitary conditions by 2015 appears increasingly remote.

Theme 1 of the Forum, centering on global change and environmental risk management, was coordinated by the UNEP and the World Meteorological Organization. Speakers in this section stressed that water security and the management of water-connected environmental risks in an interdependent world depend on global dynamics such as migration, climate change, and virtual water flows, i.e., the water contained in commodities exchanged on international markets. Water security thus goes hand in hand with energy security and food security. Managers of water resources must hence take account of this complexity and call on multiple skills and adopt different approaches as required. It is especially crucial to transfer technology to risk-prone areas, and involve local authorities and consumers in innovation processes in the sector.

Theme 2 – human development and the Millennium develop-

ment objectives – was coordinated by UN-Water and the FAO, and focused on some currently pressing issues: poverty, hunger, and the lack of access to water and decent hygienic and sanitary conditions affecting a huge percentage of the world population. Special attention was given to the role of careful water management in the struggle against world hunger. Agriculture – the sector that consumes the most water resources – today is called upon to undertake a major effort at modernization, notably as regards irrigation systems, cultivation patterns, and land ownership. Much depends, however, on the changing of the market mechanisms whereby today developed countries limit the agricultural exportations of poorer countries, such as subsidies to their own agricultures, non-tariff restrictions, and protectionist attitudes. Even the subsidies granted by the USA and the EU to biofuel production are at least in part responsible for the recent price hike of basic agricultural products on international markets. This price increase has favored large producers exporting on international markets rather than small landowners, and has certainly gone to the detriment of the poorer urban classes.

The third theme of the forum was the management and protection of water resources, organized by UNESCO and the International Network of Basin Organisation (INBO). The various sessions under this heading analyzed political agreements and institutional frameworks capable of safeguarding water sources and reinforcing cooperation within international hydraulic basins. Little space was devoted to conflict for trans-boundary water resources, such as the Turkish GAP project, which envisages the building of a system of 22 dams and 18 electric power plants on the Tigris and Euphrates in the Anatolian southeast, whose population is in majority Kurdish. This project has a high potential for conflict generation, not just at the national but also at the international level, since it is destined to heavily impact water availability in Syria and Iraq and threatens to completely disrupt the life systems and the very existence of Kurdish communities in the affected area, through the submersion of whole villages and the forced moving of the population. The lack of a debate on the problematic aspects of major hydraulic projects reflects the policy of the forum, which, on the one hand, avoids all judgments of merit on actions undertaken by

governments – represented at the forum by political delegations that actively participated by holding a number of meetings –, and, on the other, never explicitly condemns projects benefiting the multinational companies of the sector. Some sessions devoted special attention to the sustainable management of underground reservoirs. These are strategic resources, being less exposed to climate change, but are subject to what Spanish expert Ramon Llamas calls a “silent revolution”, i.e., intensive exploitation that often eludes all form of state control. Only in 2002 the United Nations finally stress the need for a mapping of large trans-boundary underground aquifers, setting out a first body of international norms regulating the use of trans-boundary aquifers (Resolution no. 63/124). UNESCO’s International Hydrologic Programme (IHP) has recorded all of 274 trans-boundary underground reservoirs.

The fourth theme was that of water management and governance, coordinated by the UN-Habitat agency of the United Nations. Participants in these sessions emphasized that the current global water and sanitary crisis essentially depends on constraints that are institutional and political in nature. The main issues discussed were the need for a system of transparent rules and controls to improve the public management of water, and the advantages of leasing out water-supplying systems to private companies in developing countries to improve these systems’ efficiency and fight corruption.

The fifth theme of the Forum was that of financial problems. It was coordinated by the World Bank. The focus was the price of water, where a distinction was made between resource and service. Water-supplying services require high investments, which can only be funded by fixing tariffs completely covering costs, from the extraction of the resource to its distribution to users. To deal with the gap between investment costs and private subjects’ willingness to invest – which threatens to widen as a result of the current international financial crisis – one must attract investors’ attention by putting on the market financial products, such as stocks and obligations, connected to the sector. A crucial resource for investments by developing countries is the granting of long-term loans guaranteeing private financiers against the high risks involved in the implementing and management of water-supplying systems. Planning investments

and diversifying funding sources through a joint use of tariffs, taxes, and transfers was presented as the only viable strategy to cover the high costs of water-supplying and sanitary systems.

The sixth and last theme of the Forum, coordinated by UNESCO, was the creation and development of managerial and organizational capabilities in the water sector. The focus was on technology transfers, research, and the raising of users' awareness of the water problem. Some of the sessions were devoted to the cultural aspects of water management. These concentrated on two fundamental but so far underrecognized aspects of the management of water resources: cultural differences in the perception of water and its social value, and the role of such differences in dynamics of conflict and cooperation between countries.

The final statement that emerged from the eight ministerial round tables that concluded the forum reaffirmed the international community's interest in some questions it regards as strategic. These include the reduction of the impact of climate change on the world water supply; strategies to minimize environmental risks; the connection between water politics, energy politics, and the world food crisis; and increasing access to water in countries where this basic right is still denied. The document stressed the need for "improved hygiene and sanitation" as an important "step towards decreasing worldwide deaths related to water shortages." The drafting of this final statement once again witnessed a rift between those countries that wanted it to acknowledge access to water as a right, and those that opposed this. The definition "water need" finally prevailed. This choice of terms is significant. By accepting that the satisfaction of water needs is subordinate to the paying of a price, the forum has given its support to an approach advocating a role for multinational companies in the creation and management of water-supplying systems. This decision of the Istanbul forum follows in the steps of the previous ones by granting legitimacy to the role of private companies both in the creation and management of networks in the framework of ongoing privatization processes, as well as in the production of bottled water, a continuously expanding sector thanks to the inefficiency of public water supplying services, which force local populations to turn to the market to make up for continuous interruptions in the supply and the bad quality of tap water. Nongovernmental

organizations stressed their dissatisfaction with the final declaration, which they saw as a step backward from the commitment that every government should make to protect water rights as an extension of the right to life as affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In parallel with the official Forum, an alternative Forum was held from 20 to 22 March, which saw the participation of more than 600 people, about 30 nongovernmental organizations, the Committee for the World Water Contract – a vast movement that opposes the privatization of water – and the Foundation for a New Water Culture – an organization founded in Spain in 2005, which has mobilized hundreds of world experts in support of a public, just, and participative management of water resources. The event was also attended by many European Parliament members and ecological and human rights associations. An especially significant presence at the alternative Forum was that of Maude Barlow, a consultant on water issues of the President of the General Assembly of the United States, an activist for water rights, and the author of books such as *Blue Gold* and *Our Water Commons*. Barlow has become a spokesman for all movements that do not recognize the legitimacy of the official Water Forum and are urging the General Assembly of the United Nations to take control of the next forums as the only organism that is truly *super partes*, and can hence represent the international community and all the organizations that are struggling for the recognition of water as a common good of humanity.

The final statement of the alternative Forum rejects all forms of privatization of water, affirms intergenerational solidarity as the guiding principle for natural resource use, and stresses the need to maintain the integrity of the water cycle and contrast the economic and environmental crisis. It also insists on the interdependence of climatic change and water crisis, and rejects approaches that, while they do nothing to contrast the rise of global temperature, threaten to further deteriorate the quantity and quality of water sources and life conditions, such as the construction of dams and nuclear power plants, and the cultivation of biofuels. The alternative Forum gave ample voice to the movements opposing the GAP project in Turkey and abroad, and especially to initiatives against the creation of the Ilisu dam and the submersion of the archaeological site of Hasankeyf.