

## Politics, platitudes, and privatization – the three Ps of The World Water Forum

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The best conference I ever slept through ... until the Canadians, the Council of Canadians that is, took front stage while co-convening the contentious public-private partnerships session at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Water Forum, held recently in Japan. The privatization debate, which promised to provide some fireworks certainly delivered – those, but perhaps not much else. Although I am confident that there were a whole host of other topics that were equally hotly debated (the Dams issue certainly comes to mind), privatization struck at the very heart of the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Water Forum and the current global water debate.

Some 24,000 people from 182 countries attended this event in Osaka, Kyoto, and nearby Shiga, all in the Kansai province of Japan. The premise of the forum, held from March 16-23 and hosted by the Japanese government and the World Water Council (WWC), was to forge agreement on an action plan designed to solve key global water problems. The delegates ranged from government officials to representatives of international and non-governmental organizations and, of course, water experts from around the world. Despite the critical importance of halving the number of people without safe drinking water by 2015, (a mandate of the U.N. Millennium Summit) this water event was more show than substance.

My voice was certainly not alone in questioning the entire event's legitimacy. Many of my Orwellian suspicions were confirmed by the downright confusing program layout, and the seeming lack of meaningful dialogue occurring in many of the presentations and panel discussions. I often wondered if they were trying to confuse us with overlapped sessions, teach us the corporate slogan – water is a right, BUT privatize, privatize, privatize, or bore us into submission with tedious accounts of the wonders of

science and the ability of large-scale technology to solve all the world's problems.

The war of paradigms was clearly evident. The disagreement centred on whether access to water is a basic human right for which governments should accept full responsibility, or whether water is a scarce commodity, which must therefore be subject to the rigors of the market.

Despite corporate-based claims that they can provide water better, faster, and cheaper, much of civil society remains skeptical. NGOs and many of the global citizens they represent blame privatization for soaring water prices, poor service, cutoffs, and the confusion caused in some developing countries by the withdrawal of water companies after their projects become unprofitable – a serious risk when you are in the business of providing water to the impoverished.

The often-emotional nature of this topic was most apparent at the thematic sessions on public-private partnerships. This session was jointly convened by the WWC and the Council of Canadians, who led the vanguard of NGOs protesting water privatization at the forum.

The promise of meaningful debate never fully materialized. Political posturing, rhetoric, and he said, she said- type finger pointing dominated the stage, especially on the all too rare occasion where opposing views were even in the same room. For my liking, there was far too little discussion of the real issue: what does one do with a failing government monopoly for supplying water? Certainly something beyond replacing it with a private monopoly that has total freedom due to the lack of an adequate regulatory environment. Both sides unquestionably did agree on one thing, the urgency of improving global water supplies, but remained deeply divided on the best way of achieving it.

Meanwhile, the stalemate over privatization was often cast by the WWC as damaging to those most in need. "We must put aside our differences and find solutions", I heard muttered on more than one occasion by those with affiliations to the large corporate interests. However, the small but active civil society contingent maintained that derailing the corporate agenda is the only option for creating democratic and sustainable solutions to the water crunch. Rather than taking the historical approach of large expensive and centralized projects, these solutions would be focused on conservation, traditional methods, or



**Maude Barlow from the Council of Canadians and William Cosgrove from the World Water Council co-hosted the public-private partnership session.**

innovative local solutions, such as recycling water and rooftop rainwater harvesting.

By the forum's close, 422 'water actions' – concrete measures by which different nations demonstrated their commitment to solving water problems – had been submitted. But critics maintain that most of these actions – as well as an agreement on a six-page statement signed by ministerial delegates from all countries – were arranged in advance. This left many participants, including myself, asking whether the mammoth event had actually furthered the effort to secure safe water supplies.

If synergies were the goal however, I am sure that many of the organizers will agree that the forum had exceeded expectations in its function of creating dialogue, and building links between scientists, officials, and activists engaged in water issues. Evidence of commitments for future collaborations abounded. Kyoto, Osaka, and Shiga were certainly a networker's dream, but overall the forum will likely, and unfortunately, be remembered by most participants as simply the place we were when the war broke out. How the rest of the world will view it remains to be seen, with the number of concrete and tangible results outside of the talk shop being the only true measuring stick.

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