

conference call

The 4th World Water Forum, Mexico: A practitioner's forum

Whether events like the 4th World Water Forum (www.worldwaterforum4.org.mx) are enjoyable and worthwhile ways of sharing experiences and learning, or a tedious distraction from other more pressing priorities is, of course, a highly subjective view. The forum was held in Mexico City from 16–22 March 2006 and it brought together almost 20,000 participants in 200 working sessions around the theme 'local actions for a global challenge'. Despite earlier indications that it risked being chaotic, the forum ended up going rather smoothly. There were many well-run and interesting sessions, packed with 'local actions' that were carefully chosen.

There were some concerns and failures of course. Training sessions held in the Learning Centre were so far from the conference centre that few people made it there, and the Alternative Water Forum was similarly distant from the main forum. Although cross-cutting issues like governance and monitoring were recognized in the planning for the forum, the agenda was strongly organized around conventional sectors, with days focusing on water and sanitation, water resources management, agriculture and so on.

Capacity building will be vital to sustain the infrastructure and services in which we are investing so much to meet the Millennium Development Goals, but capacity building was inadequately addressed. Only capacity building for risk management was explicitly reflected in the generally unexciting ministerial statement, and local actions failed to reflect the general need for much more emphasis on capacity building at the intermediate (e.g. district/local government) level.

Privatization was mistaken: World Bank

A change of course was signalled by Jamal Saghir, Director of the World Bank's Energy and Water Division, who

reflected that the last 20 years of efforts to privatize water supplies had been largely wasted. To avoid the next decade being similarly unsuccessful, he went on to say that we should accept that the vast majority of water services will continue to be provided by the public sector. The focus must therefore be on helping public sector utilities to function better, he said. It was pointed out that, of all the utilities, water is by far the least profitable and is therefore a very difficult sector for the private sector, compared to others like telecoms and energy. Privatization policies were the main subject of a protest on the opening day of the forum, when some 15,000 people marched through Mexico City.

Corruption rises up the agenda

Corrupt practices, from nepotism in recruitment to incompetent management, from overcharging by re-sellers of water to outright embezzlement of funds meant to finance investment – all frustrate attempts to provide water and sanitation services. Against this background two sessions on 'Good Governance and Fighting Corruption in Water Services and Resource Management' and an 'Initiative to Form a Network to Combat Corruption in the Water Sector' (19 March 2006) brought together sector stakeholders to discuss corruption issues and new initiatives to improve transparency (for links, see www.ecologic.de). Donal O'Leary, co-ordinator of Transparency International's activities in the water sector charted the development of a new Water Integrity Network (WIN) to combat corruption in the water sector.

Multiple-use water services

'I enjoyed this series of presentations enormously, one of the most exciting things this week, dealing not only with problems locally but also with challenges of scaling up', said Roberto Lenton from the Global Water Partnership at a session on multiple-use water (MUS) services (20 March 2006). These services aim to address the need of many poor households for water for small-scale productive activities like backyard gardening and keeping

livestock that is routinely ignored by the domestic and irrigation sectors.

The session brought together local practitioners who are piloting integrated approaches to supply water for domestic and productive uses (see www.musproject.net), and representatives of key international and national institutions from the domestic and irrigation sectors. Five local actions from Bolivia, Colombia, Thailand, Nepal and South Africa illustrated practical and integrated approaches to meeting poor people's needs for access to both domestic and productive water. The benefits include improved food security, incomes, health, and improved sustainability of water systems linked to better willingness and ability of users to pay.

In the following panel discussion, Ede Jorge Ijjasz, the Global Manager of the Water and Sanitation Programme, reflected that 'We cannot do rural water supply projects without considering productive uses...we should realize this in the same way that we learnt that sanitation had to be integrated with water supply in the 1980s.' The fact that we don't do this widely, he feels, is linked to the problem of having a single, narrow Millennium Development Goal for water. Barbara Schreiner (Deputy Director General, Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, South Africa) noted that 'this is really about looking at local economic development – but from a bottom-up rather than a top-down perspective' and described multiple use water services as amongst 'the most exciting and new stuff that is on the table' at the forum.

Perhaps because so many organizations did not send their 'top-level' staff, due to political and organizational rumblings beforehand, this was a forum pleasantly devoid of the usual mind-numbing repetition of well-known statistics and preaching to the converted. This was a practitioner's forum, filled with interesting formal and informal meetings, new ideas and new enthusiasm.

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