

## conference call **Second World Water Forum: a personal view of the NGO event**

I was at the Forum for three days, along with ITDG colleagues from Sri Lanka and Peru. Out of the 4,500 people there, there were 100 southern NGO participants sponsored by UNED-UK.

The choice available was bewildering – the Forum and the Fair were combined with a Film Festival and many other cultural programmes on water as well as 80 seminars and workshops. You stepped over gently gyrating mermaids, or were deafened by South African drummers on your way in to the seminars. Each day had a different continent, a different Major Group (Gender, NGOs, Private Sector) and many different themes.

On the Friday, I went to the opening ceremony, which turned out to be rather more dramatic than the organisers had planned. When the music stopped for the Chair of the World Water Council to speak, a man and a woman rushed out, stripped naked in front of him, revealing painted slogans against dams and water privatisation.

Suddenly there were shouts from all over the hall and a man a few rows in front of me suddenly jumped over the balcony, and sat hanging from a harness – as did others elsewhere. Mahmoud Abu-Zeid doggedly continued his speech, but no one could hear it.

The Dutch Crown Prince eventually attempted to calm things down with the message that the point of the Forum was to allow everyone to express their views. The band played 'Misunderstood' at this point. It took a very long time for the security guards to capture all of the protesters. As a result, everything was late.

The ideal of openness to participation was however more honoured in the breach. Most of the sessions were plenary, with little or no opportunity for questions as with the morning session organised by the Dutch NGO, Simavi. The NGO event did allow much more time for contributions from non-panel members, so here pent-up frustrations were given a stage, but the structure and mechanisms to facilitate good participation were absent and so favoured the loudest voices. The Gender session I went to on Tools for Participation was probably the most participatory.

The level of participation in the development of the various documents produced for the Forum was also a contested

theme, and one intertwined with the issue of legitimisation for the documents and the various bodies which had produced them. These ranged from the 'Bellagio Principles' expounded at the Simavi session, which apparently derived from a preparatory meeting of a handful of experts, to the Vision 21 document, which had involved 15,000 people in 30 countries

Dams and privatisation were a recurrent theme, with dams proving to continue to act as symbols around which the debate on the fundamentals of development ideology were fought. Stars of the international scene, such as Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy drew attention to the anti-dam case, which was naturally prominent in the NGO sessions. The irony was that dams swamped the myriad issues linking poor people with water resources.

The hostility to a technocratic approach swept all before it, damning Integrated Water Resources Management without considering it at the micro-level.

As for privatisation, the NGO debate on water as an economic (and social) good was certainly lively, with some interesting research findings as well as strong views from unions.

The unions, with their greater experience of targeted advocacy, punched above their weight at the final 'NGO' session, where UNED had the tough job of chair. The final session, intended to agree an NGO statement for the Ministerial Conference, was hardly a model of either focus or accountability. There were perhaps 150 people there, and after an hour and a half of impassioned declarations from a minority about the links between the Forum documents and the multinational dambuilders it still had not got beyond the first paragraph of the statement. Most embarrassingly, it was clear that the vehement denunciations were not based on a passing acquaintance with the different reports.

Jon Lane, former head of WaterAid, eventually cleared up the confusion over the documents. His point that the discussion so far had hardly benefited poor people was sobering. In the event, a short response was produced for a meeting with the chair of the World Water Council, who coped with it more happily than the outputs of the protesters. Many NGOs, including WaterAid, refused to sign the final statement.

UNED-UK are keen to see some lessons learned for future NGO advocacy. Maybe the Third World Water Forum will be different.

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