

## Lost in the Triangle of Thirst

On 17 March 2000, the Second World Water Forum was opened in The Hague by His Highness Crown Prince Alexander of the Netherlands – a royal presence to highlight the great importance of the event. After all, water, or rather the shortage of drinkable water, has become the most urgent environmental issue of the third millennium and there is an overwhelming consensus in the scientific community that global disaster will be unavoidable unless action is taken immediately.

The attendance was impressive – with governmental delegations from more than 130 countries, representatives of NGOs claiming to be experts in the matter and multinationals with major interests in water-treatment technology and water as a consumer product. On 22 March, which was solemnly proclaimed World Water Day, the Forum slowly sank into that abyss where the wrecks of other ponderous think-tankers lie rotting, i.e. the Rio Conference.

That the whole Forum would be a charade was already evident by looking at the list of the co-ordinators – all of them administrative managers of impressive sounding organisations such as 'Water & Gender', 'Youth Forum', 'Next Generation of Water Leaders', etc, etc. Global water shortage, it seems, is a fertile ground for the germination of a whole array of water groups. But somewhere along the line the group of water scientists appears to have fallen overboard. But possibly these 'technicians' were considered superfluous, the scientific homework on the subject having been done. Instead, the World Water Forum was perceived by its co-ordinators as the time and place for the truly important people, the 'decision-makers', to get together and solve the problem.

So what important solutions and visions were reached during the forum? It was an event whose *raison d'être* and major objectives were described by its initiative takers as 'a unique opportunity to fundamentally change the way in which the world's citizens perceive and respond to the impending water crisis... the Forum will involve the active participation of a number of major groups, among them NGOs, gender and youth groups and the business community... intent on cementing relations with the public and... motivating us all to take action where the future of water is at stake.'

If anything was lacking it was the 'relations cementing' and the 'general motivating into action' exercises. In fact, the Forum clearly proved the existence of two opposing interest groups in the water problem – the NGOs and their satellites on one side and the multinationals on the other. A third group, i.e. the Third World political decision-makers, to keep friendly with both sides, wisely remained mute and opted to blend in with the wall paper.

The major contribution to the Forum of the NGO gender and youth groups was truly of an inestimable value. They proposed a very important political motion namely that the access to sufficient drinkable water should be a universal human right. Water for all the people all over the world! A noble thought coming from organisations that carried out innumerable catastrophic water-drilling and irrigation projects that greatly contributed to the depletion of the water resources in poor countries and apparently still believe that distribution of consumable H<sub>2</sub>O into every corner of the globe is child's play. What if people everywhere do get sufficient water to cook, wash and sprinkle their vegetable garden?

There still remains the small matter of the vast amounts of water necessary for industrial development and expansion. Apparently the NGO vision of the Third World is one of small rural villages where demographically stable populations spend their lives in beatific contentment because their simple basic needs are fulfilled.

But it was not the NGOs that won the day in the World Water Forum. Their motion was waved away with a flick of the wrist by the representatives of the multinationals who did not 'engage a debate', but simply told the rest straight out that they, and they alone, were leading the dance. For water, like energy, is a fundamental resource for maintaining the present global economy, as well their own existence. There are two groups of multinationals with major water interests. The first one can be described as the 'beverage industry', e.g. soft drinks companies with their many subsidiaries in different countries, including arid ones, who cringe at the thought that their access to water would be limited in any way after they have invested so heavily in getting people to consume vast amounts of their products. Finding solutions for the water shortage problem is not really their field, so the contribution to the Forum by Nestlé, Unilever, etc, was more a 'hands off our water resources' warning. The second group of multinationals with major water interests belong to what can be called the 'water treatment industry'. This sector, which contents itself with the technology of water distribution, polluted water treatment, desalination, irrigation and (and/or water) energy, has grown over the last 20 years into one of the most influential and powerful global industries. Their political influence is quite sizeable, since once a country closes a deal, the further development and expansion of its water distribution and treatment, and thus its economy, is linked to the company.

It is therefore of essential self-interest for the water treatment industry to be able to come up with solutions for the water shortage problem. The most disquieting occurrence at the World Water Forum was hence not the aquatic Marxism professed by the NGOs or the capitalistic claim-staking of the beverage industry, but the ominous silence of the water treatment industry. In a recent article that appeared in the April 2000 issue of the French journal *Science & Nature*, Jacques Labre, a director of Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux, quite succinctly and sincerely reflected the vision of the whole sector, and of the scientific world, by stating that in the so-called 'Triangle of Thirst' between Tunisia, Sudan and Pakistan, even 100% utilisation of all available water resources for human purposes (which would be catastrophic for the environment) would not suffice to cater for all the needs. The countries in the Triangle cannot sustain large cities and an important agricultural sector simultaneously – a sad truth not broached at the Forum.

But is there a solution? According to Mr Labre, these countries therefore have to develop an economy that enables them to produce sufficient foreign exchange to buy food elsewhere. This is known in commerce as the market of 'virtual water' – i.e. the international trade of cereals enabling virtual transfers of water resources (the production and transport of one ton of grain equals a 1,000 tons of water).

It sounds good, but I simply have insufficient imagination to picture countries such as Sudan and Pakistan switching in the next decade to a highly modernised minimal-water-using economy that is competitive with the West. Yet the same conclusion, namely that countries in the arid zone should stop investing in their agriculture and switch their economy to tourism for example, is reached by the UN 'experts' working on the 'Action Plan for the Mediterranean' and the 'Blue Plan for the Mediterranean'.

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