



Bill Cosgrove of the World Water Council welcomes participants to the 3rd World Water Forum. The event was held in the three neighboring Japanese cities of Kyoto, Shiga and Osaka from March 16-23, and examined how to bring safe water and sanitation to the entire world.

The World Water Forum in Kyoto – Just Another Conference?

Water professionals around the world are now back to normal business after the big event in Japan in March – the 3rd World Water Forum. Despite the inevitable hangover after such a meeting, it is important to reflect over achievements and see if there are positive trends which can be detected compared to earlier mega conferences.

After all, this was the third forum in six years, in addition to the serious water focus at last year’s World Summit on Sustainable Development as well as a preparatory meeting in Bonn in 2001.

The media has already reported that the Forum was a failure. No new commitments and the same old stories. This is partly true, in particular if success is measured through the quality of the ministerial declaration or in demonstrating or committing to real actions on the ground. But this is too simplistic. It is important to keep in mind what the real, if not specified, goals of meetings like the Forum really are, beyond the official rhetoric on “political commitment” and “moving from theory to practice”.

Meetings like the Forum are important places to share ideas, develop thinking, engage in dialogue, present progress on the ground and maintain water issues as a priority on the political agenda. From these perspectives, was the 3rd World Water Forum a success?

A meeting point for the enlightened

As a meeting point, Kyoto surpassed all expectations in drawing 12,000 active participants. It is no small achievement to attract so many different water professionals from all over the world for a week-long meeting. Participation has also widened, with broad

input from the NGO and business communities. Water is clearly on the way to becoming “everyone’s business”, one of the recommendations from the previous World Water Forum in The Hague in 2000. From that perspective, the Forum was a success.

Despite this, in the main it was water professionals meeting other water professionals. Sectors such as finance, economic development, trade, etc., are underrepresented. To broaden participation further remains a key challenge for the future. Another failure seemed to be the further polarisation among different groups. Grass roots NGOs—long suspicious of private sector involvement in water

Talking About Water

In view of the increasing attention paid to stakeholder participation, societal acceptance and political decision making, SIWI believes efforts are needed to bridge the gap between public belief and scientific understanding. Widespread, incautious use of the ambiguous word “water” is particularly unfortunate. In meetings, conferences and symposia, “water” is often referred to interchangeably as drinking water to be paid for (water provision), as streamflow or groundwater to be put to beneficial use (blue water), or as the water in the soil on which crop and tree growth depends (green water). Moreover, serious misconceptions are widespread in the environmental and forestry communities regarding land cover changes and their hydrological effects. Often the real effects are opposite the assumed ones.

– even lashed out at organisations felt to be connected to business in some ways, such as the Forum host World Water Council.

Progress in thinking and the same old ideas

Did the Forum show that thinking has progressed? A simple yes or no answer cannot suffice. The privatisation debate seems to have polarised groups to the degree that thinking is further apart than it was, say, in The Hague in 2000.

More than 350 seminars took place in Japan, and individual participants no doubt found it impossible to attend more than a few. Many seminars regurgitated the same ideas that have been reiterated over the last decade: yes, water is an economic and social good; yes, it is important to consider the environment; yes, integrated water resources management is the key to success; and yes, the river basin is the most logical spatial scale for water management.

There were, however some positive development in thinking. Water issues are increasingly linked to overall socio-economic development and poverty mitigation. The focus on ecosystem services has increased, and ecosystems are recognised not just as users of water with which humans have to compete. Trade and water in the context of globalisation, and ethical dimensions, such as so-called “hydrosolidarity”, are also getting more attention. Forging this new ground makes water issues more interesting than in the past, but it also makes them more ideological and thus more difficult.

Dialogues in the form of statements

The Forum created dialogue, though not always with civility, and often with clear divisions among the stakeholders. Statements dominated too often, with open and respectful dialogue taking a back seat. It is very clear that the ideological interests often dominate, at least regarding benefits or threats of globalisation, trade issues, privatisation, large-scale infrastructure and financing. Whatever the issue, there is a tendency that it ends up as an “either...or” discussion.

Clearly, also, an agreed vocabulary is missing – people used the same words but had different meanings. The result? Actors talking past each other rather than with each other. The dialogues were not always well organised and many rightfully complained that there was too little time for discussion in the sessions. As many sessions wanted to produce a statement to the ministerial session, the political temperature rose even further as people wished to air their ideas. Pre-cooked documents still dominated, some-

thing not viewed positively by some. The Global Water Partnership demonstrated its inclusiveness at the sessions dealing with governance. Facing some fierce opposition in the closing plenary, GWP gained credibility by inviting NGO participants to help draft a theme statement and address the plenary session. Such openness is the future!

Progress on the ground hard to measure

Progress on the ground? Yes, but even that depends on what progress you are looking for. Many sessions at the Forum contained presentations of wonderful and innovative initiatives – both at the international level as well as the more national and local levels. The projects and initiatives on display under the Water and Poverty theme, for example, showed how families could benefit economically when access to water went beyond covering basic needs. There is progress that often can be linked to the efforts to achieve the targets set at in the Millennium

Increasing attention – but for how long?

Are water issues high on the political agenda? In Kyoto, it was still possible to attract a fairly large number of ministers, and this despite the ongoing tensions in the Middle East. This is a positive sign!

The signals sent to the Group of 8 meeting, which includes a water focus and takes place in France later this year, is important. Water issues continue to receive increasing attention – though the political declarations from forum-like meetings do not necessarily reflect any strengthened commitments. There will be a challenge to maintain this interest, in part because of an increasing fatigue over large international meetings that focus on everything from water from a tap to virtual water trade, ecological sanitation and large-scale dams.

What other channels can be used to maintain interest? How can other sectors/actors be attracted, particularly those in reality sitting on the capital and the power? These are some aspects that will require fur-



Voices at the World Water Forum: Clockwise, from top, Margaret Catley-Carlson, Global Water Partnership, Ravi Narayanan, WaterAid, and Kuniyoshi Takeuchi, University of Yamanashi, Japan; a privatisation opponent; Mikhail Gorbachev, Green Cross International; participants in the Children's World Water Forum.

Declaration and at Johannesburg. Innovation clearly exists in the water sector, despite the gloomy picture presented in media and at the high-level meetings. However, whether this innovation is sufficient cannot satisfactorily be answered at such global forums. The real impact of international meetings on true progress is hard to measure, but certainly it is important that people have a chance to meet, discuss, share ideas and measure development, not the least regarding “real actions”.

ther attention – and affect if and when there will be a 4th World Water Forum, and on what it will focus.

It may well be that after such mega-fora in recent years, it may be time to “get back” to small events which are more focused, which grant more possibilities for implementation after the talking stops, and which give substantive, concrete results.

Mr. Johan Kuylenstierna, SIWI