



## The Forum Goes Local

Action on the ground forms the basis for discussions at the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico

**For the estimated 20,000 people at the World Water Forum in March, life after the tri-annual mega conference meant “getting back to reality” in our various institutions, organisations and companies. Perhaps, however, we’ve all had time to reflect on the event and have come away with a little more knowledge, wisdom and inspiration that will serve us well on a daily basis.**

This was the fourth Forum that the World Water Council organised together with a host government. Mexico had the honour this time, and the explicit focus on water issues in a global context was back in Latin America for the first time since the United Nations hosted its first water meeting in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977. Although some in the global water community cried out for “no more global mega meetings” after the 3rd Forum was held in Kyoto, Japan, in 2003, people did show up in large numbers again. This, also, despite recent studies which questioned the need for such huge gatherings. So, did the Forum offer us anything new?

### Think locally

“Local Actions for a Global Challenge” was the theme devised for the 4th World Water Forum. The underlying idea was that there are enough global principles and policies in the water sector, and plenty of ongoing processes. Action, by people, on the ground, is what ultimately will make a dif-

ference, not policies, principles, processes or high minded declarations and paper trails. The theme manifested itself through five sub-themes: water for growth and development; implementing integrated water resources management (IWRM); water supply and sanitation for all; water management for food and the environment; and risk management.

The organisers practised what they preached. As a convener of a number of sessions, SIWI experienced what at first seemed as a challenging and even frustrating process – the mandated inclusion of local action presentations in an already tight agenda in each seminar arranged by a convener. The local actions had been sub-



Ms. Maria Stenstöm of SIWI visits with a guest at the Swedish Water House booth.

mitted from all over the world, though with a decided proportion of Latin American cases, to a local actions database. Once this frustration abated, however, and the sessions were held, we as an organiser could really appreciate this mandated approach. In the SIWI-convened or co-convened sessions, the local actions provided examples of concrete action on the ground, and the diverse personalities behind them.

There is a tendency in international meetings to include the same issues, and the same people, in seminars and workshops. The inclusion of local actions and actors actually introduced new perspectives – and brought reality a bit closer to the participants in the meeting rooms. It provided an opportunity for many voices, not often heard, to get a chance to speak out – and illustrate that the problems we often discuss are far more complicated and worse than we can imagine. On the positive side, however, it showed that human ingenuity knows no limitation if provided with the right environment and support.

### Flesh on the academic bone

A nice example came from the SIWI-organised session on corruption in the water sector. To be sure, corruption is a tricky issue, and one which is very relevant for the capital-intensive water services sector. The issue has not been fully explored or thoroughly discussed in the past, and it is easy to become academic when new, difficult or sensitive issues are put on the table.

Photo: Dave Trouton, SIWI



Photos: Maria Stenstöm, SIWI, Dave Trouba, SIWI and Leila Mead/IISD (right)

First, we argue about the issue, then we try to understand its context and principles, and finally we look for appropriate tools to work with the issue. Then, we try to do something about the issue. At the corruption session, real cases were presented and a healthy sense of urgency came to the forefront. When someone stands in front of you and tells you that people actually have been killed in their struggle to combat corruption and nepotism, then real life sneaks into the meeting rooms and becomes the flesh on the academic bones!

Many such examples were presented at the Forum in the more than 200 seminars which were organised. This was a success and a very good example of how mega meetings, well administered, can play a creative and constructive role.

### Work the crowd!

Alas, all was not groundbreaking. The traditional processes were also there. A top-heavy opening plenary session included not a single woman as a speaker! That this is possible in 2006 is mind-boggling. And a ministerial session which is behind closed doors, with a declaration that nobody really wants or needs, can be questioned in this day and age. Are there ministers today that truly believe that signing one more declaration, with all the key buzzwords, lip service and pleasantries so often uttered before, will make a difference? Is there any real purpose to have a political declaration that only reaffirms, takes note, recognises, acknowledges, welcomes and encourages?

No, it is time to liberate the ministers from the captivity of their closed-door meetings. Let them interact with other participants instead (some, to their credit, do on their own!). Let them be part of the creative

and open discussions in the seminars and contribute with their political experiences. Let them listen to and comment on the local examples and realities. Ministerial sessions should be more than just a show of solidarity. Let us hope for a change at the 5th World Water Forum in Turkey!

SIWI was very active in Mexico, as the sidebar article highlights. Many interesting and educational discussions were held, many new contacts were established and new ideas were tested. SIWI used the Forum to present two new concrete actions, one being an international network on water and corruption and the other an initiative that will focus on how to put green-blue water management into practice on a basin scale. The Forum was an excellent venue to

discuss the actions and receive feedback.

All in all, from a substantive point of view, the Forum was a success. The Forum as a whole can consider itself a positive contribution to advancing the global – and local – water agenda. Kudos go to the organisers and the secretariat.

While it is too early to speculate how the Forum in Turkey will be framed, there are many highly interesting political water issues in that region. Through the annual World Water Week in Stockholm, SIWI will continue to play an active role in the process leading up to the Forum.

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## SIWI Scales Up Forum Activities

SIWI was an active participant in Mexico. Experts from SIWI moderated discussions, contributed to published reports and participated in the Swedish Water House Pavilion, which highlighted the country's expertise and actors in water management and poverty reduction. SIWI also took an active part in the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) "Mega" session.

In addition, SIWI convened, co-convened or was active in the following sessions:

- How to Overcome Corruption in Water Resources and Service Management?
- Action for Development: Linking Poverty Reduction and Water Management - Reaching the MDGs through Investing in Water
- The Role of Water and Integrated Water Resources Management in the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals
- Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) in the North
- Green and Blue Water Resources for Improved Livelihoods - Utilising the Rains for Intended Gains
- Assessing Livelihood and Environmental Trade-offs and Synergies for Water Management in Agriculture