

IVth World Water Forum – Briefing 2, March 17

Local news on television and in the press showed pictures of yesterday's violent street protests against the forum. The main message was that water should be free. The papers carried little about the substance of the forum itself, or all the committed people here who are trying to tackle water delivery and other water related problems. The first sessions today covered a general introduction to the Americas' water problems before breaking into sub-groups.

With so much going on simultaneously, my write-ups will cover primarily what I subjectively chose to attend. Where possible I will include summary comments from daily reports on sessions I didn't attend, such as this morning's Regional Presentations. However, these are certainly not inclusive. For example, both the Media and Corruption sessions, which I include here, were not covered in the official report. I apologize if my selections, in this and coming blogs, don't include many observations made by other people which are equally valid.

Some comments from the report on Regional Presentations session, opened by Benito Braga, VP of the World Water Council:

Abel Mamani, Bolivia's Mister of Water, hopes that Water as a Human Right will soon be recognized in Bolivia's constitution. He added that this right was also called for by activists in the demonstrations yesterday in Mexico City.

Maureen Ballesterro, Global Water Partnership, Central America, said that while the region had adopted sustainable water development principles, implementation mechanisms have not yet been put in place. Treating wastewater is still a major challenge for many countries.

Jorge Mora Portugués, Central American Network for Water Action, noted that civil society, academia, financial institutions, international and national institutions and the private sector all participated in the preparatory work for the forum. Continuing participation of all sectors is necessary going forward in order to establish water as a priority in public policy.

Abel Mejía, World Bank, noted the lack of resources to integrate legislative structures and water infrastrucutres but expected substantial improvement by 2015.

Atonio Vives, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), said that the countries where investment is most needed have the lowest levels of tax collection as well as inefficient water supply and institutional management. Development plans must include Risk Assessment, to include climate change and variability.

Crown Prince Naruhito of Japan's keynote address drew attention to the special relationship historically between people and water, and the inspiration given by solutions to early water problems and by local knowledge.

Luis Alberto Moreno, IDB President, wants to improve sustainable funding for water infrastructure. He recommended well-regulated private sector

involvement at micro- and macro-levels, incentives for efficient financial administration, new financial resources while strengthening existing ones and more multilateral financing.

Some comments from the Thematic Sessions:

The European Initiatives on Water and Poverty covered decentralization initiatives but mentioned the absence of some local stakeholders from the participatory processes in water initiatives. Also covered in the question and answer portion were the need for long-term planning and budgeting; policies on renewable energy and efficient use of water in new buildings; links between deforestation and desertification, as well as states' insufficient role in decision-making on water management.

The Issues and Political Reflections session was introduced by Davis Grey, World Bank, who examined the "minimum platform" concept that countries must acquire to achieve water security. The poorest people must not be excluded from the options discussed. The Ugandan Minister for State and Water, Maria Mutagamba, said that water problems, exacerbated by droughts and linked water and gender issues, were preventing Africans from improving their living standards. **Jerson Kelman, President of the Brazilian National Energy Agency underscored the need to consider not only local, but also global impacts of water infrastructure development.** There were also a number of presentations on the good work being done largely by NGOs in various indigenous areas of Mexico.

The Mayors session got together over ten Mexican State representatives all day to discuss their experiences in water management. They noted the advantages of using treated waste water for irrigation; the need for funding from all sources for these projects; access to drinking water and payment for water services by people living in unplanned settlement (read slums); ways to promote awareness in youth and children; and whether the pricing of water services should be the responsibility of water operators or governments.

Dams as a Platform for Growth and Sustainable Development continues to be a contentious topic. Ricardo Sánchez Sosa, UNEP Regional Director, called for balanced actions for sustainable development. **Jerson Kelman noted that in dam licensing, some environmental and social standards were seen as excessive and trade-offs between local and global environmental interests were often not evaluated.** Patrick McCully, International Rivers Network, noted that large-scale projects get attention and financing, the agricultural sector receives only a small part of the benefits. He added that the World Bank's definition of "good dams" differs from that of civil society's, the Millennium Development Goals can only be reached through low-cost community-based projects; large dams serve a limited geographical area. The definitions of "minimum environmental impact" and "acceptable project outcomes" were discussed.

In The Gurria Task Force Findings, Loïc Fauchon, President of the World Water Council noted that water financing is still on the top of their agenda. James

Winpenny said that "business as usual" practices were not sustainable and we should focus on financing the modernization of existing irrigation schemes and on unconventional sources of financing. There was a call for addressing the environmental costs of hydropower and the relationship between public and private deliverers of renewable energy.

Finally, in the Business, Water and Sustainable Development session, Hans Olav Ibrekk, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, said that investing in water and sanitation and in resource management was good business, and each country should develop a "minimum platform" for water infrastructure and water security. Youth needs should be taken into account and a long term vision included.

The lunchtime session I attended, Water and the Media, was moderated by Tim Cullen, who spent 20 years in senior positions at the World Bank. It was aimed at journalists, which I pointed out was probably a mistake as the larger audience has a keen interest in working together with the press to explore the best ways to get our common message across. The session was very useful, attended mostly by Asian journalists - it remains a mystery (and a major challenge) that so few of the Western press are here. The problem of "event-driven" news and how to get an editor to even print articles on water, given the immense number of competing articles on a paper's daily news map, absorbed most of the discussion. A hook for a story, and making it more personal, was suggested, as well as ways to word information to grab attention and make the data understandable to the man in the street. For instance, the sorrowful number of children worldwide dying daily from lack of potable water, mostly from diarrhea, is put at close to 4,000. But this doesn't have the impact of saying that it is equivalent to 10 fatal jumbo jet crashes every day. I wonder how many consecutive days we could stand that! Other good comments made were that we should look beyond the mainstream media and let editors, and people in general, know WHY we think water is so important.

For the afternoon I decided to attend the sessions on Corruption, which it was agreed is the topic least well addressed by these fora and others in the past. There were presentations and case studies from Colombia, Ecuador, the Philippines, Mexico and Africa. The causes boil down to great contrasts in wealth, absence of an ethical framework and heavy bureaucracy and related hurdles. The implicators and targets of corruption are different in each area. Sometimes it's a simple bribe to falsify meter readings and to overcome or ease bureaucratic hurdles with water and government authorities, all personal in nature, under the heading of Unstructured Corruption. Sometimes it is Structured, often built into the cost of obtaining contracts, or not monetary as in abuse of public power for private benefit, rigged elections, inappropriate or shoddy projects, etc.. A common theme, is that corruption is often rampant at all levels of the water delivery process. The cost of this corruption, which translates into reduced funds to the government and supplier, is ultimately borne by the poorest sector of the population in the form of increased tariffs and inefficient service.

Transparency is the key to reducing corruption generally. A Colombian

busimen's group in Cali, uniting the country's major metal tube producers, was successful in drastically reducing corruption by entering into a binding agreement, with real teeth in the form of sanctions, beginning with moral sanctions, withdrawal of licenses, for example in the case of sub-contractors in the supply channels, and suspension of business and public disclosure for multiple offenders. Ecuador currently lacks strong legislation in this area but is working on it; there is congressional approval for the need for transparency and honesty and corruption in water delivery has already been reduced. The Philippine case, in the community of Magdalena, was an example of good intentions gone awry. A loan from the World Bank has to be repaid by an impoverished community, where there was no consultation, the bid of the contractors chosen was 30% higher than the lowest, and the drinking water they had been promised is still not potable. The Water for the People group which made the presentation has fought rigorously on behalf of the citizens, but has not been able to stop the ensuing rises in tariffs. In Africa, the World Bank representative mentioned that construction was the most corrupt stage. The diversion of resources to the poor and resultant fiscal subsidies also play a part in deterring developers and low quality projects. In Mexico transparency in awarding concessions is in the law, with internet submittals and one way glass counters discouraging manipulation.

At the end of the day I stumbled upon an excellent session, part of the Human Right to Water and Conditions to Apply it, in which Juan Manuel Ruiz, a very articulate and clear presenter from Spain, described that country's huge population growth and its implications, which are being factored into water planning. For example, the urban population has grown much more rapidly than that of France, and this has been mostly in coastal cities, which are most vulnerable to water related problems. For many years planning for urban development in Spain took into account the resources available in an area and built accordingly. Now, for example, the planning process involves studying what it takes to bring rivers to their original state and then building within these limitations. Among all the gloom, things like this bring hope! FL