



After Istanbul: Let's Lift Water on the Global Agenda

Photo: IISD/Earth Negotiations Bulletin

The 2009 World Water Forum in Istanbul gathered a huge number of participants to bring water to the forefront of the global stage. The World Water Council and their partners, including the Government of Turkey, did an admirable job to stage this massive event as a manifestation of the global water community's diversity and geographic reach. In times when much attention is given to the challenges of current economic crisis, or on climate change, it is good that the world receives a reminder that water is still an unresolved challenge in many parts of the world, already today affecting the lives of more people than any of the other challenges.

As the host of the annual World Water Week in Stockholm, we understand that bringing such an event together requires tremendous preparation, work and cost. Organisers and participants alike are confronted with the simple and pertinent question: what did you accomplish and is it worth the expense? Skepticism towards such mega-conferences runs high, ranging from those who believe that talk is not matched with action to others who suspect that event agendas are steered by malignant corporate forces.

Irrespective of our own personal views on this, the truth is that water-professionals, leaders, politicians, scientists, NGOs and activists must convene to clarify their goals and agree on what to do next and how to do it.

Political support needed

All participants place a high value on the opportunities to share experiences, build networks, learn from others, and connect with the latest thinking in the field. Yet,

this is not enough. For any meaningful progress to be possible, there must be consistent political engagement in water-related issues. These great international forums and events can be ideal opportunities to build such momentum and jumpstart the political changes needed to match demographic and environmental shifts that place unsustainable pressure on water resources.

Yet, compared to the magnitude of the challenges faced, there was relatively little political support and activity at the Forum. Ministers, mayors, parliamentarians were too few and far between. Few would dispute that the Ministerial Declaration and official outcomes from the Forum were disappointingly weak. This is not the fault of the Forum itself. It reflects the ongoing struggle of the entire water sector to reach outside of "the water box", to the political arena, and to connect the challenges of water issues with the activities that affect us all within other sectors of the society.

Though many international media outlets covered substantive issues discussed at the Forum, an unfortunately large number focused on the conflicts between protesters and police.

The UN World Water Day was celebrated with a seminar focusing on the theme of the year; cooperation on transboundary waters. Many other sessions on that theme were, however, less productive, focusing on the semantics of shared/international or only transboundary waters and thereby avoiding the real issue: how to make the best use of the water resources we have and how to share the benefits of the water.

Clarity, conviction and urgency

The Third World Water Development Report made its formal debut at the Forum. This new 2009 edition of the report focuses on "Water in a Changing World", and points both the water and development sectors toward an emerging state of

affairs in which external drivers controlled by other sectors of the society – climate, demographic, economic, waste and global environmental change – mount pressure on water resources. The report charts a course for leaders from government, industry and research to confront the challenge. We in the water sector must ensure that our purposes are clear and that our messages convey urgency and conviction to those leaders. The Third World Water Development Report is an important tool to make that happen, and should be used by all those who are involved in trying to influence policy-makers and decision-makers at all levels.

From Istanbul to Stockholm and beyond

“Bridging Divides Over Water” was an aptly chosen theme for the 2009 World Water Forum. We have more joint economic, social and political interests than we have causes for conflict. Yes, some might debate about the proper size and role the private sector should play in water utilities, and states or communities can disagree over how shared resources are managed. But our opportunities to address common concerns are much greater. Moving forward to the 2009 World Water Week in Stockholm and future water meetings, we need to ensure that our efforts in the water sector are matched by real political commitment and public engagement. To provide clean water and sanitation to all, to build resilience to the impacts of climate change and to reduce pressure on water resources and ecosystems through improved agriculture, reduced waste and responsible consumption, this must happen now.

The 5th World Water Forum is now history. It’s up to us – all of us – to build the coalitions, partnerships, and well crafted agreements that can move the world forward. The next step is in Stockholm.

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About the World Water Forum

The World Water Forum is the world’s largest water-related event. The Forum is organised every three years as a joint venture between the World Water Council and the government of the host country. Previous Fora were held in Morocco (1997), the Netherlands (2000), Japan (2003) and Mexico (2006). The Fifth World Water Forum 2009 was held in Istanbul, Turkey in March 2009. The Sixth World Water Forum will be held in 2012.



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