Reflections on Kyoto

War and water

These two came together at the Third World Water Forum, which during 16–23 March 2003 brought thousands of participants together in Japan. With 350-plus sessions at three locations and a minimum of five in parallel at any given time, speakers too often seemed to be ‘preaching to the converted’. Certain sessions in Osaka and Shiga received only eight to ten visitors. In many sessions there was a positive exchange of ideas about best practices. However, when the war in Iraq broke out, journalists at the forum were more interested in watching CNN than in covering the event.

The vagueness of the ministerial declaration was criticized by many participants and the press, in particular by Jan Pronk, special UN envoy and designated new chair of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council. At the end, about 100 ministers failed to deliver concrete plans and money on the road to achieving the UN’s goals of halving the proportion of people without safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015. There is not enough on water and poverty reduction, climate change impact and gender issues, said some ministers and NGOs.

The war against water privatization continued in Japan, led by a noisy coalition of anti-globalists, activists fighting international dams, and international trade unions. The latter disturbed the session discussing the Camdessus panel report on new financing options for water infrastructure, containing 85 ideas. Camdessus urged a doubling of financial flows, which it claimed was manageable, provided ‘all the parties accept the need to change their approach’. Institutions must be more accountable for their performance, and a lifeline for the poorest of the poor through cross-subsidies is also needed.

Ronnie Kasrils, South Africa’s Water Minister, endorsed many of these findings. They reflect approaches already undertaken in South Africa. ‘I find it remarkable how far we have come in the discussion since the Second World Water Forum in the Hague three years ago,’ Kasrils said. There the discussion focused on full cost recovery and private sector involvement. ‘Water for people, not for profits’, the activists shouted for 15 minutes before leaving the room. The big industries are reportedly withdrawing and contracts are cancelled after bad experiences in some cities.

Agnes van Ardenne, the Dutch Minister for Development Co-operation applauded the panel’s emphasis on mobilizing all sources of funding from both public and private sectors. She also announced that the Dutch government will sponsor a new international dialogue on public–private partnerships. But it is questionable whether the water activists and industry representatives are still willing to join in.

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‘Beyond domestic’ at Kyoto

‘Poor people are saying that they need [domestic] water not only for drinking, cooking and washing, but also for productive purposes. We must hear the desire of poor households to lift themselves up out of poverty, and the role that water can play in the process’ (Ronnie Kasrils, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, South Africa)

It was difficult to hear the voices of poor people, let alone the delegates at the Third World Water Forum held in Kyoto (and two other nearby cities). The Water Voice Project made a valiant effort to gather a wide range of grassroots opinions, but they had a difficult task to use these experiences and to draw upon the views of so many delegates. Impossible perhaps, but if forum declarations are to represent more than the views of the ministers and advisers present in the special sessions, surely better dialogue is needed next time: some form of direct voting perhaps?

Returning to Ronnie Kasrils’ remarks at a preparatory meeting, the need for appropriate, community-managed water supplies that address the multiple needs of poor people was one message that gained ground at the forum. Most Waterlines readers will be convinced that more water, more sanitation and more hygiene education do make a big contribution in the fight against poverty in developing countries. However, making this case to policy makers and politicians outside the water sector remains an urgent need. For example, we need to promote more emphasis on WATSAN in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers – documents in which developing country governments set out targets and activities to reduce poverty as part of arrangements for debt relief to help make this possible.

Water can do much more for the poor than has been widely acknowledged when appropriate household-level supplies are made available for uses that go ‘beyond domestic’. Small-scale activities enable people to grow food, earn income and save expenditure through engaging in fruit and vegetable production, keeping livestock, brick making and building, and a wide range of informal microenterprises. These activities at the garden or household level reach different people from those served by larger-scale irrigation schemes. The ability of such household water uses to contribute to poverty reduction, cost recovery, and sustainability were summarized in a statement presented at the forum from a preparatory symposium held in Johannesburg ‘Responding to poverty: promoting productive uses of water at the household level’ (see http://irc.nl/prodwat).

For more information on the forum including Water Voices, see www.worldwaterforum.org/

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