



# ACTIVISTS TAKE CENTRE STAGE AT WATER FORUM

BY ANIL NAIDOO, GUY CARON AND LAURA COLETTA

Photos: Leila Mead / IISD

This March, civil society groups from around the world converged on Kyoto, Japan, for the Third World Water Forum (WWF). What was intended to be a corporate “schmoozefest” turned into a clear victory for those who believe water is a human right.

The emerging cartel of water corporations, including Suez, Vivendi, and RWE-Thames, expected the Forum to support more water privatization globally. They expected government ministers, their bureaucrats and the media to be won over by slick PowerPoint presentations telling tales of benevolent private solutions to the growing water crisis.

Instead, The Council of Canadians and our global partners, in what is being called the “Water Is Life” coalition, used personal experience, passion and powerful arguments to reject privatization and advocate community-based public solutions to ensure people have the right to clean water. This message resonated with the delegates, and we began to see a serious division at the ministerial conference over the role of the private sector in the financing and delivery of water. There is no doubt that the privatization agenda was dealt a severe blow.

The Council of Canadians can be

proud of the role we played in this victory. Maude Barlow was offered a showcase role in the Forum’s program – co-chair of the contentious Public-Private Partnership (P3) session. In what was clearly a ploy, the Forum organizers tried having The Council of Canadians inside, which they thought would mute our criticism of the agenda. This turned out to be a serious miscalculation.

Our goals at the Forum were to break the pro-privatization World Water Council’s claim that there was a “consensus” on a corporate-controlled future for water, to put forward our own “Vision Statement,” and to build the broader movement.

We could not have hoped for a more successful outcome. As soon as the Forum opened, we launched the initial phase of our plan, the intervention strategy. Teams of global activists took to the microphones in the sessions, asking tough questions, pointing out glaring inconsistencies and proposing public solutions.

Building on the success of the interventions, we next took the Vision Statement directly to the Forum delegates. Wearing armbands that read “Water Is Life,” highly visible teams handed out thousands of copies of the statement and collected

signatures from delegates. This “Water Is Life” Vision Statement has now been signed by over 300 organizations and can be viewed at [www.blueplanetproject.net](http://www.blueplanetproject.net).

Next came our P3 session. The Council of Canadians went head to head with the World Water Council (WWC). After two days of very powerful arguments from experts and grassroots activists and weak presentations from staid industry representatives, it was even more obvious that the corporations were on the defensive and there could be no consensus. Reports of high-profile privatization failures such as in Atlanta, Argentina and Ghana were very damaging, especially when activists from those places directly challenged the corporations.

In an unprecedented conclusion, the P3 session ended with separate ministerial statements from The Council of Canadians and the World Water Council. The media declared in bold headlines: “No Consensus.” The division between the private, market-based vision of water as a commodity and the vision of water as a human right was clear.

Throughout the Forum, Maude continually spoke to the media and never missed an opportunity to vigorously challenge the corporate



water cartel. Our message was heard on CNN, BBC and CBS (extraordinary given their “all war” format), as well as others too numerous to mention.

Despite these successes, activists knew there was a significant report being released on the final morning of the Forum that needed a strong disavowal. The former managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Michel Camdessus, was scheduled to release a blueprint for the future of private funding of water projects.

We strategically placed ourselves in the massive hall and began by using “Lie Meters,” which had small bells attached, to draw attention and express our disagreement. After almost two hours of speeches by pro-privatization representatives, Pablo Salon from Bolivia requested that questions be taken from the floor. Under pressure, the meeting chairperson agreed to this. But after 15 minutes of piercing questions, we were shut down.

At this point Patrick Apoyo from Ghana declared that because we were not being given an opportunity for true dialogue, we should leave the session. Maude led 200 activists onto the stage, and with signs, banners and chants we captured the stage for about 10 minutes before we marched out of the hall.

As we left the conference centre, a few hundred of our Japanese allies joined us outside. The moment when the two groups met was very powerful. We all knew that by working together we had left no doubt about our message, our strength and our solidarity. The impact of our work in Kyoto gives the movement a great deal to build upon in the future.

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