

# KYOTO SHOWDOWN CIVIL SOCIETY AT THE 3<sup>RD</sup> WORLD WATER FORUM

By Maude Barlow

## A Personal Account

I have recently returned from the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Water Forum, which took place March 16-22, 2003, in Kyoto, Japan, and want to share my thoughts about this extraordinary event while they are still fresh in my mind. Seldom have I been involved in an action where the goals we set for ourselves were so fully met. The amazing work of the civil society coalition that came together to attend the forum will reverberate for years to come.



## History

The World Water Forum (WWF) is the brainchild of the World Water Council (WWC), a policy think tank run by the World Bank and regional banks, such as the Asia Development Bank, as well as the major water corporations, including Vivendi and Suez. The WWC holds a global forum every three years, which has all the appearances of a United Nations convention. The host government puts out the welcoming mat for the thousands of participants who attend the forum from all over the world, providing choice conference venues, concerts, festivals, food and sophisticated transportation services. Workshops and panels on every aspect of water are held and the convenors

produce their own “theme statements” which are pulled together into official recommendations by the WWF for future action. The forum hosts a ministerial meeting with senior politicians and bureaucrats from around the world who produce their own “Ministerial Statement” that carries great weight back in their home countries and at the United Nations.

In reality, however, the WWF is not an official UN conference, although there is some UN participation at the forum. In truth – and this is the heart of the civil society critique of the WWC – it is a showcase for corporations who are moving in on the global water services business and the financial and trade institutions that back them. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> WWF in The Hague, held in March 2000, civil society NGOs were not even given a room in which to meet and our views were only able to be presented from the floor or in press conferences we called ourselves. Out of this forum came a “Vision Statement” endorsing a huge role for the for-profit sector in water services as well as a rejection of the demand that water be considered a fundamental human right. Our groups decided then and there that we would have a very different presence in Kyoto.

## Preparations

In a series of preparatory meetings (including several I attended in Japan with Japanese civil society groups in March 2002) our movement – now calling itself the “Water is Life” coalition – decided that we would participate “inside” the WWF on the condition that we follow three goals: to break the WWC “consensus” on a corporate-controlled future for water; to put forward our own “Vision Statement”; and

to build our movement, including those groups putting on alternative water forums in the U.S., Brazil, India and Italy.

To this end, we spent many weeks writing and building consensus for our civil society “Vision Statement” as well as collecting sign-ons from groups from all over the world - over 260 by the time we delivered it in Kyoto. In conjunction with our allies, we also brought more than 80 water activists representing grassroots groups fighting for local, public control of water from every continent. These people formed the heart of the “intervention teams” that put forward our position on water privatization in many workshops and events over the course of the week. And, as the Council of Canadians had been invited to co-convene (with the WWC) a major theme session on public private partnerships (PPPs), we spent many hours negotiating with the 3<sup>rd</sup> WWF secretariat for our own space and our right to submit an independent theme session statement on the topic.

### **Intervention Teams**

Our gang all stayed together at the Hearton Hotel – a modest but very convenient modern hotel in the heart of Kyoto, just down a few streets from a beautiful park housing the Imperial Palace. (I know as I found time for several lovely jogs in spite of cool, rainy weather.) We had a large NGO room which became our command centre and from which we reported daily to the world. Every morning we met in this room to plan the day and every evening we gathered to report back on our interventions. Essentially, we broke into teams who chose which events they wished to attend and then became a clear presence in every forum where the crucial issue of water ownership was raised.

In session after session, we swarmed the mikes and challenged the “suits” on the podium with stories and statistics from the grassroots. At the CEO panel, speaker after speaker rose to challenge the blatant untruths that were being spoken by the heads of every major water company in the world. An activist from Cancun, Mexico passed a bottle of putrid-smelling, brown-coloured tap water up to the Suez executives sitting on the stage – a result, he said, of the post-Suez privatized system in his community. From South Africa, Argentina, Chile, The Philippines, Pakistan, Ghana, Indonesia, El Salvador, India, and many other countries, our team members told about the horrors of water privatization - dirty water, exponentially rising water rates, water metres, worker lay-offs and even water wars – and as well, of course, of soaring corporate profits.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> – the final morning of panels - we undertook a larger action in recognition of the importance of the panel reporting on the Camdessus Report. This is a report on financing of water projects in the Third World that was chaired by the former head of the International Monetary Fund, Michael Camdessus, and which paves the way for a re-financing of the water companies in order to give them greater security in the face of currency fluctuations and local resistance to water privatization.

For us in the Water is Life coalition, this panel was what the players had really come to Kyoto to do – namely to force poor governments to come up with guaranteed profit for the water corporations, regardless of the performance of these companies in their countries. Together with the Indigenous Caucus, Public Services International and International Rivers Network, our coalition – carrying “lie metres” and

signs – challenged the chair, Margaret Catley Carlson, formerly of CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), and took over the stage.



In a packed impromptu press scrum held afterward, our members once again challenged the propaganda that floated around the 3<sup>rd</sup> WWF, and particularly in this panel, as given truths.

### Theme Session

Meanwhile, for two days – the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> – many of us took part in an intense debate on the whole issue of public private partnerships. The water companies and the World Bank are promoting PPPs as a means of compromise. No longer are they seeking control over water, they claim; they now just want to deliver water, and keep governments in control of the process. However, in their system, governments

still get to take most of the risk while the companies get to take never-ending profit while raising the cost of water in order to pay their investors. In fact, it can be argued that PPPs are the most profitable form of privatization for the companies as they will always have the public purse to fund them.

As agreed ahead of time, the WWF co-chair (Bill Cosgrove, another Canadian) and I opened our theme session with a panel expressing the two divergent positions.

Then our groups separated for two days, before coming back to a closing panel to report on our deliberations. We used our two days to hold a “speak-out” – stories from the planet about local water takings – to critique water privatization, and to promote our alternative - public community partnerships. When Bill Cosgrove and I came back together in the closing panel, it was to announce that, for the first time in the history of the WWF, two completely divergent views on partnerships were going to be presented from our theme session to the larger forum.



This meant that, on the most contentious issue of the whole forum, the position of civil society had to be officially placed into the record of the final transcript.

Our views were also officially registered at two huge ministerial consultations that were held where our members, seated at different tables, offered to act

as rapporteurs and transmitted their views back to the plenary where they were recorded for all to see. Over and over, the WWF heard that water is a human right; that corporations have no business profiting from peoples' need for water; and that governments are failing in their responsibilities to their citizens and nature.

## Media

The international media – with the sad exception of the North America media – attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> WWF in large numbers and reported extensively on our activities and positions. We had an excellent media team who planned daily press briefings, set up individual interviews and held scrums at key moments. “No Consensus” blared the headline of a major Japanese newspaper when we ended our PPP theme session. Our intervention team activists were widely photographed and quoted and our position of resistance was carried around the world, including on BBC, CNN and CBS, only days before the war. On the final day, we held a press conference and published our alternative civil society “Vision Statement” which received excellent media coverage.



(Both the Vision Statement and our PPP Theme Session Statement can be found on the Council of Canadian's/Blue Planet web site. – [www.canadians.org](http://www.canadians.org))

There is absolutely no way that the WWF leaders could claim to have consensus (as Catley Carlson did at the forum's end) on the key issues of the role of corporations in water delivery; no matter what final WWF documents are tabled, the media told the story loud and clear. The WWC tried to forge a global consensus on the future of water; but the huge civil society contingent present did not buy into it and, in fact, presented compelling evidence of corporate failure and alternative models for a water-secure world.

## Reflections

As I climbed on the plane to return home, my mind raced to understand the meaning of this incredible week. The first feeling was one of fierce pride in the coalition building we accomplished with Japanese civil society. These groups were simply superb; we could not have done any of this work without them. From the beginning, we worked closely with Tets Nagamoto and his team of “Water Advocates,” whose task was to make our stay as comfortable and fruitful as possible. Food, currency, printing, translation, the train system, bridging cultural gaps – all these and more were the areas Tets and his team helped us navigate. They took great care of us. We also worked side by side with the terrific activists from The People's Forum on Water, Japan Center for a Sustainable Environment and Society, Friends of the Earth, Japan, A SEED Japan, AM-NET, Pacific Asia Resource Center and JICHIR – the municipal workers' union.

My second thought was for the brutal war that had just been launched and which cast a terrible pall over the whole event. Strangely, instead of making the preceding days less relevant, the way a war can cast a shadow over everything, the outbreak of this war underlined for

me the urgency of what we deliberated in Kyoto and the tragedy of dealing with conflict in such a way. Sure enough, water shortages are one of the many terrible hardships now being experienced in Iraq.



Finally, my thoughts turned to an analysis of the forum itself and our work there. There had been hard deliberations in our movement about whether we should attend the 3<sup>rd</sup> WWF at all. After all, this is really a show of the World Bank, some argued; you'll never change their minds. But we didn't set out to change their minds. We set out to register to all those groups, governments, UN agencies and media who take the World Water Council seriously, that the WWC doesn't speak for us or the millions and perhaps billions of the world's people who do not want the world's dwindling supplies of fresh water to be commodified and put on the open market for sale. Our modest goals of breaking the consensus, putting forth an alternative vision, and building our network were met, without question.

Now comes the hard work of consolidating our movement, building on our vision toward action, and planning for a World Water Social Forum. Thank you Kyoto.

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April 1, 2003

*Photos: Leila Mead/ IISD*