

MEXICO - Strong Discrepancies between the official "Fourth World Water Forum" and the activists-run "International Forum in Defence of Water" (por Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - Mutual distrust and even suspicions of a "conspiracy" separate the organisers of the Fourth World Water Forum, taking place in the Mexican capital, and the activists holding their own simultaneous alternative gathering.

"It's true, there is a lack of connection and communication between the two forums," said José Ángel Gurría, secretary-general-elect of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), who is participating in the Mar. 16-22 World Water Forum.

"It's funny that in the alternative meeting, these groups are speaking out against privatisation, when none of the 12,000 to 13,000 delegates here are talking about that," Gurría, a former Mexican foreign minister who will assume the post of secretary-general in June, told IPS.

But the activists taking part in the Mar. 17-19 International Forum in Defence of Water do not put much credence in such statements. The World Water Forum is "conspiring" against progressive positions, they allege.

On Thursday, some 4,000 people, including the participants in the alternative forum, marched through the streets of the Mexican capital chanting slogans like "water belongs to all, the land gave it to us, let's stand together to block privatisation", and carrying signs lashing out at the World Water Forum.

Maude Barlow, one of the world's leading water activists, told an enthusiastic audience Friday in the alternative forum that the World Water Forum only represents corporations pushing for the privatisation of water resources.

According to the Canadian activist, the alternative forum, held in an auditorium belonging to a trade union, "is the true international water forum." In the official forum, "they think they're speaking in our name, but that's not true."

"I'm with Barlow, who is one of our biggest inspirations," said Alberto Muñoz of the Provincial Assembly for the Right to Water (APDA), based in Rosario, Argentina. "The World Water Forum has demonstrated so far that it is pro-privatisation, and it does not want to listen to consumers, the poor, those who need water," he commented to IPS.

Barlow, who was awarded the "Right Livelihood Award" or "Alternative Nobel Prize" in 2005, is the author of "Blue Gold: The Global Water Crisis and the Commodification of the World's Water Supply", a 2002 international best-seller that talks about the privatisation of water supplies and advocates universal public access to the resource.

Gurría, who heads a working group in the World Water Forum on the financing of water supplies, said that in the official gathering, the delegates are engaged in an intense dialogue on how to guarantee, by means of concrete measures, universal access to water.

Investments in water must be paid for, said Gurriá. "Whether it's the World Bank, the IDB (Inter-American Development Bank) or whoever, it has to be financed, and that's done by the users, taxpayers or the state coffers," he said.

He added that a consensus is emerging among the participants in the World Water Forum that the best way to "finance water services is through a mixture of user rates and subsidies" for those who cannot afford to pay.

The question of financing is not being directly addressed in the alternative forum. But the participants argue that water resources belong to the state, as a public good, and that no private company should derive profits from this essential resource.

According to the United Nations' World Water Development Report: 'Water, a Shared Responsibility', total official development assistance to the water sector in the past few years has averaged three billion dollars a year, with an additional 1.5 billion dollars in loans, mainly from the World Bank.

But only 12 percent of that reaches the most vulnerable, and a mere 10 percent goes towards the development of water policy, planning and programmes - too small an amount compared to the scope of the problem, the report adds.

Although there is enough water in the world for everyone, 1.1 billion people have no access to this vital resource, and 2.6 billion lack access to even the most basic sanitation services.

The president of the non-governmental World Water Council, Loïc Fauchon, called on the wealthy nations to provide more financial aid, but also stressed that it is time to "break the loan-indebtedness-debt cancellation spiral in favor of intelligent, balanced and socially sound tarification strategies."

The Fourth World Water Forum, for which the central theme is "Local Actions for a Global Challenge", is being attended by around 13,000 delegates from business groups, non-governmental organisations and the governments of over 100 countries. In the meantime, the parallel civil society event drew together some 2,000 activists, environmentalists and representatives of water service users from around 20 countries.

At the official forum, taking place in the convention centre of a private bank, strict security measures were adopted to keep activists or any unforeseen event from interfering with its painstaking organisation and schedule. Participants were required to pay a registration fee of 600 dollars.

The alternative forum is being held in a trade union auditorium over 20 km away, there are no security measures, and it is open to anyone who wants to participate.

Barlow and the other participants in the counter-forum are expected to keep up their criticism of the organisers of the World Water Forum until the event draws to a close.

"What divides the World Water Forum and the alternative forum is a gap arising from past experiences and certain prejudices. But both speak about universal access to water and the fact that water is a basic right," Fabián Granda, a researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, commented to IPS.

The World Water Forum was organised by the World Water Council, a non-governmental forum made up by representatives of 300 business groups, including the directors of transnational water companies, academic institutions, non-governmental organisations and U.N. agencies.

At previous editions of the forum, considerable emphasis was placed on promoting private investment in water services, and little was said regarding the role of states in this area. It is this history that has spurred activists to attack the event.

However, Muñoz, the Argentine activist, recognised that unlike the forums held previously to the one underway in Mexico (held in Morocco in 1997, the Netherlands in 2000 and Japan in 2003), at this one

"there appears to be a space to talk about water as a resource of the state and the public."

At the same time, however, the Assembly stressed that "it remains to be seen if there is a real will to exercise and foster public management of water."

For his part, Gurriá said he hoped the activists would grasp the fact that there has been consistent concern expressed at the World Water Forum for the poorest sectors of the world's population, and that "nobody is talking about privatisation."

See also:

- World Water Development Report: 'Water, a Shared Responsibility'

<http://www.unesco.org/water/wwap/wwdr2/index.shtml>

- Fourth World Water Forum

<http://www.worldwaterforum4.org.mx/home/home.asp>

- WATER: Listening to the Voices of Children

<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32530>

- WATER: Foreign Corporations Backing Off

<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32527>

- WATER: Activists Share Reservations About Global Forum

<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32519>

- LATIN AMERICA: Water Polluters "On Trial"

<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32515>

- DEVELOPMENT: Mismanagement, Corruption Blamed for Water Shortages

<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32446>

- CULTURE: Film Festival to Drive Home Significance of Water at Global Forum

<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32431>

<http://www.ipsnews.org/news.asp?idnews=32547>