friends of the earth international

3rd world water forum in kyoto

Friends of the Earth International

water for life & livelihoods

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water for life and livelihoods

preamble

Most of the water we consume is a renewable natural resource that passes through a natural cycle. As well, some water is taken from underground sources, including both renewable and non-renewable ("fossil") aquifers. Rainfall feeds springs, rivers, lakes, wetlands and aquifers; and aquifers feed springs, rivers, lakes and wetlands. In addition to providing for literally hundreds of human uses, these sources provide fresh water for animals, and for the proper functioning of ecosystems and habitats.

This water cycle is crucial for human life and for the ecological balance of our planet. However, at the present time, excessive human consumption of fresh water for agricultural, industrial and personal use, along with careless disposal of our wastewater, is threatening the viability of the water cycle. As a result, it is adversely affecting every living thing on the planet, some to the point of extinction. At the same time, it is making it harder for poor people, whose livelihoods depend upon the water cycle, to earn enough and grow enough to live with health and dignity.

The lack of enough, good quality fresh water rivals global climate change for importance as a global problem. And it will only get worse as current predictions see water use increasing 50 percent over the next 30 years. Only with fundamental changes in the way in which we human beings manage water can a global water crisis be avoided.

the crisis of fresh water

The world's water problems are becoming increasingly visible and urgent. Economic expansion and population growth, coupled with high-consumption and high-waste lifestyles (for example, increasing use of animal sources of protein), and with industrial patterns of development, have led to higher and higher rates of water use.

According to the World Commission on Water and other sources, water consumption is rising at twice the rate of population growth. Now, many rivers are so heavily used that they are dry long before they reach the sea; over-pumping is depleting aquifers faster than they can be replenished: wetlands are shrinking in size; and pollution is rendering some water resources unusable even for irrigating crops. Large dams have caused an enormous loss of biodiversity (especially fish), forests, wetlands and farmland. Massive deforestation and consequent desertification of semi-arid regions further degrades water sources. To cite just two statistics of the damage that results from these collective insults to the environment:

- Some 50 percent of the world's wetlands, which are among the main sources of fresh water and critical to cushioning the effects of floods, have disappeared in the past century.
- About 20 percent of freshwater fish species have become extinct or are currently endangered.

Worse yet, little of this activity is serving to reduce poverty. Dams alone have displaced 40 to 80 million people from their homes, and there is a growing gap in rates of water consumption between developing and developed countries. Poverty is magnified by weak (or, in many cases, no) enforcement of such environmental laws as exist.

The global economic system also plays a role in the current water crisis. In the last century, the export-led economic growth model with its predilection for industrialised agriculture, large-scale infrastructure projects including dams, conversion of rain-fed cultivable lands to irrigation, and aquaculture have intensified water use patterns and disrupted water balances. Forced modernization with centralized management of water has eroded culturally important and sustainable water management systems practiced by local farming and indigenous communities worldwide. The new systems are too commonly characterized by corruption, mismanagement, and decreased equity in access to water and decreased security of water supply. Poor maintenance of watersheds, absence of regulations for source protection, and human-induced changes in rainfall patterns do their part to reduce equity and security even further.

These negative experiences, which initially occurred in industrialized countries, have not induced the international community to adopt new criteria for the sustainable management of water. On the contrary, global financial and trading institutions continue to push developing countries to adopt the same top-down models, without any regard for related environmental and social impacts . Local communities are typically totally excluded from the process of designing these new policies, but they must suffer the consequences of their implementation. Overwhelming debt burdens and structural adjustments forced by international financial institutions in developing countries prevent them from ignoring this misguided advice, with the result that they are induced to adopt short-sighted policies and projects.

As a result of natural scarcity and human mismanagement, competition and conflict over fresh water has already arisen between communities and among users, and will likely worsen as consumption increases and nearby sources are depleted or

degraded. Conflicts over water use are often further complicated by inequitable use of water resources among rich and poor consumers. Equity has been compromised by unjust and often corrupt decision making where poor communities are excluded from decisions over water use and management, while rich and well-connected users have access to abundant cheap water.

Transnational water corporations and international financial and trade institutions are using water scarcity to promote an exclusively market-based approach to water management – an approach designed to provide them with massive profits. Their rationale is that by privatizing water services and introducing market criteria for investments determining the sources from which to draw water and the customers who will receive water, consumers will ration their water use and private suppliers will eliminate profit-reducing inefficiencies. Powerful transnational water companies are advancing this agenda at events such as the Third World Water Forum. For communities, however, privatization has commonly meant that poor consumers are cut off from water services, and principles of long-term sustainable management of water for human and ecosystem health are sacrificed to a search for short-term profits.

The push for privatization is often justified by the failure of public water utilities in many countries to provide clean water to their citizens. Though many public water utilities are in need of major reform – in both developing and in industrialized countries – there are also examples around the world of publicly owned water systems that are financially viable, provide good quality services, and reflect the interests of the broad community. Furthermore, many public utilities in developing countries have been hurt by their governments' overwhelming external debt burdens and by declining aid levels. These financial constraints have prevented adequate investment in services, such as public water utilities. While public utility reform is often direly needed, privatization is not a satisfactory or sustainable solution. Privatization in many cases has failed to deliver high environmental standards and to expand access, and has increased prices for consumers even in the absence of improvements in quality. Privatization has also given companies the opportunity to profit from service provision to wealthier water users, while ignoring basic service provision to the impoverished.

water as a critical resource

Priority of water use should be given to the satisfaction of basic needs and safeguarding of ecosystems, including wetlands. Governments should publically commit themselves to ensuring clean, adequate and affordable water supplies for the human population while also meeting the needs of ecosystems. As well, because water is directly linked to food sovereignty and security, governments should ensure that water for local and small-holder farming, and for inland fisheries, takes priority over water for cash crops and for industry. Governments should also recognize and give priority to traditional water management systems by local and indigenous peoples over a uniform, top-down system.

Water is a critical resource for sustainable livelihoods and therefore a human right. All states should guarantee the fundamental human right to affordable water in a quantity and quality sufficient to life and basic needs. Sufficient quantity of water for basic needs includes uses for drinking, cooking, basic sanitation and food production needs with recognition that the specific dimensions of those needs will vary with location and with culture. In many cases, satisfaction of this right will mean providing fresh water at no or low cost. In other cases, it will be appropriate to charge for the cost of delivery. Whatever the charge for basic needs, water supplied for cash crops, for industrial production or for consumptive recreation (eg, golf courses) should pay full costs (or more) including not just water supply but also appropriate wastewater disposal.

Further, as a common property resource, every person has an equal right to water for basic needs, but does not have the right to consume to an extent that would prevent others from enjoying their share or that would compromise the health and vitality of ecosystems. Therefore, water does not belong and cannot be owned by anyone. Rather it must be managed equitably and sustainably as a trust by democratically elected governments.

Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners, and policy-makers at all levels and at all stages. To the extent possible, water systems should be managed at the local level, within criteria and constraints that ensure equitable and sustainable systems at watershed levels.

Particularly in developing countries, women play a central part in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water. Women are the main providers of food and health care for their families, and therefore are directly and profoundly affected by lack of clean water. Management systems for water should pay particular attention to the needs and desires of women, and women should be represented at all levels of management structures, including decision-making.

water for life and livelihoods

We support the Rio principle, which states "Effectively integrated management of water resources is important to all socio-economic sectors relying on water. Rational allocation prevents conflict and enhances the social development of local communities, as well as economic planning and productivity. Efficient demand management allows water-using sectors to achieve long-term savings on water costs and stimulates resource-conscious production technologies. Health conditions and environmental quality should also improve, either as a result of integrated development planning or as a beneficial consequence of improved environmental or social conditions."

Pollution control is critical to protect fresh water and to preserve watersheds and wetlands, which are crucial components in the water cycle. Polluters must pay for the damage they cause to water sources, without transferring those costs to the final consumer, and should be criminally liable for serious or deliberate acts of pollution. Where appropriate, as with impoverished communities, government must provide appropriate measures for pollution control.

water: not a tradable commodity

We oppose treating water as a "commodity" and the inclusion of water as a tradable commodity under World Trade Organization (WTO) or other trade rule authority. We equally oppose ways that have been proposed to evade current national prohibitions on trade in water, as by calling it a service rather than a commodity.

We further call on governments to halt any attempts to include water services in the agenda of the WTO or regional trade negotiations, such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

We oppose efforts by International Financial Institutions (IFIs), including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and regional development banks, to force full cost recovery, privatization of water services, and private sector participation as conditions for funding to borrowing countries. It is for states to determine democratically appropriate governance systems for their water. Those systems should address equity and efficiency of services as well as service quality from environmental, social and economic points of view. To this end, we call upon national governments and local municipalities to state clearly their views as to what constitutes good governance for water in their jurisdiction, and to subject their definitions of good governance to public scrutiny and comment.

We are concerned that multilateral efforts aimed at addressing critical water supply and management issues, such as the Global Water Partnership, the World Water Council and the World Commission on Water, are serving to provide global water corporations and IFIs with a platform to advance an agenda of water privatization, rather than to promote local-level water management strategies and capacity building for public water systems. Their efforts, even if well intentioned, could contribute to current tendencies to ignore the critical role of water in maintaining ecosystems on the one hand and traditional cultures on the other. We urge these multilateral programs to demonstrate that they are really concerned about low income people, traditional communities, and ecosystem preservation by adopting principles and undertaking demonstration projects that show clearly that priorities go to people and ecosystems, not to corporations and markets.

We condemn efforts by the global water industry to acquire ownership of water sources of any kind, to operate municipal and regional water services in ways that provide for profit at the expense of people's basic needs, and that permit exclusive authority to control water flows through ownership of large dams and waterways.

an equitable and sustainable solution

The international community must work cooperatively in governing water use and promoting equitable and sustainable solutions to the global water crisis. These proposals must respect traditional communities' water rights and people's right to water as well as the vital role of water cycles, watersheds, and wetlands to ecosystem health

Fresh water is inherently a political issue. It is a cause of conflict, but it is also an impetus for cooperation. The international community should support efforts by governments at a national and regional level to manage their water resources equitably, efficiently and in a manner that promotes livelihood and ecosystem sustainability. Where resources cross or underlie national borders, joint management schemes should be developed to reduce the potential for conflict.

Developing country governments should be supported in efforts to improve the functioning of domestic water systems and utilities, and in efforts to expand water access. This support includes comprehensive cancellation of poor countries' unpayable external debts, in order to free up resources for basic services including water and sanitation.

water for life and livelihoods

Civil society and community organizations must play a vital role in decision-making regarding water management in their countries, and women must be included as an integral component of at all levels of decision-making.

Every effort must be made to develop, disseminate and transfer both traditional techniques and new technologies that allow for water conservation at source and in end uses.

The international community should look to systems such as that in the Brazilian State of Rio Grande del Sul, where water companies are publicly-owned yet financially independent from the government. Management is based on models of civil society control over operations and public participation in making investment decisions. This model has succeeded in providing affordable clean water to those who lack access, and shows that public sector solutions are also viable.

Models of water management should always uphold public ownership of water resources and the primacy of government regulation, oversight and monitoring over water systems.

Finally, we urge all nations to agree that domestic water supplies will never be used as a weapon of war. Regardless of the state of hostilities, adequate quantities of good quality water must be provided to civilian populations to allow them to remain healthy at all times throughout a war, riot or insurrection.

In summary, water is simply too crucial to people's lifestyles and livelihoods and to the global environment to be neglected any longer. Action is needed now, and such action must include protection of all sources of fresh water and conservation in all uses of fresh water. Further studies and research are certainly needed, but the main lines for action by people and their governments are already evident. Delay will mean more illness, more death, ever greater differences between rich and poor, and degraded ecosystems everywhere around the world.