

MEXICO - Final Declaration Holds Diluted View of Water as a "Right" (by Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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[IPS](#) - The assertion that access to water is a human right was not included in the ministerial declaration adopted at the Fourth World Water Forum, which ended in Mexico on Wednesday, World Water Day.

Although all of the delegates said they agreed with the principle, some argued that it was not feasible to include it in the final declaration, because it could generate legal problems at the national and international level.

That stance was criticised by activists, who said the refusal to include the assertion was "a clear indication" that transnational corporations and rich countries do not want to budge an inch in their aim to "commodify" water, to which 1.1 billion people in the world do not have access.

Water is a "guarantee of life for all of the world's people" was the compromise formula agreed by the government delegates taking part in the Mar. 16-22 Forum.

The delegates of the 148 participating countries agreed to sign the (non-binding) document, in which the governments pledged to work towards the goal of universal access to sanitation and safe water, after negotiating the inclusion of an annex that expresses a dissenting view held by several governments.

In the appendix, Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela expressed a stance in line with the positions set forth by the activists taking part in a parallel civil society forum, stating unequivocally that access to water is a fundamental human right.

The three Latin American countries, which are governed by leftist leaders, also expressed "deep concern" over the possible negative impacts that international instruments like free trade and investment agreements could have on water resources.

By contrast to the final declaration, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) also declared Wednesday in Mexico that access to water is a fundamental human right.

UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura said nations that are signatories to U.N. treaties have a "moral obligation" to consider water a human right.

According to the activists who took part in the Mar. 17-19 International Forum in Defence of Water, a civil society gathering that produced an alternative declaration, the dissent expressed at the Forum showed that the organisers were only interested in turning water management into a business opportunity.

"We didn't expect anything different or better to emerge from the Water Forum, we knew this would happen," Claudia Campero, spokeswoman for the Coalition of Mexican Organisations for the Right to Water (COMDA) - which organised the alternative events held parallel to the World Water Forum - told IPS.

The Forum itself was convened by the World Water Council, an international think tank founded in 1996 that deals with water policy and is made up of 300 representatives of business, government ministries, academic centres, multilateral financial institutions, U.N. agencies and local governments.

Because the founders of the Council included executives from multinational water companies like Suez in France, activists argue that the World Water Forums only represent and express the interests of

transnational corporations and industrialised countries..

According to the "Joint Declaration of Movements in Defence of Water", which was adopted by last week's civil society meeting and signed by around 300 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from 40 countries, water is a "common good" and access to water is an essential and inalienable right.

The "Joint Declaration" states that water is not merchandise, which is why the NGOs reject all forms of privatisation, even public-private partnerships, which "have proven to be a complete failure around the world."

Argentine Environment Secretary Atilio Armando Sabino argued that the exclusion from the final declaration of the assertion that the right to water is a human right did not tarnish the consensus achieved by the governments that sent delegates to the World Water Forum.

Underscoring that water is a "guarantee of life" for humanity demonstrated sincere concern over the issue on the part of all governments, he maintained.

It was "a bit difficult" to include the right to water in the ministerial declaration because it would have committed many countries to modifying their legislation and would have forced international bodies to create new legal instruments, explained the official.

The document declares that water and sanitation services must be considered top priority in development policies, and that continued efforts and follow-up are necessary to meet the goal of reducing the proportion of people worldwide without access to these crucial services.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by the U.N. member countries in 2000 include a target of halving the proportion of people without safe drinking water, by 2015.

Eugenio Barrios, an activist with the global environmental conservation organisation WWF (formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund), described the Fourth World Water Forum as "disappointing."

"We were hoping for advances and for the ministerial declaration to be much more forceful, and to propose practical measures in favour of access to water. We are sorry that did not happen," Barrios told IPS.

WWF took part in the Forum through several conferences as well as meetings with delegates.

The privatisation of water supplies, which according to some activists was the ultimate goal of the Forum, was not a central issue in the debates, and the stance that water is a public good was also advocated, said Barrios.

David Boys, with the France-based Public Services International, a global trade union federation made up of more than 600 public sector unions from 140 countries, agreed with that view. "Even the World Bank acknowledged here that the privatisation of water has been a failure, which was something new that was not heard at the previous forums," he told IPS.

But the final declaration was "very weak," said Boys, whose organisation has urged the World Water Council not to invite government ministers in the future, since the Forum is neither organised by the United Nations nor by governments.

"It is the United Nations that should organise international conferences on water, not a private body," said the trade unionist.

More than 13,000 delegates of private companies, governments and U.N. agencies, as well as a limited number of activists, took part in the Forum, paying registration fees that ranged from 240 to 600 dollars.

Although the World Water Forum is not an official intergovernmental meeting, it is considered the main

platform for the global debate on water resources. The Fifth World Water Forum will be held in Istanbul in 2009.

The last day of the Fourth World Water Forum coincided with World Water Day, which is commemorated every year on Mar. 22.

In a statement released in New York, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared that despite its importance, water continues to be "wasted and degraded all over the world." He also pointed out that 6,000 people, mainly children, die every day from water-related causes.

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