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OPINION

Follow the money to the water source

Purportedly a democratic forum to discuss water issues, the World Water Forum has seemingly been sold to the highest bidder. Tony Carnie reports from Mexico City

March 22, 2006

By Tony Carnie

My phone rang a few weeks ago. A charming voice on the other end of the line asked: "Would you like to come to Mexico?" What a question.

The African Development Bank was offering me an all-expenses-paid trip to Mexico City to report on the Fourth World Water Forum - the biggest event on the global calendar devoted solely to protecting our water and making sure everyone gets a fair drop of something that none of us can do without.

Now I know that there is no such thing as a free lunch in the world of journalism. If someone offers you something for nothing, they generally want something in return. So the questions foremost in my mind were: "What is the World Water Forum?" and "Who pulls its strings?"

But the temptation was too great. How often does one get the opportunity to travel to such an exotic destination and report on something close to your heart, I rationalised.

Here was an opportunity to see a place I had never been to. To meet people who were experts in this field. To learn more about something which concerns everyone in this world - even though most of us take water for granted.

So I jumped at the opportunity. But there were still misgivings in my cynical mind, and in between my daily work schedule, I surfed the internet to find out more about the event and its organisers - the World Water Council.

According to my cursory Google searches, the forum was a "multistakeholder group" that brought together the people, governments, professionals and the private sector. The worldwide web also told me that the council had its headquarters in Marseilles, France.

Oh, Oh, I thought. Aren't there a whole bunch of big water companies in France, such as Suez and Veolia, which have been involved in controversies over the privatisation of water supplies in South America and many other parts of the world?

The discussion topics listed on the forum's agenda looked interesting and newsworthy, but they also contained a few clues that something was amiss.

So, when the plane ticket arrived, the hairs on the back of my neck were up, but nevertheless I set off to explore this jamboree.

Since then, I have been listening carefully to what is being said in Mexico by some of the 11 000 participants. And to what is not being said.

For example, on the way back to my hotel a few nights ago, it was impossible not to notice the 3 000 or so police in full riot gear lined up on the Paseo de la Reforma, the showpiece main boulevard of the Mexican capital.

What were they doing? They weren't sunbathing. A few minutes later my suspicions were confirmed.

Ten thousand or so ordinary people were marching up the street towards the conference centre. But they didn't have invitations. They looked a bit unwashed.

The police were there to ensure that they did not gain access to the inner sanctum of this global, democratic, multistakeholder forum.

This rabble of humanity was also being rather disrespectful, it seemed, by holding placards with messages like "No la privatizacion" or by chanting "Agua no se vende!" (Water is not for sale!).

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So I hopped off the bus very smartly with my camera, and after much marching and singing, the procession eventually came to a stop some distance away from where the police did not want them to go.

The marchers included peasant farmers from Chiapas and Oaxaca. There were Zapatistas and communists, too.

The leaders denounced the forum and spoke with passion against the evils of privatised water supplies. Most of the marchers were peaceful and law-abiding folk, although a few young toughs with cloth-hooded faces hassled a photographer, and an effigy of Uncle Sam in a top hat and black suit was strung up on a street light and detonated with fireworks. Boom!

The leaders of the march were rather concerned about this explosion and beseeched the culprits not to provoke the assembled multitude of policemen. But after that, the march pretty much fizzled out and everyone went home.

And back in the conference halls the following day, the questions still niggled: who actually controls the World Water Forum?

Finally, at the World Water Council recruitment stand I stumbled across some answers after picking up copies of the membership list and the council's recruitment guidelines. They confirmed what I had suspected at the outset.

Membership was open to almost anyone with some interest in water, but you had to pay in order to belong.

And if you did not pay, you could not vote the board of governors into positions of power and influence.

Which peasant farmer or slum dweller could afford the minimum annual membership fee of 250 euros (R1 900) to join this influential club?

Big multinational companies are required to pay a bit extra, but the maximum annual subscription fee of 930 euros (R7 000) is small change for the likes of Severn Trent plc in England, the Suez group in France or the Hitachi Plant Engineering and Construction Company Ltd in Japan.

And so it is that the more money you have, the more influence you can buy in the World Water Council and the corridors of world power.

The council rightly makes provision for any body with a legitimate interest in water issues to join the club. But is it right that the majority of its voting members (which hail almost overwhelmingly from the French private water sector and the Japanese and Turkish construction and engineering industries) should determine the policies of the World Water Council?

How dare this organisation attempt to present itself as the democratic voice of the water world and the world's people.

Just look at the membership list to get a sense of the staggering degree of influence which can be purchased by organisations like the World Bank and private sector companies with massive vested interests in the privatisation of water and the construction of new mega-scale dams and water works.

The Fourth World Water Forum comes to an end today, and no doubt we will see some more pious declarations on the need to combat poverty and ensure water justice for all.

But who do the World Water Forum and the World Water Council represent? Just follow the smell of the money.

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