

Call from French NGOs toward next World Water Forum, 16-22 march 2006, Mexico

The next World Water Forum focus on 'local actions for a global challenge' could be understood as reflecting a shift in international water related policies. But let's not be fooled! Insisting on the local level will not solve the problem unless firm commitments and concrete means are set up.

1.1 billion Human Beings still have no access to drinkable water, and 2.5 billion are deprived of sanitation. Each day about 10,000 people die because they drink polluted water. What changes have there been since the last World Water Forum? NGOs have several times denounced the succession of international summits that do not help change the terrible situation on the ground, thus questioning the legitimacy of extremely costly and rather fruitless summits. It is an emergency for our governments' credibility to give up with unimplemented announcements, to apply previous commitments and to take an equitable and qualitative approach to water and sanitation problems.

Many reports and declarations acknowledge the social and environmental value of water, express a concern for equitable access to this public service and repeatedly reiterate the need to involve all relevant stakeholders in the decision-making processes, not just political and economic authorities. However, those concerns are swept away by economic and financial interests. Today's challenge for international water projects is to set up social and political issues as a priority and to provide local actors with real means for local solutions.

For this, we ask the French government, the international community and all development decision-makers to mobilize crucial means and concrete actions in order to:

- guarantee sustainable and equitable access to this vital resource
- support the construction of the public service with local actors

Water is key to all poverty related issues: food, health, education and the emancipation of girls and women, food sovereignty and security, economic activities, natural environment preservation, etc.

Guarantee sustainable and equitable access to this vital resource

➤ Clearly recognize the right to water

Those very States that recognized water as a fundamental right within the UN¹ do not draw the consequences of their obligations during international events dedicated to water. French NGOs together with international NGOs insisted that this right be reiterated and translated into national legislation during the last UN-CSD. We regret that our demand remains unanswered by either the French authorities or by the EU.

¹ Article 25 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, 1948, UN General Assembly Resolution, 1999 ('The right to pure water is a fundamental human right' RES/54/175), Observation n°15 Social and economic rights UN Committee, 26 November 2002.

Such uncertainty toward a rights-based approach clearly demonstrates a lack of political will to have the right to water formally included in policies for access to this vital resource.

We request that the right to water be implemented through policies and legislation elaborated *with* citizens and reflecting their claims and means. This public service must be accessible to the poorest, including those who cannot afford the price of water.

A responsive access to water must also be secured whenever people are faced with emergency or conflict situations.

Promoting the existence of a right to water, formalizing its content and its concrete implications and ensuring compliance with this right within multilateral institutions: here is what France now must do.

➤ Set up an equitable and sustainable management of water

Governments have set up policies that are contradictory with the protection of the resource. Despite their Johannesburg commitments, integrated water management schemes do not prevent a sectoral approach to water that threatens water quality and natural balance.

Speechifying around "good management" of irrigation water or "sustainable" use of phytosanitary products is no longer acceptable. Intensive agriculture models that systematically rely on chemical fertilizers and pesticides generate an irreversible depletion of water resources and represent an irresponsible threat to human health. Wetlands that are supposed to secure long term water supply are dried out for wasteful irrigation systems that contribute to water scarcity. This agricultural model also promotes all kind of crops that do not fit the local context and are rather grown for export, thus threatening food sovereignty in the global South and feeding conflicts around water use.

To secure long term access to water, France should stop supporting a heavily subsidized industrial agriculture and rather advocate for a drastic decrease of high water-consuming crops. It should support: a food-producing local agriculture that makes no or little use of polluting chemicals, include a natural environment component in development projects with a focus on the wetlands, actually implement integrated water management schemes.

➤ Matching financial decisions with discourses

There will be no change as long as national budgets treat water as a minor issue, and if international funds remain so weak, centralized and watered down into operating expenses before reaching final recipients. It is the international community's duty to react and allow Southern countries to mobilize the necessary funds to turn access to water and sanitation into a national priority.

We call for a strong reaction from bilateral and multilateral organizations, whose current actions and means do not match their commitments. The idea of an observatory on access to water in southern countries is under consideration. But we think it would be as just as

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urgent to ensure the follow-up of the commitments taken by northern countries to devote significant public money for access to water and sanitation.

France should confirm what part of its aid budget will be actually dedicated to water and sanitation as well as the concrete amount of the increase expected. It is most important that the efficiency of aid be evaluated by the number of people newly connected to water and sanitation and the affordability of the service for people seen as 'less solvable' (the Poor, rural areas, urban suburbs etc.).

At the French level, a public body with due representation of Parliamentarians and NGOs should be empowered to control how public money devoted to water through aid programs is used : amounts, criteria, goals, timelines, allocation, evaluation etc.

Support the building of a public service with local actors

The recommendation of 'models' by Northern countries and international financial institutions is in total contradiction with their official commitments to promoting local solutions. Development programs are supposed to help Southern actors develop their own skills and enable them to manage the water service on a long term basis by themselves. France must contribute to reducing the South/North dependency by supporting the building of local skills, rather than disseminating French-based management solutions that would not be applicable in other contexts.

➤ Strengthen national and local public actors

It is the duty of national public authorities in concert with local authorities (municipalities, rural communities, traditional leadership, civil society groups,...) to decide how to organize water public services without pressure from funders conditions such as the opening of the country water system to Northern big private corporations (multinationals, consultancies etc.) or to full cost recovery models that burden the final user without direct and cross subsidies.

We want the water management systems to be as close as possible to users, but in the current situation, a majority of local authorities do not have the human, technical, administrative nor financial means to ensure the organization and actual control of the water public service.

To solve this, a significant part of the funding should be systematically dedicated to:

- strengthening the technical, social and economic skills of national and local public actors in charge of the water public service;
- 'public-public partnerships' between local authorities (South-South and North-South);
- NGOs and social movements in the South and the North as they have an ability to follow local initiatives rather than imposing external solutions.

➤ Involve citizens in the decision making

Official discourses often emphasize the need for building a public water service for and with citizens.

But far from this rhetoric and despite the commitments of several States² the need for transparency, democratic processes and involvement of water users is regularly disregarded.

The public water services will not take shape unless real coordination takes place between the national state, local public authorities, user groups and professionals.

Citizens must be involved in the choices from the very beginning: management model, price, network extension, quality etc. and not after the overall framework has been agreed upon.

The equitable representation of all stakeholders in the decision making processes entails a need for information to be available equally and in the same timeline for all those parties.

It is critical to feature the concrete implications of the last CSD decisions regarding community and womens' involvement in decision making, through transparency, information and public participation criteria that would apply to all water projects.

➤ Allowing emerging local skills or boosting 'markets' conquest?

In the WTO context, developing countries might very well be insidiously forced to open their borders to Northern companies through secret bilateral agreements. This implies competition between Southern operators and Northern transnational corporations. Such an approach would put fragile local actors in competition with powerful Northern multinationals (technical knowledge, economies of scale, etc.) and would prevent the development and strengthening of local and public know-how.

To allow the emergence of real public service and long term skills in the South, we demand that water services be clearly excluded from the GATS, which has not been created to include public services such as water and sanitation.

France should:

- Officially forsake for the future any demand for opening the water sector service to the free market and endorse this position within the EU bodies that are in charge of this matter;
- Ask for the ultimate exclusion of water and sanitation services from this agreement.

Signatories :

Adede- Agir ici- Aitec-Les Amis de la Terre (FoE France)- CARI-CCFD- Confédération Paysanne - CRID -Eau Vive- East- GRET- Groupe Initiatives - Hydraulique sans frontières - Ingénieurs sans frontières- Ligue des Droits de l'Homme - Peuples Solidaires - 4D - Réseau Foi et Justice Afrique Europe- Solidarité Mondiale contre la Faim-Sos Sahel -Terre des Hommes France - WWF France.

Also supported by : ACME – France Libertés - Anne Le Strat (Conseillère Ville de Paris)

² Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters.