

Observations from the Budapest water summit

Prepared by: David Boys, Public Services International; I Reza Hanifa and Sigit Budiono, KruHa Meera Karunanathan, Blue Planet Project; Satoko Kishimoto, Transnational Institute Jorgen Magdahl, FIVAS; Gabriella Zanzanaini, Food & Water Europe

From October 7-11, we attended the Budapest Water Summit as a fact-finding initiative to further our understanding about corporate influence within the global water policy agenda.

The Budapest Water Summit was organized by the Hungarian government and the United Nations in partnership with the World Water Council (WWC), the corporate-led “multi-stakeholder” forum and private think-tank involved in organizing the controversial World Water Forum. The Summit is aimed at feeding into the post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda of which Hungary plays a key role as co-chair of the Open Working Group at the United Nations. We are highly concerned about the role the World Water Council plays at such events as a partner to the United Nations despite not having a democratic mandate. This is a continuation of the WWC’s lobbying of the UN to advance corporate interests.

While there appeared to be consensus from various sectors gathered at the Summit that there should be a dedicated goal on water, we fear that the SDG process lacks meaningful public engagement. We are particularly concerned about the tremendous corporate engagement through multi-stakeholder processes, which have crowded out public participation.

The SDG process does not replace concrete obligations of states to implement the human right to water. We call for concrete action from governments on implementation of the human right to water starting with domestic policy and national action plans focusing on sufficient funding and resources for responsibilities pertaining to the human right to water and greater involvement of communities and local governments.

The human right to water requires sustainable public financing for public services through global tax fairness and cross-subsidization. We reject the full cost-recovery and private public partnership strategies that have been forced onto public operators who have been denied access to sustainable public funding. We are concerned to see the extent to which international financial institutions have emphasized private sector solutions and forced public utilities to run along business lines, downplaying social and environmental impacts of privatization and corporatization taking strong public solutions off the table in discussions about access to water and sanitation services.

We are concerned about tensions between the WASH framework - which focuses specifically on universal access to water and therefore cannot ignore social justice needs - and more nebulous “nexus” and “green economy” frameworks which appear to grant industries greater access to water resources. It is not acceptable for the international community to withdraw its support for achieving universal access to water and sanitation. This remains a great challenge and intentional efforts should be strengthened.

We need a human rights framework that prioritizes frontline communities who pay higher prices and suffer most the effects of water pollution. Such a framework would block market-based pricing schemes or water allocation schemes, which deny marginalized communities access to

water and sanitation services and water for livelihoods and subsistence economies. This rights-based approach was sorely lacking at the Budapest Water Summit.

At the “business forum” component of the summit, we heard about market-based solutions such as payment for ecosystem services and “polluter-pays” strategies, which emphasize “green growth” and the use of market signals and incentives to determine access and behaviour. We call instead for strong environmental regulation based on the precautionary principle and public control of water resource allocation. Market-based schemes have denied communities their rights to decide how their water supplies are managed. Rather than incentivizing polluters we demand the punishment of corporate environmental and human rights crimes and ensure that communities have access to reparation.

We are concerned about the heavy emphasis on high-tech solutions that reflect business priorities and allow the focus to be placed on post-pollution treatment, rather than prevention or protection of water resources. These expensive technological choices are made over the needs of communities for appropriate, locally managed and low-cost solutions. This is also part of the agenda of the national donor agencies, which focus on using aid to win contracts for their country’s corporations.

We cannot meaningfully talk about sustainability as long as there is a failure to acknowledge that corporate rights have undermined human rights and that investment protection mechanisms and free trade agreements have undermined rights of communities to say no to water polluting projects. For example, as we speak mining companies are using international trade tribunals to sue governments in Latin America to defend their right to pollute and over-extract.

The merit of potential SDGs depend on their ability to address the human rights, social and environmental justice concerns of communities around the world.

For more analysis on the Budapest Summit, please read:

1. Budapest Water Summit offers mirage of water for all

<http://www.tni.org/article/budapest-water-summit-offers-mirage-water-all>

2. Blunt speaking on reality of privatised water opens up important debate at Budapest water summit

<http://www.tni.org/article/blunt-speaking-reality-privatised-water-opens-important-debate-budapest-water-summit?context=599>

3. Fighting the Corporate Agenda in Budapest

<http://www.canadians.org/blog/fighting-corporate-agenda-budapest>