

IATP Water Note # 1

A Rights-Based Approach to Solving the Water Crisis

Fixing the global water crisis needs more than taps and toilets! This is what an activist wrote in response to the outcome of Bali Prep-com of WSSD.

Proposed solutions

The opinion makers of the international water establishment have worked hard over the last few years to redefine the water problem. The discussion is no longer about unsustainable use of water for production and consumption. Instead, they focus only on the symptom: they quote the number of people without access to water to meet even basic needs. The Millennium Declaration proposes to halve the number of people without access to drinking water by 2015. And the campaign to include a similar sanitation target is likely to succeed at WSSD.

Will this help meet the basic needs of the water poor?

It is true that 1.3 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water: 2.3 billion people do not have access to healthy sanitation facilities. However, a little known fact is that **90% of the worlds water poor lives in rural areas**, and centralized water supplies and sanitation is unlikely to be the answer to their woes. The multinational water companies are primarily interested in capturing a specific market: that of urban growth centers, particularly in developing countries.

So where does the solution lie?

- In ensuring healthy ecosystems, upon which the great majority of the water poor directly depend to meet their water needs.
- In ensuring that the basic water flows are maintained.
- In ensuring that wetlands are maintained to act as flood plain buffers and filters.

This calls for respecting the "fundamental rights of people and ecosystems to safe water." Only if such a right is universally recognized and respected can we ensure that "development" through international, national and regional policies and trade and investment agreements contributes towards addressing the water crisis rather than exacerbating it. In practical terms this means:

- Development of an international framework on freshwater that recognizes the fundamental human right to water to meet basic needs for people and ecosystems; and that water is kept outside the purview of the WTO, instead strengthening existing treaties dealing with freshwater issues.
- Internalization of social and environmental costs of water used in profit making enterprises, and application of the polluter pays principle, incentives and disincentives, for managing point and non-point sources.
- Application of demand management and conjunctive use of water management in river basins for allocating available water and meeting basic needs in source areas - for people and for the ecosystem.
- Increase in water use efficiency especially in agriculture, which accounts for about 70% of water use.
- Institutional support for community initiatives in water augmentation and mangement.
- Strengthening of public sector water utilities and regulatory authorities to ensure that public utilities function with efficiency and meet the public health standards.
- Application of a block tariff system, with the lowest block priced at zero to ensure that basic water is free for all and cross subsidies to ensure that the long-term viability of the system is built in.

At WSSD, the Heads of States can make a beginning by making commitments on these with targets and timetables. We Await!

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