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Normally each meeting in a series builds on the momentum from the previous one. In the case of the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto, this was always going to be a problem, and not just because the previous Forum at The Hague had been such a dynamic and progressive event. The organisers’ difficulty arose from the sheer number of global water meetings that have taken place during the intervening three years. First the Bonn conference in December 2001 brought the results from the Hague Forum into the UN system, then the World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg last July gave political prominence to water and, especially, sanitation. The adoption of a global sanitation target was one of its finest outcomes, and the Americans’ reluctance to agree it caused media headlines around the world.

After all those global meetings, the Kyoto Forum was always likely to be an anticlimax, at least in respect of policy progress. So its organisers billed it as a showcase for action. It is a difficult task to create something more than a disparate catalogue of people’s work. At Kyoto, that is exactly what happened. There were several hundred sessions spread over three different venues, so everybody who wanted to organise a session had their fifteen minutes of fame. Unfortunately there seemed to be no attempt to put those together into a concise exposition of current major issues, let alone agreed actions. Our Japanese hosts were very hospitable and the organisation was formidably efficient, but the coherence and purpose were missing.

What were the big subjects? I had hoped that the role of local government would be prominent, after it had become belatedly recognised at Bonn. But it was hardly in evidence. Sanitation and hygiene were well covered, but the crucial debate on balancing the water demands of agriculture and the environment was not prominent. The dams issue seems to be receding out of the limelight now that the dams proponents have taken umbrage at the WCD report (World Commission on Dams, 2000). Surely globalisation and privatisation would provide some lively debate? In the event, however, they only attracted protest. I was pleased to see so many participants from the social justice movement around the world at Kyoto, but saddened that most of them had more interest in shouting slogans than in listening to other people’s views, which just alienated the majority of the delegates.

The one headline event at Kyoto was the launch of the report of the World Panel on Financing Water Infrastructure (World Panel on Financing Water Infrastructure, 2003), chaired by Michel Camdessus,

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former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). I welcomed the idea that financial experts should scrutinise the funding aspects of the water sector, because for a long time we have talked among ourselves. Unfortunately too much of the report is devoted to telling us things we already know; I would have preferred the panel to have concentrated on what they, in their professional work, can do to improve the macroeconomic conditions in which water development can occur (such as correcting global inequities in agricultural subsidies and in trading, which keep poor countries poor). The report also repeated the World Water Council’s confusion between the figures of money needed to satisfy basic needs in developing countries and those for all water-related work around the world. The report was so long and detailed that both supporters and opponents of any idea could back up any argument with judicious quotations from the text. In these circumstances impressions become important, and it seems strange that the World Water Council and Global Water Partnership chose as the Chair of the panel a person who for ten years led one of the organisations most deeply resented in developing countries for its insensitive and anti-poor policies. That put M. Camdessus at a disadvantage before his work even began. So did its title, indicating rather tactlessly that its concern was with the infrastructure rather than with the people.

The World Water Development Report (UNESCO, 2003) was also launched at Kyoto. This is a massive tome that has all the hallmarks of production by a committee. Its editor had the tough job of breathing life and interest into a compendium of material contributed by no fewer than 23 UN organisations. While some of the material itself is excellent, I personally found it less readable or interesting than the previous biennial World Water reports from the Pacific Institute, which probably cost a small fraction of the money spent on the WWDR.

The now-obligatory Ministerial Declaration was more feeble than usual, reportedly because the Forum hosts wanted to avoid controversy so the wording was watered down constantly. For example, the delegates did not seem to realise that the UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights issued a “General Comment” on 27 November 2002, stating, inter alia, that “the human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, affordable, physically accessible, safe and acceptable water for personal and domestic use”. So the Kyoto declaration failed ignominiously to acknowledge this. This was hardly an edifying example of political leadership on water.

We went to Kyoto with low expectations, and they were confirmed. As the World Water Council and potential hosts discuss their plans for a possible Fourth World Water Forum, I advise them to think long and hard about its purpose, structure and usefulness. I offer two suggestions: first to concentrate its agenda onto a small number of important subjects, and secondly to convene the politicians and the water professionals together in one meeting rather than locking them away from each other in separate meetings. While some Japanese tried we all must find more and better ways to make this happen.

References

