

AROUND THE GLOBE

4th World Water Forum an Impressive Event

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The 4th World Water Forum, held in Mexico City from March 16-22, had the look and feel of a three-ring circus in an amusement park. Organized by the World Water Council, the forum combined several events, including: a World Water Expo; Water Fair; Water Symposium, with a different thematic program and geographic focus each day; a

ministerial conference involving nearly 150 nations; panels on water finance, empowerment, and democratization; and various prize ceremonies and cultural and artistic programs, all culminating in closing ceremonies on World Water Day.

Over 12,000 people attended, including heads of state, royalty, and at least two



Groundwater overdraft has led to uneven subsidence in Mexico City, as illustrated by the tilted lines of this building.

Photo: Gary Woodard

Nobel Prize winners. The forum theme was “Local Actions for a Global Change,” a new spin on Buckminster Fuller’s call to “Think globally, act locally.” The global change topic most discussed was the urgent need to help over 1 billion people who currently lack access to safe drinking water. Even those with access to water may spend hours each day hauling it from miles away, work usually done by women and children, keeping them from earning a living or attending school.

Another 10,000 people showed up to protest big water projects that displace villages, farms, and indigenous peoples, and to highlight the plight of the poor who lack basic water and sewer service. But their top target was privatization, continuing a theme from the third forum, held in Japan in 2003. Protests were largely peaceful, tying up the downtown

area, but never breaching the tight security around the forum venue. The protests didn’t go unheard, however. One declaration at the forum was that governments, not private companies, bear primary responsibility for providing access to safe, reliable water supplies.

The five-day symposium featured hundreds of talks and panels, presented in 12 concurrent sessions with simultaneous translations. Unfortunately, logistical problems kept most attendees from knowing who was presenting and when.

“Integrated water resources management” (IWRM) was perhaps the top buzzword, but, like “sustainability,” clearly means different things to different people. One session on IWRM devolved into a debate as to the minimum requirements of IWRM, and whether historical efforts such as the Tennessee Valley Authority would have met the definition.

The Expo, sprawling over an area larger than six football fields, featured many massive and elaborate displays. Waterfalls and a glass floor with fish swimming inside were among the approaches used to attract attendees. While most exhibitors were companies and nongovernmental organizations, there were a number of large national pavilions. Spain held bragging rights for size (6,400 sq. ft.). The second-largest, Japan, competed with frequent entertainment and lots of free sake. The Netherlands was third in square footage, and attracted huge crowds with both its water technology and Dutch beer. By contrast, the United States was a virtual no-show, with only small booths representing USAID and USGS.

The symposium talks and Expo emphasized smaller-scale, practical solutions and green technologies. Overall, the forum appeared to signal that the world has come a long way toward recognizing sufficient, potable, reliable water as a basic human right.

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