



Bridging Divides for Water? Dialogue and Access at the 5th World Water Forum

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ABSTRACT: The 5th World Water Forum was officially presented as a deliberative democracy where diverse stakeholders could gather to talk about water. However, the conference was marred by significant conflict, ranging from audience complaints to protests, and to alternative political declarations. This paper explores why a Forum designed to 'Bridge Divides for Water' (the official theme) was so contentious that participants were unable to reach any sort of consensus. I explore four hypothesised mechanisms by which the Forum itself counteracted the possibility of Bridging Divides and creating constructive dialogue. First, I argue that, because of cost, security and size, the Forum made many participants feel unable to fully access the Forum and share their opinions. Second, I suggest that the programmatic structure of the Forum promoted simplified ways of talking about water that made translation between perspectives difficult. Third, I contend that the physical space where Forum deliberations occurred institutionalised unequal social arrangements, making certain viewpoints more audible than others. Fourth, I demonstrate that the Turkish host government actively masked contestation to present a 'civilised' Forum to the world.

KEYWORDS: World Water Forum, deliberative democracy, water politics, Istanbul

INTRODUCTION

Minutes before the opening ceremony of the 5th World Water Forum, two women stood up in the balcony of the lecture theatre, holding a banner and chanting 'No Risky Dams!' A dozen nearby spectators applauded, but security guards rushed in and asked the protesters to leave. Moments later, the opening ceremony began. The first speech by the Secretary General of the Forum¹ drew extensively on the official Forum theme: 'Bridging Divides for Water'. He listed numerous stakeholder groups whose voices were essential for creating meaningful dialogue, and even highlighted the Forum venue – two conference centres on opposite sides of an inlet – as exemplifying the bridges to be built during the following days. The participants' challenge, he said, was to work together to create a meaningful outcome over the week: "[g]ive water a future, and give water to future generations". The protesters were detained and later deported from the country.

This incident marked the beginning of tensions that permeated the 5th World Water Forum, held in Istanbul, Turkey in March 2009. From daily protest marches in Istanbul's Taksim Square, to complaints about a lack of accountability and legitimacy from members of the audience and participants, to the hosting of two parallel forums by organisations that felt the official Forum was too 'elitist' or 'corporate', disputes over the Forum were ubiquitous. While conflict has been prominent at every World Water Forum since The Hague gathering in 2000,² the Istanbul Forum was advertised to "truly be

¹ 'Forum' (with the first letter in upper case) designates the World Water Forum; 'forum' (in lower case) refers to any forum in the abstract.

² Conflict has pervaded every World Water Forum except the 1st (held in 1997 in Marrakech). At the 2nd Forum, held at the Hague in 2000, debates emerged between the Forum conveners and Public Services International (an international federation of public-sector trade unions) over whether to designate water as a need – to be allocated by either private companies or the

different". According to the Forum website, "this Forum will more than ever before be focused on priority issues emphasizing multi-stakeholder interaction". It would employ an "open and participatory" process to allow "divergent points of view" to contribute to shaping the final political output – the Ministerial Declaration – thereby 'Bridging Divides for Water' (World Water Forum, 2010b). These aims of deliberative democracy, however, did not transpire. Rather than uniting around a single declaration, per the Secretariat's stated goals, four outputs emerged: the official Ministerial Declaration; a 'Complementary Declaration' signed by dissenting ministers from 25 countries; an indigenous people's declaration; and a people's water declaration, adopted at an alternative forum held outside the official venue. In addition, participants whom I interviewed and interacted with at the Forum identified a lack of access – that although they were present at the Forum, their viewpoints were not being heard by the relevant audiences – leading to their dissatisfaction with the Forum.

While some contention is expected at an event with as large and diverse an audience as the World Water Forum, in Istanbul I observed a disconnect between the stated objective of 'Bridging Divides for Water' and the expression of strongly opposing viewpoints that contributed to the aura of conflict at the Forum. With the 6th World Water Forum approaching in March 2012, critical attention to the last Forum can provide insights on how to structure the meeting in order to achieve constructive dialogue, assuming that to be the actual goal of the Forum.

In this paper, I explore the mechanisms by which the Forum itself contributed to the reproduction of extreme, polarised views that, once articulated, reduced the potential for constructive dialogue between divergent viewpoints. After a brief history of the World Water Forum, I introduce the Istanbul Forum, which was officially presented as a deliberative democracy where diverse stakeholders could gather to talk about water. I then explore four hypothesised mechanisms by which the Forum worked against the possibility of Bridging Divides and creating constructive dialogue. First, I argue that, because of cost, security and size, the Forum made many participants feel unable to fully access the Forum and share their opinions. Second, I suggest that the programmatic structure of the Forum promoted simplified ways of talking about water that made translation between perspectives difficult. Third, I contend that the physical space where Forum deliberations occurred institutionalised unequal social arrangements, making certain viewpoints more audible than others. Fourth, I demonstrate that the Turkish host government actively masked contestation to present a 'civilised' Forum to the world.

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted during and after the Istanbul Forum. During the week of the Forum, I was a participant observer. I attended numerous presentations, observed activities throughout the Forum venue, and spoke with participants ranging from United Nations (UN) officials, to engineers, to activists, to students. I also attended a half-day each of the two parallel forums. During the summer of 2009, I interviewed 16 Forum participants to better understand their experiences at the Forum. I selected interviewees from a range of backgrounds, in terms of organisation (government, international organisation, corporation, NGO, research institution), career (hydrologists and engineers, business executives, activists, academics, civil servants) and geographical location.³⁴ Interviews were conducted both in person and by telephone, given the global distribution of respondents. I asked semi-structured, open-ended questions about the reasons they attended the Forum, what they did there, and what they felt the Forum accomplished. I also asked them to describe

state – or a right, which would supposedly ensure universal access (Barlow and Clark, 2002; Haughton, 2002). At the 2003 Kyoto Forum, activists interrupted a panel on government support of the private water sector, demanding "withdrawal of the private sector" and recognition of water as a human right; the Forum's final declaration, however, supported private-sector finance and overlooked the human right to water (Bakker, 2007). Likewise, the key point of contention during the 2006 Mexico City Forum was whether water should be declared a 'human right' or whether it was sufficient to label it a 'need'. The reiteration of debates and conflicts from Forum to Forum has led several former participants to question the use of convening future conferences (Salman, 2003, 2004; Gleick and Lane, 2005).

³ Half of my interviewees were North American, with the rest spread evenly between Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. I interviewed at least two individuals within each category of organisation type and career.

⁴ To protect anonymity, I refer to all interviewees as 'he', regardless of gender.

'water' in order to understand their personal relationship to the entity.

This ethnography is by no means 'complete'. As an individual researcher, I could only piece together numerous fragments – gathered from my own and others' experiences – to create a partial yet coherent story. Many scholars recognise that epistemological understanding is inevitably situated, subjective and partial (see Taylor, 2002; Massey, 2003) and that there is no "vantage point that purports to take in the world at a glance" (Whatmore, 2002). Moreover, I was unable to interview any members of the World Water Council (WWC), the organisation that convenes the Forum; therefore, any 'official' story I tell is derived from published Forum materials and does not reflect any individual opinions. I also did not trace how planning decisions about the Forum were made. Therefore, I describe the structure of the Forum and what it did, but do not present the power dynamics and politics through which the Forum originated.

THE 5TH WORLD WATER FORUM: DIALOGUE AND DIVERSITY

Convened to address global water management, the World Water Forum is the "world's largest water event" (World Water Forum, 2009). The Forum, held every 3 years, is the brainchild of the WWC, an "international multi-stakeholder platform" (World Water Council, 2010) created after the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (Giordano and Wolf, 2003). The Council's board members primarily represent national and regional water agencies, with a few members from the UN and other international organisations. Council funding comes mostly from membership fees paid by government, nongovernment and private organisations. The WWC hosts the World Water Forum in conjunction with the host country's government, which appoints a Secretariat to oversee the Forum's organisation.

The 1st World Water Forum was convened in Marrakech in 1997, and Forums have been held every three years since. The following table provides information on attendance and themes at all previous and planned Forums.

Table 1. Basic information on World water Forums.

Year	Location	Attendance ⁵	Theme
1997	Marrakech, Morocco	250	Vision for Water, Life and the Environment
2000	The Hague, Netherlands	6000	From Vision to Action
2003	Kyoto, Japan	24,000	A Forum with a Difference
2006	Mexico City, Mexico	20,000	Local Actions for Global Challenge
2009	Istanbul, Turkey	33,000	Bridging Divides for Water
2012	Marseille, France	-	Solutions for Water

The 5th World Water Forum, the largest Forum to date, drew together more than 33,000 individuals from 192 countries, representing local and national governments, international organisations, corporations, nongovernmental organisations, research institutions and civil society (World Water Forum, 2010a) – a diverse swath of humanity drawn together by a common interest in water.

Before the Forum started, "thousands of organizations and tens of thousands of individuals... worked over a two-year period, both through physical meetings and virtual consultation, to prepare the debate". Coordination meetings – in person and online – were held to ensure a "dynamic means for stakeholders to contribute". Regional representatives met to articulate their geographical stances on

⁵ Sources: World Water Council, 2003; IISD, 2006; World Water Forum, 2010a.

water issues. An online questionnaire identified the themes that panels would discuss. The 'open' and 'collaborative' Virtual Meeting Space was used to gather comments on topics to be discussed, which were then incorporated by panel organisers into the final schedule (World Water Forum, 2009).

Numerous activities took place at the Forum, with several official components occurring simultaneously during the week. First, the political process included a ministerial roundtable, meetings with local authorities and parliamentarians, and a summit of Heads of States. Second, the regional process brought together stakeholders from particular geographic regions – i.e. the Americas, Europe, Asia and the Pacific – to discuss region-specific issues. Third, the thematic process consisted of panel presentations organised into six 'themes': global change and risk management; advancing human development and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); managing and protecting water resources; governance and management; finance; and education, knowledge and capacity development.

The Forum programme proclaimed that "a diversity of stakeholders" could participate in a "substantive debate" leading to common, "high-impact outputs" (World Water Forum, 2009). The Forum's theme – 'Bridging Divides for Water' – which "emphasize[d] the need for greater interaction, communication and functional harmonization of the various entities involved in or affected by water management" (World Water Forum, 2010b), highlighted the Forum's desire to attract diverse stakeholders and encourage communication. Official publications may thus be said to have portrayed the Istanbul Forum as 'deliberatively democratic'.⁶

Beside the official processes, the Forum provided space for individuals and organisations to share their ideas. More than 100 'side-events' hosted by public, private and civil society organisations covered themes ranging from environmental education, to desalination, to corruption, often with a geographic focus. The Citizens Water House and Global Water Education Village provided space for any registered participant to host films or discussions. Posters describing scientific research and development projects lined some hallways. According to the official programme, in these sessions and spaces "everyone [could] express their opinions freely, regardless of their profession, geographical background or age" (World Water Forum, 2009).⁷

ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

Despite the official publicity that the Forum was a place for diverse individuals to contribute to the dialogue, a regularly echoed lamentation at the Forum was feeling a lack of access, and the inability, to fully participate in the Forum.⁸ Over one-third of the participants I interviewed were sceptical whether all of the stakeholders who needed to contribute to the debate were actually granted that ability. As a hydrologist told me, "I think there were a lot of voices that were not heard, and I think they need to start getting heard in all different arrays". A common concern was that the registration fee (which ranged between €100 and €500) was prohibitively high for people from developing countries or who work in the non-profit sector, especially when one considers the costs of airfare, food, and lodging that were also necessary to attend. A Nigerian waste management professional reasoned, "If they [the

⁶ Deliberative democracy, exemplified by the Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1989), holds that the best decisions emerge when civil society gathers together as a public and deliberates on issues. This deliberation forms a common political culture, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to interact and reach agreement (Lupel, 2005). Critics of deliberative democracy argue that achieving rational deliberation, equality, and consensus is problematic and paradoxical. In order to promote liberty and equality, liberal democratic institutions must limit individual sovereignty, essentially working against both liberty and equality (Mouffe, 2000). Moreover, ideas are often irrational, but they are nevertheless essential to debates (Christiano, 2004). Finally, proponents of agonism argue that the world is inherently plural, and human identity is formed on self-differentiation, making an 'us/them' mentality intrinsic to human interaction. Accordingly, reaching consensus can never actually happen (Mouffe, 1992; Kymlicka, 1995).

⁷ Note that these spaces were designed for individuals to 'express' themselves, not necessarily to be heard.

⁸ A 'democratic deficit', framed as a lack of accountability, legitimacy, or control, is often associated with non-governmental political processes (Marres, 2005) such as international conferences and forums (Pianta, 2001).

World Water Forum] want to talk about development, why not make it more accessible [to people from developing countries]”? Another interviewee was appalled that individuals who had travelled from halfway around the world were turned away from the Forum because there were problems with their bank transfers, something he had never seen at other international conferences.⁹

Some individuals who could afford the fee still felt unable to participate. At the Istanbul Forum, development funding agencies could only find individuals or organisations if they had an exhibition stand, hosted an event, or had an extremely visible flyer; the majority of participants had to approach agencies to promote their causes. I suggest that the sheer size of the Forum made it difficult for individuals without distinct roles at the Forum – audience members and organisations without stands or events to host – to have their opinions heard by the relevant stakeholders.

A representative of the UN Environment Programme in St. Lucia told me about the difficulty of raising awareness about Caribbean issues on the international stage: “[a]t an event such as the World Water Forum, we [from the Caribbean region] pale in significance when you compare our issues to others... There’s a whole bunch of issues that take up much larger geographic spaces and involve a whole lot larger populations than us in the Caribbean, so we’re overshadowed to a large extent in these international meetings”. While the Caribbean delegation was better represented in Istanbul than in previous Forums, this delegate still felt disadvantaged by the Forum’s structure. As ‘one of billions’ who was trying to have projects funded, he felt that it was difficult to attract donor agencies’ attention and “it [was] kind of hard to sell our issues as being more important than others... I think we’re better served when those who have cheques to write find us, rather than us going to them”.

Even some business executives felt that their viewpoints were not heard. The business manager of a desalination company that did not have a booth was scheduled to give a presentation in a side room at the conference centre. He complained of the difficulty of advertising the event, and it took him 2 hours just to locate the room where he was meant to present. In the end, no one attended his presentation. And the former president of an American professional organisation for engineers told me that whenever he mentioned the United States and Mexico’s successful transboundary water management – which he felt could inform other transboundary cases – he was regularly quietened because the organisers of the ‘World’ Water Forum did not want to be dominated by American interests.

Participants who were only there to observe, rather than present, felt especially separated from the deliberative discourse at the Forum. In conversations following ten different sessions, audience members I spoke with complained that a lack of time management during panels limited the time for audience feedback, which, for many, was the only way of getting their voices officially recorded in the minutes. To address this problem, one topic (preserving natural ecosystems) provided audience members with handheld electronic responders to allow active participation. Throughout the discussion, audience members could text comments to the rapporteur and vote on the official recommendations to indicate which issues they thought were particularly important to address. However, the majority of panels I attended hardly considered the audience, spending almost all of the allocated response time on discussions among panel members, which limited the possibility for audience participation and incorporation into the deliberative public sphere.

Security at the Forum added to the feeling of inaccessibility for some participants. As a North American activist put it, with security, “civil society was pretty much locked out”. Upon entering the boundaries of either conference centre, participants scanned their ID badges, walked through a metal detector, had their bags x-rayed, and sometimes underwent a pat-down. Once inside the Forum, security guards, plain-clothes guards, and police officers were everywhere, as would sometimes

⁹ The Forum provided some scholarships to individuals who would not be able to attend otherwise, a fact lauded at the opening ceremony as an example of organisers’ attempts to make the Forum inclusive. However, according to an interviewee, the living conditions provided by these scholarships were appalling, as recipients were housed in a shabby hotel in the ‘red-light district’ and were not provided with transport. The scholarship recipients were *at* the Forum, yet they evidently were not able to fully participate because they had to spend long hours travelling, leave the Forum well before dark, and manage the stress of their living conditions.

become apparent if a participant or worker's badge was not clearly visible and (s)he was immediately approached to rectify it. The space was further delineated by cordoning off certain portions of the venue to 'VIPs' – including upper-level presenters, officials from the Forum secretariat, and the WWC – and the media, each of whom had his or her own entrances, lounges, and workspaces, and their own guards to make sure that everyone was in his proper place. Moreover, to track numbers and traffic, participants were required to scan their badges when crossing the bridge between the conference centres or when entering the WaterExpo.

Security at the Forum led some participants to use more extreme, controversial language and tactics. The vignette I recounted about the anti-dam protesters at the opening ceremony is an extreme example. The women were whisked away by security guards within seconds of unfurling their banner. The protesters were probably aware that they would be silenced quickly because their statement was controversial. In order to have an impact, they chose to act boldly and incite the guards, whereas without security they might have had the time to voice their opinions in a more conventional manner.

Four interviewees brought up security as a concern, feeling that it added stress to an already large and overwhelming conference. Protesters against the Istanbul Forum used the separation between inside and outside, demarcated by the security apparatus, as ammunition to support their claims that the Forum was elitist and not inclusive. They argued that without security anyone could experience the World Water Forum – not gaining admittance to the actual panels, but at least being able to interact with individuals from around the world – but with security, participation was limited to those individuals who could afford the registration fee (which, remember, some participants considered prohibitively high for developing world attendees).

Participants' concerns about access to the Forum suggest that the Forum was not adequately 'Bridging Divides'. Instead, there were stakeholders who, because of cost, security, and the sheer size of the Forum, did not feel that they were able to contribute to the dialogue or that important voices were not even present at the Forum.

THE SIMPLIFICATION OF WATER

In this section, I discuss the influence that the Forum programme had on the way that participants could talk about water. Specifically, although my interviewees suggested that water is a hugely complex resource, the Forum's structure encouraged simplified, essentialised representations of the resource that do not adequately capture all of the variables necessary for constructive dialogue.

The diverse participants at the 5th World Water Forum were drawn together by a shared interest in water. A common question upon meeting a new acquaintance was 'Do you work directly in water?' This same question was addressed to the audience members during an early panel, and almost everyone identified himself or herself as working in 'the water sector'. Over half of my interviewees – including activists, hydrologists and civil servants – cited learning from people who have similar interests but come from a diversity of backgrounds as motivation for attending the Forum. In speeches and presentations, several participants highlighted the ability of water to bring people together. The Director General of UNESCO and a governor of the WWC maintained, "[w]ater doesn't divide; water connects". A Turkish organiser said, "[water] connects us through space and through time and connects us through generations". During a side event on 'The Power of Spirit' – on using storytelling and dance to honour water – a participating Unitarian minister shared the story that every year, his congregation collects vials of water from its travels around the world. "Water brings us together as one people", he said. "We are all connected through water".

However, I observed that stakeholders were united not around singular Water, but around different, and sometimes conflicting, understandings of what water is or should be. Participants' definitions of water fell into three broad categories. One was the technical or scientific treatment of water, which was promoted by many water provisioning professionals, engineers, businessmen and scientists. A Spanish professor of hydrogeology lectured, "[t]o maximise the efficiency of irrigation, you have to

consider the economic value of crops grown per amount of water used". Other panels similarly spoke of 'economic water productivity', measured in protein or calories produced per cubic metre of water. The President of the International Commission of Large Dams maintained, "[b]etter water infrastructure is the solution to guarantee safe drinking water for a growing population". For these individuals, water was a technical object to be measured and observed. Once quantified by science, it could be handled as a commodity and allocated to individuals for numerous economic and social uses.

These statements stand in contrast to representations of water as a human right. 'Water is essential for life' was a common refrain in many panels and at the parallel water forums, as was, 'Water is a person's fundamental right'. A member of the trade union Public Services International vehemently argued, "[w]ater is not a commodity to be bought and sold like a tin of beans in the supermarket". In this formulation, water could not be a commodity because private provisioning would grant wealthier individuals more access to water than the poor. Water could still be measured and studied, but not if that knowledge then went into making it a privatised object.

These two versions of water both emphasise the utility of water for humans, and treat it as an entity separate from humanity that we can and should exploit. Coming from a radically different perspective, an American anthropologist declared, "[w]ater [is] a living and active force, not just a chemical substance". A member of the Central American Indigenous Council said, "[w]ater is not only a source of life, but has a life of its own, it provides knowledge". According to an Australian indigenous activist, "[w]ater is a spirit that has a right to be treated as an ecological entity, with its own inherent right to exist". Viewing water in this way is contrary to the iterations in the previous paragraphs. If water has a life of its own, it is problematic to consider only its utility for human uses or to measure it as an object, as water has its own right to exist.

Each of the three ways of representing water can be highly complex and multifaceted. However, the majority of representations of water at the Forum were presented as a singular 'reality' or 'the truth' – described in a matter-of-fact way that was difficult to dispute. These representations, I argue, had been 'purified' (see Latour, 1993, 1999). As is evident from the quotes above, hydrologists, engineers, ecologists, economists and even human rights activists at the Forum often described water in a straightforward, uncomplicated manner, erasing the complexity of the resource. A lunchtime exchange between two participants – a Kenyan and a Brazilian – highlights the problems that can arise when water is reduced to pure, simplified representations, rather than being treated as a whole. The pair complained about the lack of coordination between government ministries that deal with water. According to the Brazilian, Brazil has 14 ministries that handle water, but without interagency communication, the water is managed in contradictory ways: i.e. agriculture needs water, but it also pollutes water resources for domestic uses in downstream urban areas. The conversation implied that all these ministries have narrow ideas of how to manage water; until they can communicate and form a holistic idea of what water is, they will not achieve integrated management.

The simplification of water at the World Water Forum, I hypothesise, was partly due to the Forum's programmatic structure, and particularly the emphasis on short PowerPoint presentations. The representations of water presented in panels were much more distilled than those that individuals put forward during interviews. For instance, during a side-event presentation, a water rights activist reiterated that water is a 'human right' and a 'fundamental good'. However, when I later asked him to describe water during an interview, he listed numerous meanings, both personal and global, and stated, "If you get stuck in viewing [water] as only about the economy, as only about the environment, as only about the equity, as only about human rights, as only about any one of these different aspects you miss the bigger picture. I'd advocate a more holistic view of it", depicting a far more nuanced resource than just 'water is a human right'. The presenters were not deliberately deceiving the audience or 'dumbing down' their talks. In order to sufficiently convey one's point in a 10-minute presentation, a straightforward, hit-home narration that likely lacks depth is necessary. At the World Water Forum, an overwhelming number of 10- to 15-minute presentations meant that the majority of speakers could not adequately describe water in a complex, nuanced way. This problem of simplification may have been

addressed through the panel and audience discussions that were meant to follow each presentation, but poor timekeeping meant that the discussions were often truncated and therefore could not counteract the distillation process created by the presentations.

The second way I suggest that the Forum programme contributed to the simplification of water was through the thematic structure. While the themes were designed to provide a space for many different topics to be discussed, I argue that they actually limited the versions of water that could be presented. The themes, and panel organisers' interpretations of the themes, predetermined the frame through which speakers could describe water, so discussions were much more likely to be about the validity of the facts than on questioning the importance of the given point of view. For instance, a panel on potential mechanisms to finance water distribution automatically presents water as a commodity and a quantifiable object. While it would be possible for a member of the audience or presenter on the finance panel to contend that water is a human right and therefore not a commodity, or that it is a spirit that should not be forced into our metrics, it is more likely that any disagreement within this discussion would be limited to whether finance should come from public-private partnerships, or from taxes, or from government subsidies.

The Forum's influence in simplifying the way that individuals spoke about water appeared to make it difficult for constructive dialogue to occur between advocates of the different visions of water. To expound on the quote above from the water rights activist, stating that 'water is a human right' – full stop – prompts advocates of water as commodity or as spirit to disagree and put forth their own (simplified) view of water. Conversely, a multifaceted representation of water – that it is not "only about the economy, as only about the environment, as only about the equity, [or] only about human rights" – allows for individuals holding diverse opinions on water to respond constructively.

Because the simplification of water limited the possibility for productive dialogue, some stakeholders used quick, non-complex representations of water to further their political agenda. These 'strategic essentialisms' (Baviskar, 2003; Mollinga, 2010) are an easy way for political groups to communicate their message, yet they inevitably create binaries and antagonistic polarisation. A First Nations forester from Canada, who presented on a panel on water and cultural diversity, went to Istanbul with the goal to change the way that people at the World Water Forum thought about water. In an interview, he said, "[w]ater is a spirit and it's alive, and it has the ability to unify everything on the planet because it's always been connecting everything else. And it's the primordial source of life and we need to respect it that way". Ultimately, he wants this view of water, in an officially defined manner, to "completely replace" the current definition of water contained in the 1992 Dublin Principles¹⁰ – an attitude that is antithetical to the dialogue and consensus-building deemed necessary by deliberative democracy.

The evolution of the dialogue on water as a human right shows a similar tendency toward disagreement rather than dialogue. Water as a human right was first presented to the World Water Forum through protests and demonstrations at The Hague in 2000. It became part of the official discourse at the 2003 Kyoto Forum, featuring in a handful of panels and presentations. However, the Forum continued to emphasise the private allocation of water, meaning that water as a commodity was the dominant form of water presented, and a number of large protesters advocated water as a human right. In Mexico City, according to an American activist, "there was a lot of talk that water is a human right, and that people deserve to have access to clean and affordable water, so that became sort of the overarching theme" within the official Forum. Nevertheless, he felt that speaking of '*the* right to water', as opposed to '*a* right to water', was frowned upon by Forum organisers; the former makes the topic seem inherent, and Forum organisers did not want recognition of water as a human right to be unquestioned or absolute. By the Istanbul Forum, water as a human right had been integrated into the

¹⁰ The Dublin Principles were prepared for the 1992 Rio de Janeiro UN Conference on Environment and Development. The definition reads, "Water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment" (International Conference on Water and the Environment, 1992).

Forum's official discourse. Five panels directly addressed 'The Human Right to Water and Sanitation', and many speakers in other panels commented on water as a human right. The discourse about water as a human right was almost automatic; variations on the phrase 'water is a human right' emerge in my field notes 41 times. By the Istanbul Forum, water as a human right was a purified form of water, empty of the controversy that shaped it and neatly delineated from any messy social meaning that it might have had.

However, some protesters at the Forum were seemingly dissatisfied with having water as a human right enter the official discourse. At the closing ceremony to the Youth World Water Forum, an activist from the alternative water movement pressured one of the governors of the WWC to agree that "yes, water is a human right". However, the governor would not also admit that "water is not a commodity". By forcing the distinction between water as a commodity and water as a human right, the activist added a new element of polarisation to the already agreed-upon dialogue. In fact, according to Bakker (2007), commodity versus human right is not necessarily an appropriate distinction. Water as a human right does not preclude it from being a commodity, adding further evidence that the activist aimed to disagree with whatever the Forum stood for, rather than solely advocating for a human right to water. In addition, the Council of Canadians, a key organisation driving the opposition against the World Water Forum, has begun to focus their efforts not just on claiming water as a human right but on redefining water as a commons; as the organisation's chair said, defining water as a commons is about "taking water back". I interpret this stance as deliberately distinguishing their agenda from that of the Forum.

THE SITE OF POLITICS

In this and the following section, I investigate the ways in which the physical location of the Forum, at both the scale of the conference centre and at the national scale, both created and masked divisions between stakeholders. Here, I argue that officially sponsored and corporate-sponsored activities had prominence in the Forum venue because they were more centrally located and housed in more modern, functional facilities.

The Forum was held at two conference centres on opposite sides of Istanbul's Golden Horn, an inlet on the European side of the city. The larger Sötlüce Congress and Cultural Centre was inaugurated 5 days before the Forum; Feshane, the other building, was a renovated *fez* factory. The difference between the two venues was stark. Sötlüce was designed to house events like the World Water Forum, with five large lecture theatres, a wide promenade overlooking the waterfront, and copious space for networking. Feshane was much smaller and shabbier; the several large lecture rooms were subdivided with temporary plywood walls. Whereas lecture halls at Sötlüce had rows of cushioned seats – necessary when the majority of time is spent watching panel discussions – the audience members at Feshane sat in metal folding chairs. The plentiful toilet facilities at Sötlüce were new and European, while the single bathroom at Feshane, although clean, was dingy.

Sötlüce and Feshane were attached by the 'Galata Bridge' – a scaled-down model of a prominent Istanbul bridge. The walk across took 10 to 15 minutes. However, the hub of activity was at the much larger Sötlüce. While there were roughly equal numbers of sessions held in each building, most of the lecture rooms in Sötlüce held many more people than those in Feshane. Haliç Hall in Sötlüce held 3000 persons, whereas the largest theatre in Feshane held only 300. One could easily spend the entire week without crossing the bridge; four of my interviewees affirmed they never left Sötlüce.

Because of the distance between the two conference centres, activities housed at Feshane did not have as much prominence or exposure as those at Sötlüce. The distinct facilities and atmosphere at each centre also meant the activities that occurred at Sötlüce had better resources and seemed more sophisticated than those at Feshane.

Most activities held in Sötlüce, and therefore with a more central location and better access to resources, were Forum-sponsored or hosted by organisations that already had money, resources, and powerful networks. All of the main panels were held at Sötlüce, as were the regional and political

processes (except local governments). Sütlüce also housed the press centre, the VIP area, and booths belonging to the WWC, numerous UN agencies, and regional water councils. Conversely, Feshane held meeting spaces for the 'Major Groups' as defined by Agenda 21, including NGOs, women, youth, and indigenous peoples. (Thematic panels and side events were split evenly between the two centres).

A large marquee tent attached to Sütlüce housed the WaterExpo, a trade fair of government and private water provisioning companies. The Expo was magnificent. Many booths, especially those belonging to governments, built elaborate and expensive displays with fountains and fancy lighting to attract visitors. Several booths had seating areas, and all displays lured passers-by with treats from the company's home country – baklava, marzipan, rice candies. The organisations and companies manning booths in the WaterExpo, as well as the WWC and the handful of other organisations that had booths in Sütlüce itself, hosted numerous discussions and cocktail parties; visiting the French Pavilion during lunchtime, for instance, guaranteed a glass of wine and some nice cheese, pâté, or sausage. Participants loved these cocktail events, raving that "the Dutch know how to throw a great party" or that they made excellent contacts while mingling with the crowd at the Israeli stand.

Across the inlet in Feshane, the NGO booths were housed at the Water Fair. Unlike the glamorous pavilions in the WaterExpo, these booths consisted of folding tables set up among canvas dividers. While the individuals manning these booths endeavoured to have aesthetically pleasing exhibits, displaying banners and pamphlets attractively, the space itself looked less professional than the sparkling WaterExpo. An NGO representative lamented the placement of the NGO pavilion across the inlet, as he doubted that most participants made the trek to visit Feshane: "I think it was a disappointment that the NGO pavilion was so far from the main meeting; I think lots of people never crossed the bridge or realised how it all worked". A similar statement was made by the organiser of a side event held in Feshane: "I thought given the location that they put us in that we would not get a very big turnout".

As the WaterExpo (commercial) versus Water Fair (non-profit) differentiation demonstrates, the organisations with money and resources appeared to be placed in a location where they could easily display their capital, while the poorer NGOs had limited space and relied on their inherent appeal (rather than enticements of food or lucrative partnerships) to attract visitors. This dominant/marginal differential was visible to me elsewhere. For instance, most official panels took place in well-equipped rooms with ample space, while some side events I attended were crammed into small meeting spaces that were difficult to access and sometimes forced eager audience members to sit on the floor.

Because the Forum venue gave certain groups greater ability to be heard, it created artificial power differentials between participants. Moreover, recall that different participants advocated different ways of relating to water. The power differentials created by the Forum venue affected which forms of water received the most immediate attention by Forum attendees. While every representation of water was presented in multiple panel presentations, the groups that most often advocated for each were located in separate places. Every presentation I attended in the largest lecture theatre – the most central venue at the Forum – emphasised water as a commodity and technical object; this view of water was also the only representation present at the WaterExpo exhibition tent, which had plenty of resources to attract visitors. The thematic panels on the human right to water took place in a small lecture hall in Sütlüce (where the audience often spilled out of the seats and onto the floor), but the NGO groups and side events advocating it were all placed in Feshane, or did not even enter the Forum and instead voiced their opinions through outside protests and parallel forums. Likewise, water as spirit was present in two thematic panels on Water and Culture held in Sütlüce, but it was mostly located in side events in Feshane.

For deliberative democracy to be most effective, all participants must be given equal rights and equal voice (Archibugi, 1998). If this is true, the conference centres contradicted the Forum's ideals of deliberation and dialogue by granting more visibility to only some stakeholders.

THE TURKISH WATER FORUM?

I have suggested that the siting of the Forum in the conference centres led to artificial divisions between stakeholders and between ways of advocating for water. However, the Forum's being located in Turkey, I argue, actually masked some of the discord present at the Forum.

Bond (2005) demonstrates that the geographical location of a conference matters in shaping the ethos of that conference. The symbolic importance of Istanbul and Turkey as host city and country, respectively, certainly shaped dialogue at the Forum. Speakers regularly highlighted the symbolic importance of the Forum's location in Turkey. According to the Secretary General of the Forum, Anatolia had a long history as a hydraulic civilisation: Turks grasped the importance of water a long time ago, and under the Hittites began to build dams, aqueducts and other infrastructure to manage water in a very 'rational' manner; later, the Ottomans 'worshipped' water through their *hammams*, or communal baths. Other speakers and audience members quoted the Q'uranic passage, "[w]e created out of a drop of water everything alive", highlighting the sacred importance of water in Islamic teachings. Specific to Istanbul, the Turkish Minister of the Environment said, "water flows everywhere in Istanbul, not only naturally but also manmade... Istanbul can be said to be a culture of water", highlighting the importance of the resource in the city's everyday existence.

Moreover, many participants suggested that Istanbul as a city epitomised the theme of 'Bridging Divides'. It lies on the dividing line between Asia and Europe and on the waterway connecting the Black and Mediterranean seas. Istanbul's architecture represents the three Semitic religions – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – in a fluid and appealing pastiche of distinct beliefs and influences. As a transition economy, Turkey is neither developing nor industrialised, and Turkish culture is said to embrace both the ancient and the modern (Maxwell, 2008). Forum participants were thus encouraged to learn from Turkey and Istanbul in order to successfully 'bridge divides' to address water management.

Beyond the symbolic use of Istanbul and Turkey in advancing dialogue at the Forum, I argue that the Forum's location in Turkey biased both panel discussions and media representations of the Forum toward Turkish interests. It is understandable that the host government's interests were well-represented at the Forum. However, many audience members and some panellists – including a Turkish activist – complained that the overwhelming majority of audience responses focused specifically on Turkish issues. In conversations following two separate panels, participants asked me rhetorically, "Is this the Turkish Water Forum? I thought it was supposed to be about the world". These individuals also complained that the Turkish comments were often presented as facts – i.e. "in Turkey, we know that dams are the best way to ensure water security" – making them harder to disagree with than if they were presented as opinions.

During a panel on transboundary water management, Turkish audience members booed a critical discussion of Turkey's management of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and non-ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses. The international panellists were so affronted by the Turkish contingent's behaviour – personalised verbal attacks on presenters, interruptions mid-sentence, and monopolisation of the microphone to crowd out non-Turkish participants – that they filed a formal letter of protest to the WWC. It was later revealed to the panellists that the outbursts were primarily from members of Turkey's General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (DSI) acting on instructions to 'launch a war' that were given at a preparatory meeting several weeks before the Forum.¹¹ While Turkish conduct at this session was extreme, it highlights a concerted effort to promote Turkish actions as infallible and to promote Turkish opinions at the expense of other viewpoints.

The Turkish bias also affected some media representations of the conference proceedings. A reporter with the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB), an organisation that provides reporting services at

¹¹ Personal communication, members of the London Water Research Group.

international meetings, told me that Turkish officials dictated what events the reporters could cover during the Forum. At official UN meetings, all parties to a convention fund ENB's reporting, so ENB is able to cover everything that occurs in an objective manner. At non-UN events like the World Water Forum, on the other hand, the host country pays for ENB's presence. According to the reporter, this meant that the Turkish government could dictate what events were to be covered and had the final say in the final edit of each day's bulletin. While the bulletins were advertised as inclusive, objective reports they, in fact, presented skewed pictures of the proceedings, biased toward the Turkish government's interests. Their primary interest, according to the reporter, was to demonstrate that the Forum was 'successful'. Bulletin stories therefore generally highlighted Forum successes, obscuring the omnipresent disputes and disagreements that marked so much of the conference. For instance, only one finance panel was covered during the week (IISD, 2009), even though finance was one of the most contentious topics at the Forum because of the public- versus private-funding debate. Turkish control of ENB made the Forum seem less contentious than it actually was.

A popular idea circulating at the Forum was that the Turkish government was hosting an elaborate event in order to demonstrate to Europe that they were 'European enough' to join the European Union.¹² Several interviewees who had attended previous Forums complimented Turkey on making the logistical arrangements (hotels, transport) easy to negotiate and for having good, plentiful food. The Forum Programme highlighted Istanbul's successful bid to be the 2010 European Capital of Culture: "[w]ith Istanbul becoming the 2010 European Capital of Culture, Europe will discover its own roots in Istanbul". Moreover, "Istanbul has been taking extensive steps... to establish itself as an important culture and arts centre of Europe" (World Water Forum, 2009).

Turkey has had a tumultuous history of trying to define its 'region'. It does not quite self-identify as European or Asian or Arabic/Middle Eastern, although there are Turks who claim allegiance to, or vehemently oppose, each label. Turkey is ethnically diverse. The 'Turkish' national identity and culture are a performance of unity and homogeneity, where in fact there are many competing religions, languages, and ethnicities (Navaro-Yashin, 2002). Through the World Water Forum and the European Capital of Culture campaign, Turkey was taking significant measures to establish itself as a cohesive nation that was firmly European. Perhaps the Turkish government wanted the Forum to go smoothly – to avoid large demonstrations or overly contentious panels – because it was seeking admission into the EU. By controlling the media and presenting the Turkish view on water as 'fact', they were able to portray a non-contentious (and therefore 'civilised') Forum and nation to Europe and the world.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, I have explored four mechanisms by which the World Water Forum worked against its theme of Bridging Divides for Water. First, that – because of cost, security, and size – the Forum made many participants feel unable to fully access the Forum and share their opinions. Second, that the programmatic structure of the Forum promoted simplified ways of talking about water that made translation between perspectives difficult. Third, that the physical space where Forum deliberations occurred institutionalised unequal social arrangements, making certain viewpoints more audible than others. Fourth, that the Turkish host government actively masked contestation to present a 'civilised' Forum to the world. I would like to reiterate that this paper only considered *what* happened, not *how* or *why* – I make no claims about why the Forum was structured as it was or who made those decisions. Unravelling the decision-making process behind the Forum would be a fascinating study, but one that will have to wait for a future paper.

As we move toward the 6th World Water Forum in Marseille, some lessons can be drawn from the last Forum. Politics requires choice: the freedom to imagine and create new realities. While it is

¹² The EU began the process of admitting Turkey in 2004. See Redmond, 2007 for a discussion of the political implications of Turkish EU membership.

understandable that Forum organisers desired a smooth-running event, superficial harmony works against the condition of possibility necessary for political action. The politics constrained by artificial unity will emerge: in protests, outbursts during panels, and expressed dissatisfaction. If Forum organisers want to create a harmonious deliberative forum, they need to work to give real voice to the various stakeholders. Whoever organises the Forum should have the potential to remain neutral and not significantly influence the political discourse. More importantly, all stakeholders – not just those who are scheduled to present or host a booth – need the ability to be heard.

If the purpose of the Forum is in fact to gather diverse stakeholders in constructive dialogue about water, several possible recommendations emerged from this research to help organisers achieve this goal.

- Schedule significant time for audience feedback at the end of panels and enforce timekeeping so feedback time is not squandered.
- Develop an audience response system for audience members to electronically submit comments during and after presentations.
- Before the Forum, develop an online clearing house for both organisations seeking funding and funders to submit information, which would allow participants to narrow down the thousands of potential contacts before arriving.
- Offer equal quality of space to all organisations wishing to host a booth.
- Finally, create a steering committee to evaluate the many dynamics at play that might influence the political process at the Forum, ranging from choice of venue, to thematic structure, to the scheduling of different Forum components. If possible, this committee could create an adaptive management plan to restructure the Forum as it proceeds in order to enhance the dialogue.

These are brief recommendations, not intended to completely fix the mechanisms I discussed in this paper. Critiques of other aspects of the World Water Forum are available elsewhere (e.g. Barlow and Clark, 2002; Gleick and Lane, 2005; Salman, 2003, 2004). My primary critique of the 5th World Water Forum is the disjoint between its officially published goals and the Forum's creation of polarised viewpoints and power differentials that counteracted attempts toward 'Bridging Divides for Water'. I end with a question for future organisers: why articulate a single desired goal if you do not have the mechanisms in place to achieve it?

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