

• The World Water Forum: who discusses what and how?

Matthieu Blanchard et François Molle,
UMR G-Eau, Montpellier, France

Background

Sustainability science not only involves the practice of inter-disciplinarity but must also serve as a way of integrating – or at least a way of confronting – different points of view, world-views or ways of knowing. This should lead to knowledge production that is richer in plural values and, ultimately, to more inclusive and better accepted decision-making. For example, the wide variety of issues surrounding water are partly shaped within epistemic communities, but also at times when these communities intersect and interact. The World Water Forums (WWFs) are key events in this regard. However, on the eve of the ninth WWF in Dakar in 2022, the content of the debates in these forums is still relatively unexplored.

Contact

francois.molle@ird.fr

Further reading

BLANCHARD M., 2021 – *Les Forums mondiaux de l'eau parviennent-ils à exposer la diversité du monde de l'eau ?* Mémoire du Master Eau, université de Montpellier.

The unmissable World Water Forums

Water is crucial to our societies and our environment, and the number of major international water events continues to increase. Jointly organised by the World Water Council (WWC) – based in Marseille – and a host city, the World Water Forums are defined by the WWC as events that bring together “participants from all levels and fields, including politics, multilateral institutions, academia, civil society and the private sector” (WWC, 2021). They combine a series of thematic sessions and various “processes” (regional, parliamentary, ministerial, etc.) with an exhibition area hosting the pavilions of various countries or organisations. They have been held every three years since 1997 and are attended by between 15,000 and 30,000 people from around 170 countries, although the vast majority of participants are from the host country. The sheer scale of WWFs and the variety of topics discussed and people attending make each one an essential meeting of the “world of water”. But how much networking, learning and consensus do WWFs really stimulate? Do attendees really talk about everything? How do they decide who is going to talk, about what and in which format? What mechanisms, intentionally or otherwise, create exclusion or facilitate inclusion? Some of the answers to these questions are given below, based on a study conducted in 2021.

Benefits and stated criticisms

WWFs can be used as a reference point to keep track of how water concepts and issues develop. Attendees can learn about new issues and expand their knowledge. But first and foremost, WWFs are just like any “trade fair”: a unique opportunity to make new contacts and network with a wide range of stakeholders. However, the forums have been criticised for their disproportionately high cost, a lack of quantifiable results, sanitised messages, a lack of continuity (the feeling of “starting from scratch” each time), how they overlap with other events, such as the Stockholm or Singapore Water Weeks, and lastly their failure to obtain commitments from governments, given the absence of any link with the United Nations.

From structural constraints to inclusion

Increasing the number of sessions and topics does not necessarily mean that different sensitivities or worldviews will be represented. The topics and sessions, and also their coordinators, are defined during the preparatory process launched by a kick-off meeting two years before the forum. Attending numerous meetings and being involved in the coordination and organisation requires a lot of resources in terms of time and funding. Ultimately, organisations that have the necessary resources, knowledge of the system and an

interest in setting the agenda tend to dominate the process. As a consequence, civil society gets involved mainly through NGO platforms or coalitions (such as the “Butterfly Effect”), whose objective is more about visibility of causes and advocacy than about global or targeted protest. In addition to these constraints, the language barrier and the host country’s shifting attitude towards civil society also influence citizen participation at the WWF.

Referring to an “international water community” and a search for consensus does not disguise the fact that international organisations (UN, professional associations, banks, etc.), a highly standardised format of expression and

an “authorised language” (in Bourdieu’s terms) dominate the debates, ruling out certain ways of seeing or thinking.

In fact, NGOs that disagree the most with the mainstream recommendations that WWFs tend to produce generally choose not to attend and/or contribute to the Alternative World Water Forum. This strategy combines the intention not to endorse the WWF’s messages with the aim of gaining greater media coverage. It is most often adopted by citizen or alternative organisations, while international NGOs, such as IUCN or Wetlands International, along with international or state bodies, are more concerned with publicising their work and proving their relevance to the WWF



The WWF session coordinators and the topics they cover.

or the world of water. The most divisive issues are urban water services and their privatisation, dams and transboundary management.

A lack of legitimacy?

The WWC's legitimacy in bringing people together and its capacity for inclusion seem to be weakened by its internal governance structure. The election of the 35 members of the Board of Governors leads to coalitions prepared in advance by the mass co-option of organisations: the 12 countries with the largest number of members include seven of the eight countries that have already organised

the WWF. France has had five governors (the maximum) since the WWC was founded, reinforcing the impression that the organisation is dominated by France and, for some, by the major French water companies. Some countries such as Canada, Germany and the UK have little or no representation. WWC's business model, based on the shared income from the WWFs and sponsors, relegates it to an organisational role, and its ambition to become a think-tank, for example, has not materialised. All these factors mean that WWC and its Board of Governors struggle to reflect the world of water as a whole and suffer from a lack of legitimacy, particularly in parts of the English-speaking world.

KEY POINTS

The World Water Forums, organised by the World Water Council and a host country every three years, are important meetings for the world of water. Despite the WWC's determination to secure broad participation from civil society, there are still many barriers to balanced debate. The organisational dominance of certain mainstream stakeholders who share a common vision, the level of resources required to participate in the process, and the lack of legitimacy of the WWC at the international level tend to limit the scope of the WWFs and the diversity of views and key messages that they generate. Addressing these limitations would improve the fairness of the multi-stakeholder discussions that take place at the WWFs, thereby strengthening a shared vision for water resource management.

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UNDERSTAND, CO-CONSTRUCT, TRANSFORM

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