

April 20, 2005

Ing. César Herrera Toledo  
Vice Director  
National Water Commission / Comisión Nacional del Agua  
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Delegación Coyoacán, México D.F.

Dear Mr. Herrera:

As co-chairs of the "Water, Development, and U.S. Policy" dialogue convened by the Aspen Institute and the Nicholas Institute, March 30 - April 2, we are writing to report to you and other organizers of the 4th World Water Forum about the results of our meeting. Your January 6th letter to John A. Riggs at Aspen invited our contribution, which we are pleased to provide.

We had a full and stimulating discussion among some 30 participants, who came from a variety of sectors and backgrounds - environment, development, the public sector, private companies and more (a list of participants is attached). We will send the report and the website link when it is final. In addition to brief descriptions of nongovernmental, corporate, and other initiatives by U.S. groups working internationally to bring water and sanitation to communities, schools, and other venues, we anticipate the report will contain the following highlights:

- The need is clear to elevate the priority for clean water, sanitation, and hygiene education by governments, donor agencies, companies, and others; and progress is as much a matter of building political will as it is of building capacity and securing finance.

- As a signature initiative, agencies and institutions, including the private sector, should be mobilized to get water and sanitation to all schools and orphanages within a generation.
- The U.S. government should prepare a strategy for greater international leadership and participate constructively in the 4th World Water Forum.
- A large need exists for public investments to improve water resources management.
- Improving governance by creating a legal and regulatory framework for water resources management is as important as, and must accompany, greater funding.
- Except in the poorest countries, domestic sources of investment will have to cover most of the costs of water service improvements.
- Point-of-use and other community and household level interventions can offer immediate health benefits.
- Integrated water resources management can make an essential contribution to clean water and health, as well as other goals.

We are especially pleased that your colleague Francisco Gurria was able to join us to speak about preparations for the Forum. His presentation and remarks prompted an excellent discussion of the opportunities and concerns, which we summarize below.

First, with Mexico hosting this international Forum, a tremendous opportunity exists to shine the spotlight on the urgent need for clean water, sanitation, and hygiene education in Mexico, as well as throughout the developing world. Elevating the priority at home and among your neighbors in the region should be possible. In his opening remarks, President Fox has a unique platform to command world attention to this problem, speaking with passion and from a position of strength given all that you are doing in Mexico to address water issues. It is our understanding, for example, that Mexico is moving away from the notion of water as a free good, recognizing that clean water and sanitation have costs and those costs must be covered. Further, we understand that the

new water law assigns responsibility for water management to state and local governments, and that the shift in irrigation from government control to user groups is nearly complete. These are important and timely moves and we urge that President Fox explain what Mexico is doing and why for the benefit of many of the assembled countries.

Second, the Forum's emphasis on solutions, tangible on-the-ground results, models, examples, case studies, and partnerships strike us as right on target, as embodied in the overarching theme "Local Actions for a Global Challenge." Past Forums have witnessed fundamental disagreements over philosophy, ideology, and strategy that have impeded progress, in our view. Though some of these issues may resurface, we hope they won't again distract from the most fundamental questions of how to improve access to clean water and sanitation to people in need and how to improve management of water resources for the benefit of all. Showcasing what works, why, and the lessons learned, we believe, will inspire others and make the point these water problems are solvable with sufficient will, finances, and know-how.

Third, communications and public relations planning are critical to the Forum's success. Not only can extensive publicity about the Forum advance the cause of clean water and sanitation in Mexico and worldwide, but we understand there may be an alternative civil society forum, which will be competing for media attention with the main Forum. We applaud your efforts to involve NGO leaders in the main Forum, at the Fair, on panels and in workshops, and in other venues. They often bring a rich experience of working directly with communities and local people, they bring a perspective that differs from that of government officials, and their involvement would be valuable. We encourage you to continue to seek their input in the planning and their participation during all or part of the Forum. One way might be to include a specific session or two on the key issues they cite - for example, water as a human right or private sector participation - to give them a voice at the Forum and structure the discussion.

News media, as no doubt you know, thrive on controversy and will try to exploit the differences between the main Forum and a civil society forum. There is no way to rein in top reporters, nor should you try. But

providing them a steady diet of good experts and practitioners with whom to speak, project briefings, field visits, regular announcements, and story ideas and themes or messages for the day should help - in other words, a very active program for media. Remarks by President Fox and other prominent speakers throughout the Forum should help frame and underscore the issues. Former heads of state like Oscar Arias have enormous credibility and should attract attention. Other high profile celebrities or officials, likewise, can help present and amplify the Forum's messages.

Mr. Gurria stated that Forum organizers are working to find a few simple messages to come out of the Forum. This is welcome news. Our meeting recognized the need for a simple compelling message that conveys both the urgency of the water challenge and the ability to solve it, as a means of raising awareness and building public support. We were a technical and policy group, however, and did not arrive at any consensus about that message. We concluded that involving communications or public relations professionals would be worthwhile.

Fourth, Mr. Gurria asked us to suggest some U.S. examples that might be relevant. One is the Tennessee Valley Authority. In the 1930s, more than 90 percent of the people in this large, multi-state region had no electricity, about three-fourths had no piped water, few had radios, and less than a quarter of the people owned cars or trucks. Most lived on subsistence farming. Soil erosion and flooding were ruinous. Within a generation, that all changed. TVA saved billions of dollars by preventing floods. It helped farmers conserve productive soils. It led to improvements in health, literacy, and industrial production. It brought electricity, refrigeration, navigable links to seaports, and revenues from hydropower to devote to community development. TVA's history underscores that large public infrastructure investments can pay off handsomely, indeed they may be essential to spur economic growth. Countries around the world at a stage of development comparable to where the Tennessee Valley was in the 1930s might benefit from understanding this experience.

The United States also has considerable experience, including both successes and failures, that might usefully be shared about river basin

management, large scale restoration and the importance of incorporating ecological values into water resources management. Our country has learned, often at extensive cost, that healthy, functioning ecological systems are critical to human and economic well-being.

Our recent experience with more efficient use of water may also be relevant to Mexico and Forum participants. In large measure due to improved efficiency of use in agriculture and industry, U.S. water consumption has remained in total about where it was in the mid 1970s and on a per capita basis about where it was in the 1950s.

Fifth, our personal experience on U.S. delegations to large international meetings suggests it may be too much to ask Ministers to forego negotiating an accord. Mr. Gurria stated that the Forum's hosts hope to draw a sizable official U.S. delegation, as well as many other participants from our country. We, too, hope that comes to pass. To help make it more likely, regarding the Ministerial Declaration, we urge that you use your government's good offices to ensure that the Ministers are not asked to negotiate new international rights or norms in the water sector. To ask for such negotiations, in our view, may well prove divisive and discourage high-level U.S. government participation.

There is much positive to say in a Declaration: Urging prompt action, reasserting internationally agreed to goals, recognizing the importance of partnerships, applauding commitments that have been made, underscoring the value of more efficient water use and the centrality of good water resource management to the health of people, economies, and the environment. These and other elements would seem fine and non-controversial. Too often, the Declaration is negotiated as if it is the most important output. Frankly, our hope would be that Ministers would not have to devote a majority of their time at the Forum to negotiating a Declaration on which there is disagreement over lengthy, bracketed text. It is the examples and models which will motivate others that most deserve time and attention.

We would hope to see the Ministers visit field projects, take part in workshops to learn what has worked, stay accessible to press, and meet with their counterparts and others to develop and launch initia-

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tives to further extend water services to the poor and promote other Forum objectives. The partnerships that could emerge, given the opportunity for willing Ministers and others to meet, would be a far more exciting result from the 4th World Water Forum than another Declaration on water. In the end, our discussions led us to conclude that the time for talking about water problems has passed, the time for emphasizing solutions and action is now.

This 4th World Water Forum is an immense undertaking and all the dialogue participants join in wishing you and your fellow organizers great success. We would be pleased to discuss any of the above points at greater length if that is helpful.

We look forward to seeing you in Mexico City a little less than a year from now. With every good wish,

Sincerely yours,

William K. Reilly

Harriet C. Babbitt

Cc: Francisco Gurria  
Rodolfo Ogarrio