

WORLD WATER WEEK

August 20th - 26th 2006

Stockholm

CONFERENCE THEME - BEYOND RIVERS

NOTE FROM Ms BHARTI PATEL, DIRECTOR, SVARAJ

Much of the focus and emphasis this year, I felt, was on the role of the private sector in water management. Although the conference delegation was made up of NGOs, academics, politicians and scientists, there was a heavy presence of the corporate sector as well.

There was much talk on agriculture being the biggest user of water and that therefore farmers should be more responsible - almost pointing towards reducing agriculture as a solution to the problem of preserving our scarce water resources. However, there was no mention of the role of industry as one of the key abusers of water - through over drawing and polluting ground water.

Both Mr Gangi Reddy (from Svaraj's Andhra Pradesh partner Chaitanya) and I used every opportunity to raise issues relevant to us with possible solutions to these problems including questioning the current economic paradigm.

Gender Workshop - In this workshop, I raised the issue of the role of women in food production and argued that there needs to be a better understanding of gender roles which go beyond the household - in particular, gender roles in traditional agricultural practices where women were managing local water bodies and were responsible for protecting indigenous seeds and seed systems. With the move away from subsistence farming to more market / finance based agri-practices - i.e. to mono cash cropping and contract farming, this knowledge is disappearing fast and the role of women has been reduced to providing cheap casual labour and as sellers of produce.

This practice undervalues and under-utilizes women's traditional skills and knowledge. It is vital, therefore, in any analysis of the role of women in IWRM that serious consideration is given to:

1. The revival of traditional practices and revaluing of traditional skills in the modern economy similar to that of cases of equal-pay-for-equal-value in northern developed countries;
2. To critique current gender roles in the new agri-economy and its true value to the local economy and the country.

Closing Basins Workshop

Much of the presentation was on water use by agriculture and rights of downstream and upstream users. I commented on the need to take into account issues of not only the users but also abusers and losers of water. Here, the role of industries in polluting both surface and ground water through the indiscriminate discharge of effluents directly into local water bodies and the environment cannot be ignored. It is the cause of many of the major concerns on the Musi River sub-basin in Hyderabad.

Plenary - on the issues of food security at the plenary session, the question was how to address problems of obesity in the northern countries on the one hand, to that of malnutrition in the southern. I was able to point out the changes in the land use pattern, wherein many of the developing countries were moving away from cultivating traditional crops - such as ragi, wheat and millet to grapes for wine and pesticideloaded fruits such as pomegranates for export. The agri-economy is now focused on its contribution to the country's GDP rather than the dietary needs of its people. The poor are now faced with this Hobson's choice.

Mr Gangi Reddy (from Svaraj's Andhra Pradesh partner Chaitanya) commented on the exploitation of groundwater and the loss of moisture in the sub-soil. His intervention was greatly appreciated and people were eager to learn more on this subject.