

Rural Water Crisis Session

Reclaiming Public Water Gathering

Brussels, Belgium

Feb 1–3, 2010

Attending session: S. Manoharan, Anil Naidoo, Sékou Diarra, Uwe Hoering, Martin Pigeon, André Abreu, Buboy Dargantes, Daniel Moss, Mary Ann Manahan, Pauline Lavaud, Sophie Clesse, Raffaella Cavallo, John Jones, Paolo Rezza, Rafael Colmeneres, Kees Kodde, Ross Eventon, Jerry van den Berge, Philipp Terhorst, Christiane Hansen, Andre, Aziz Latrach, Mathias Ladstatter

Coordinators: Daniel Moss and Mary Ann Manahan

The group met to consider how the RPW's network can deepen its work on rural water systems.

The agenda for the meeting was the following:

- i) Define the varied forms of rural water systems – what do we mean by rural water
- ii) What are the threats to rural water that we ought to pay attention to?
- iii) What support do rural water struggles need?
- iv) Who are key allies to cultivate?
- v) What are the next steps for RPW?

Defining Rural Water Systems

We noted that defining rural water is difficult because the water flowing between urban and rural is the same - although sources are generally in rural areas. There tends to be a preponderant focus on urban water. 80% of the people that don't have access to water live in rural areas.

More or less 60% of the water we use in the world is for agriculture. We must consider the effect of using water for agriculture on small communities as well as the pollution related to agricultural use of water. Many mining projects around the world affect the whole ecological cycle, so this point was added to Colombia's recent water referendum.

The uses of water in rural area – household drinking, irrigation - and the different decentralized and centralized systems mean that issues of privatization and corporate control vary considerably. For example, the local government in India has taken responsibility for water but its management is decentralised. Local water management

bodies provide water in villages. In Tamil Nadu, there are 40,000 water bodies mostly under the control of citizens. Worldwide, irrigation systems vary from indigenous-owned systems to private to state systems.

Threats to Rural Water:

Urbanisation, inequitable distribution, production based on monoculture and plantations, food production and consumption patterns, meat-focused agriculture, the difficulty of organising workers in rural areas, mining and resource extraction, mega infrastructure projects such as dams, land grabbing by companies and states, the creation of markets to capture and allocate resources, climate change monies being made available for programs like the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD) – as payment for environmental services, the impact of climate change itself and the conflicts this can produce - transboundary conflicts, need for improved sanitation, pollution of ground water due to agricultural practices – pesticides, aerial spraying etc., privatization of water sources, the non-recognition of water as a right/its perception as a need, the push by corporations to have a price placed on water.

RPW should grapple with payment for environmental services schemes – look at how they might pay for watershed restoration and resist how they commodify water and labor involved in watershed restoration. Accounting for non-use values can help communities to maintain ownership of water supplies by helping them see the value of their water. The right to water in rural areas is complicated. Is there a right to water for agriculture?

Defense of rural water:

In the southern US, some indigenous irrigation systems have won legal standing: Las Acequias Association. In this case there is a land trust and small informal irrigation systems with legal standings. They are families with small plots but they decide how the water is allocated – an example of a customary system and enshrined in civil law.

In the Philippines and elsewhere, there are also initiatives by public utilities that allow communities to manage and maintain the water source for the cities. These forms of ‘partnerships’ between public utilities and communities provide examples of defending rural water systems.

In Thailand, Focus on the Global South has found several interesting rural water alternatives. Farmers downstream affected by upstream use sought conversation with upstream users for equitable distribution of the water. It’s important to look at the inter-user discussions that take place, including rural-urban discussions/multiple interest groups/”stakeholder” deliberations.

Cross-boundary watershed work that crosses traditional political jurisdictions is important and difficult. Advances were made in cleaning up the Rhine River, although that was not a community-led process. We must be on alert for companies for abusing

water that relocate in the global south to continue bad practices.

Alliances:

Alliances will be crucial especially with environmentalists and rural dwellers; this is the convergence of human and ecological rights. New York City, for example, invests upstream by paying people not to pollute. We need to expand our work to account for the upstream situation, especially where there is co-management. Future documentation by RPW of case studies should look at cases where managed holistically.

In the Philippines watershed protection upstream is used as an argument to protect people's jobs downstream. Water facilities downstream have less water to distribute when aquifers upstream are not recharged through careful groundwater management. We have to look at upstream health as a workers rights issue as well, bringing in the dimension of labor-management cooperation. That raises the question of who pays for environmental services upstream.

It also raises questions of who owns the land where groundwater is being recharged. The market solution, which assigns monetary value to nature, for use or non use, has shown itself to be unable to protect ground and surface water. Desertification is a prime example of our failure to manage water. We need to pay attention to the UN process on desertification and raise these upstream/downstream issues there.

It is incumbent upon RPW to show how we add value to discussion and activism on rural water. There are many groups already working. As we advance we need a scoping exercise to determine who is doing what and what our value added might be. Many of these issues do and should emerge in the climate change discussion.

One concrete possibility is to ensure discussion of rural water in the working group on climate change and water. Another is to have a separate working group on rural water. Discussion about rural water will take place in Cochabamba in April 2010 at the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the water wars.

In RPW's history, it has been difficult to move ahead with the rural water work because the groups in the RPW network are largely urban groups. There are fewer groups working on rural water, and when they are it is normally part of something larger including food, land, etc. Very few rural groups work only on water. The food crisis now is very much related to the water issue. There was a sense in the group that our view should be broadened. We must seek alliance with groups like the Via Campesina. Of course we must look at our capacity to pursue new alliances and make our work commitments accordingly.

Next Steps

- Seek opportunities to promote watershed restoration and investment to improve rural communities' access to water and improve water quality and quantity for

people and nature

- Strengthen urban-rural link so urban areas have a stake in sustainable watershed management upstream
- Write up successful cases about this kind of holistic water management for RPW 2.0.
- Prevent private sector manipulation of climate change discussions and programs that do not treat water as a commons
- Participate as a network in the Cochabamba meeting and COP16 to promote public and community management of rural water
- Engage in scoping project on rural water to assess what other groups are already doing and where RPW can add value. This includes a review of the Rural Water forum that was held in Barcelona in 2006. One of the entry points in the scoping exercise and as part of the focus of the RPW network on alternatives, is to look at the forms and kinds of alternatives in the rural water systems. Mary Ann, Jerry and Daniel volunteered.