

Taking on the Privatizers at the World Water Forum

International water activists – including representatives of the Council of Canadians and our Blue Planet Project – took on the world’s biggest water privatizers at the 5th World Water Forum (WWF) this March where we helped secure agreement from 25 countries to challenge a ministerial declaration released at the forum that defines water as a “need” rather than a “right.” Sixteen countries also signed a statement calling for an end to the forum.

The Council’s Blue Planet Project has been at the forefront of the fight for international water justice for many years. Our goals going into the WWF were to build on the previous success we had mobilizing the global water justice movement and press for a UN process to take over hosting a global water forum.

The World Water Forum is organized by the World Water Council (WWC) – an umbrella organization of more than 300 members, ranging from NGOs and citizens’ groups to financial institutions and public sector representatives. But despite the WWC’s multi-stakeholder image, it is largely dominated by the agenda of the world’s biggest private water companies, including Suez, Vivendi and RWE Thames. The Blue Planet Project has joined other concerned groups in pointing out that the water companies care more about profiting from a global water crisis than working towards sustainable public solutions that ensure access to clean, safe water for everyone.

In total, close to 300 international activists came to Turkey explicitly to fight against the World Water Forum. They came from 67 different countries and represented key struggles, main social movements and strong regional networks working on water issues.



Blue Planet Project (BPP) Organizer Anil Naidoo and BPP founder Maude Barlow stand under a sign opposing water privatization in Istanbul, Turkey where the fifth World Water Forum took place.

“We wanted to seize the messaging and use the concentration of international media to ensure the voices of those struggling for sustainable and just solutions to the crisis were heard,” explains Anil Naidoo, Project Organizer for the Council’s Blue Planet Project (BPP) who was in Turkey with the Council’s National Chairperson Maude Barlow and National Water Campaigner Meera Karunanathan. “We were committed

to bringing together hundreds of global activists in Istanbul and finding ways that those voices could be expressed.”

But expressing their voices and concerns wasn’t easy. Protests held on the opening days of the forum were met by a strong police presence, arrests and violence.

“[Turkish groups] organized the initial protest in Kadikoy Square and at the

“We could not have believed we would get this kind of support, and it is not over,” said Naidoo.

“We are working on a process to use this support to launch our further efforts at the UN.”

opening of the forum at Sutluce [the site of the WWF]. This was broken up by rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannons ... heavily interwoven with police brutality,” describes Naidoo. “Still these efforts brought the attention on the forum into clear focus. Immediately after the oppression, a group of us went into the

opening press conference of the World Water Council to ask questions of the Executive Director, demanding that the council denounce the oppression.”

Following that, Maude Barlow, Senior Advisor on Water Issues to Father Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann, President of the UN General Assembly, delivered a speech on behalf of Father Brockmann calling for a binding UN covenant on the right to water and bringing the WWF forum under a UN process.

Water justice activists then met with political representatives attending the forum. The result was growing opposition to the WWC’s stance on water and a significant pushback by a group of countries against the WWF ministerial statement. By the end of the forum, 25 countries demanded the human right to water be in the official ministerial declaration and 16 countries called for a UN water forum to replace the World Water Council’s water forum.

Meera Karunanathan