

Capacity for Development

Toward better understanding of sensitive water issues

March 9, 2003—Water is at once the most ordinary and most precious of substances. Taken for granted even where it is becoming scarce, it can be an intensely sensitive issue both within and across borders—and very hard to write about in an arresting way. Unless a drought, flood, or controversial reform proposal—usually involving privatization, cost recovery, or both—grabs the attention of editors and decisionmakers, water issues usually don't make the front page. Even when water is front and center, its political sensitivity, and the desire of elites in many countries to avoid public scrutiny of their actions, can make it difficult for journalists to cover the issue comprehensively—and safely.

To better address this sensitive topic, the Water Media Network selected 68 print, broadcast, and television journalists who traveled to Kyoto last month for the 3rd World Water Forum, where 5,000 water specialists and policymakers joined forces to avert the looming global water crisis. The journalists were selected from more than 200 applicants for the quality of their water-related reporting through a global competition and sponsored by the Water Media Network, a World Water Council program funded by the governments of The Netherlands and Japan, WBI, ADB, IDB, and the European Commission.

"We wanted top-notch journalists who have reported on water, and who are developing a specialty in the sector," says Tracey Osborne, program manager of the Water Media Network for WBI. "Many of the winning journalists have attended our workshops and are getting a better understanding of water issues." Most of the journalists were from major national papers, television and radio stations and a few trade papers such as Asian Water and Sewage.

The winning journalists wrote more than 400 stories during the week not just about the forum, but about water issues in their countries. The journalists represented nearly forty different countries including Bolivia, Nigeria, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, India, Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines, Turkey, Laos, Fiji, and Peru.

Participants had a big job to find stories out of the more than 364 sessions being hosted at the event, but



The Water Media Network brought journalists together for a regional workshop in Budapest to study water issues. Here, the journalists examine an aerial photo of the Danube River Basin.



theme days and regional days allowed journalists to track down speakers on areas of interest and from their region. Many of the journalists watched the launch of the Iraq war in the press room in Kyoto and had to bring attention to water issues in the midst of a major international crisis

The journalists also ran a session on "Why Trust the Press" which included reporters from the Financial Times, The Economist and the Global Water Report. The lively discussion focused on contentious issues such as the reporting on the Cochabamba water privatization in Bolivia, how to "sell" water issues, when there are "bigger" stories that sell, and how "misinformation" gets spread quickly over boundaries.

The trip caps a program of workshops, field visits, networking, and distance learning that has connected 400 participating journalists with water specialists and other research resources to help them better explore the social, environmental, regulatory, and financial aspects of water supply and use.

"Journalists as opinion builders play a key role in framing national political debates on water sector development," says Sergio Jellinek, Senior Communications Officer for ESSD. "By empowering them with relevant specialization in technical areas, the debate becomes less ideological and more issues driven." John Roberts of the *Global Water Report* agrees. "What's wanted is best practice," he urges, "whether practiced by a publicly run utility or one that is managed by a private company."

To impart specialized information, the Water Media Network has held workshops for journalists in every one of the Bank's regions. In Chile for example, reporters from all over Latin America discussed and debated issues of private-sector participation in water supply and sanitation. Although many of the journalists were disposed against privatization, the workshop allowed them to understand the financial, technical, and economic arguments of the sector and to hear from representatives of nonprofit organizations involved in water issues.

Participating journalists seem to have valued these regional events. "All the stakeholders put forth their views frankly and very clearly," claims Sudha Nagaray of India's *Economic Times*. "All the complexities, contradictions, and conflicts were out there in the open."

The Water Media Network, which arose from the 2nd

World Water Forum in 2000, is now a virtual network of more than 700 journalists from all over the world who share contacts and stories in a mutual effort to improve water reporting and keep shortages, corruption, and conflict at bay.

Capacity for Development is a monthly column contributed by WBI on building capacity with clients through knowledge and learning.

Useful Links: To learn more about the Water Media Network, [click here](#).