

“Water and Sanitation: Faith Roles in Responding to Global Challenges” Meeting Report
Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs

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DRAFT

On the morning of March 18, 2011, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) hosted a meeting exploring faith dimensions of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). The meeting’s goal, held four days before World Water Day, was to work towards developing an agenda for further research by the Berkley Center and WFDD. The meeting offered an opportunity for a free-flowing exchange of views and ideas on the global WASH agenda and on what approaches promise the greatest impact. This summary captures the broad themes that emerged in the conversation. A list of participants is included on the last page.

The meeting began with an overview of the mission and activities of the Berkley Center and WFDD, giving particular attention to the multi-year survey of critical issues at the intersection of religion and international development, undertaken with the support of the Henry R. Luce Foundation. Previous investigations have focused on tuberculosis, malaria, HIV/AIDS, governance issues, gender, and shelter; they have tracked the engagement of faith-inspired organizations around a set of core policy challenges, with an emphasis on common problems, ethical commitments, and best practices. The mission of the two organizing institutions—Berkley Center and WFDD—were described as, respectively, to research knowledge gaps and to bridge the religious and secular divide in the world of policy. Katherine Marshall described concerns around the work of faith-linked groups that are quite common in non-religious development institutions: religion is divisive; it is seen as dangerous to progress and modernization; its importance in modern societies is diminishing rapidly; and emotions about religion run too high for professional reflection. Even so, each barrier can be addressed by dialogue, facts, and increased engagement.

The group agreed on the importance of addressing sanitation, hygiene, and behavioral change alongside issues of water access, and thinking not only of water quantity but quality; to use the language of the UN Human Rights declaration, water that is “safe, clean, accessible, and affordable.”

The meeting turned to the question of what the main output of the project was expected to be. The hope is that the forthcoming report will provide an evaluation of relevant projects, describing what is being provided by faith-inspired organizations “on the ground,” as well as identifying potential bottlenecks around these issues. The discussion turned on whether this initiative should focus on rural urban water needs, or if it should include water access and sanitation within urban centers. While some organizations, like World Vision, concentrate their water programs in rural areas, issues of urban water and sanitation need greater attention in a world that is becoming ever more urban; this was recognized in the theme of World Water Day 2011, “Water for Cities: Responding to the Urban Challenge.”

Given the spiritual implications of water, what are the ways that religious leaders can and have become involved in addressing these challenges? Many participants noted that faith-based communities are increasingly playing roles in raising awareness about the WASH challenge by raising funds and reaching out to Congress (in the US, and in other countries). There are existing networks bringing such groups together, though several participants noted difficulties in bringing in non-Christian organizations and individuals; Christian groups working on water are far more visible. One

participant raised a concern that within many of these conversations, the more vocal groups set the agenda. He expressed a need for a professionalized approach to religion within organizations.

On the implementation side, a number of participants emphasized that faith-based organizations can be critical in delivering water and sanitation services, as well as hygiene education. The body of experience and knowledge of faith-based organizations is not fully acknowledged, but local religious bodies, especially ones with linkages to school systems, can play a role in the implementation of water, hygiene, and sanitation projects.

It is also vital to address sustainability issues, including supply chains and the community organization component. While new technologies, such as GIS mapping of water sources, are useful in this regard, there is also a large potential for local faith institutions to contribute to the sustainability of water and sanitation interventions. Building wells, boreholes, and sanitation systems is the relatively easier step; the existing relationships and leadership within religious communities can be central in maintaining and managing these structures after the NGOs have left.

Another important religious link, noted by Maria Figueroa of Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School for Public Health, is the meaning of water in different cultures and regions. In India, water is understood as clean (you won't find a dry bathroom), while in many places in Africa certain sources of water are understood as "owned" by spirits and can't be used. It is important to understand the way these cultural and religious meanings come into play.

Another theme that emerged in the meeting was the potential for faith traditions to encourage a culture of water, one where we respect water and pay attention to how we use it. In the words of one participant, "We are seeing a growing awareness of our role as stewards of the environment and stewards of common welfare," and this is something religious groups can be promoting. There was a call to explore further the moral dimension to water and to emphasize that our old approaches to water use are not sustainable.

While the UN General Assembly's recognition this past July of the human right to water was an important accomplishment, it raises further questions of how to operationalize and understand this right, especially in light of the many ethical debates over water resource management on a global and regional scale. The World Council of Churches, among other religious groups, has been central to these conversations, but the proper role of the private sector in water management and distribution is still not settled. A participant noted the extensive commercialization in rural India, leading to unreliable service and increased fees for the poor, even in a state where the government does have policies on rural water supply. A central player in these discussion is Catarina de Albuquerque, the first UN independent expert on human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation, appointed in 2008 (de Albuquerque's title was changed in March 2011 to Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, and her mandate extended for an additional three years.).

During the discussion, Dennis Warner of Catholic Relief Services enumerated five issues that, in his view, merit greater consideration:

- Accepting that the privatization of water and the viewing of water as an economic good is already an established fact, while finding a way to integrate an understanding of water as a human right into that.

- Encouraging lifeline water services as an absolute baseline for both government and private service-providers; it is necessary to better understand the difference between the privileged economic developmental view of water and water as an essential need.
- Identifying and publicizing egregious examples of exploitation of the water of the vulnerable and poor, examples that clearly demonstrate human right conflicts.
- Bringing together high-profile spokesmen associated with a wide spectrum of religious groups to make a joint advocacy statement that water access is essential for humanity.
- Showing how different faith statements can support international conventions on water. It is critical to identify the messages within different faith traditions that support our goals.

The meeting then turned to highlighting the key problems within this sector, including ones that are often overlooked. A common theme was that boreholes and wells are only a small part of meeting the water needs of poor people. In highlighting the centrality of water, participants raised the impact of water needs on population issues, as well as migration as a consequence of water shortages (either man-made or because of climate change). Participants also emphasized the need to keep climate change central to this discussion. Many of the key problems transcend boundaries: Dennis Warner also brought up the difficult case of the West Bank, where Israel controls the aquifer and water is then sold at high costs to Palestinians. This is a situation where faith is driving divisive wedges.

The discussion returned to the question of the audience for this work: private citizens (and potential donors/advocates) within the United States; corporate bodies; national governments (where there is a wide range in each country of approaches and emphases); and/or global bodies? Another core question was the range of focus: between trying to identify many issues or focusing on a few priority lines. It was pointed out that most people don't know 90 percent of information on water that people need to know, and that much work is being done in a fragmented way that needs to be better brought together. The cross-disciplinary nature of water interventions is one factor that makes this particularly difficult. How well do the existing networks work? And how effective are they at bringing valuable information to the people on the frontlines?

Katherine Marshall emphasized that we have no illusions that this will be a comprehensive review; the idea is to try to do a general sketch of how things fit together, and then to find a plausible sample of stories and examples that will help to bring these issues to people's attention. Suggestions were made to document egregious cases, raise awareness, and identify the places where things are not working. Some suggested focusing on common area of agreement. There was a call to paint an up-to-date, granular picture of what is happening on the ground around the world: What are the sticking points? What are the biggest gaps? Until you get to the country level, you can't know how many services are provided by faith-inspired organizations; water is an issue that is both very local, and very global.

List of Participants

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Susy Cheston

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Karen Dickman

Executive Director & Water Program Manager / Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy

David Dyjack

Director of Health / Adventist Development and Relief Agency

Maria Figueroa

Director of the Global Program on Water and Hygiene / Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School for Public Health

Shelley Moskowitz

Manager of Public Policy and Mobilization / Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

Dennis Warner

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