

Personal Stories of Change

Robin Simpson: A perspective from a consumer NGO representative

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Robin Simpson works as a Senior Policy advisor for Consumers International and as an independent consultant for other multilateral organisations and NGOs. He has worked with consumer organisations on water and infrastructure issues in the EU, Central & Eastern Europe and Latin America. Robin writes:

“I was asked to join the founding group of The Water Dialogues in 2003 to represent the consumer perspective. I joined partly out of curiosity and partly out of a desire to hear other perspectives in a setting geared towards listening to new points of view. At the time, David Boys, who invited me to join the group, and who was one of the very small number of people responsible for initiating the whole process, estimated that the scoping phase of the project would only last 18 months and that our role in the project would finish once the Scoping Study was presented. He was right about the first part of the process but I think none of us envisaged that we would still be here six years later! In the event, our extended role as the International Working Group of The Water Dialogues has entailed various unforeseen challenges that are discussed in greater depth in the main narrative of this manuscript.

“I came from a background in which my own dealings with the UK private sector had already led me to question stereotypes, despite my critical stance towards the privatisation process, when working as head of policy at the NCC (National Consumer Council of the UK). Further to this, I also encountered a very polarised debate around public versus private in my work in Latin America leading me to question the often simplistic rhetoric that was prevalent, particularly as regards to companies from outside the region. I also encountered intense problems within the sector in the Former Soviet Union states where there was virtually no private intervention, indicating a strong need to examine the public sector as much as the private.

“Having blotted my copybook by missing the first meeting of the IWG in summer 2003, my first intense involvement in the project centred around assisting Penny Urquhart and Deborah Moore in late 2003 to prepare the survey that would form the basis for the interviews and research that then took shape in the Scoping Study. I still believe that this study was a fine piece of work by Deborah and Penny and represents a major contribution to the debate. And in interviews with us, people were ready to be far more nuanced in their positions than was the case in their public statements. Some major private companies admitted to mistakes; and very vocal opponents of the private sector acknowledged in discussion that it has a potential role given the right conditions.

Robin Simpson: A perspective from a consumer NGO representative *cont.*

“Over time, the roles of the members of the International Working Group have evolved. We, quite rightly, became less directive as the Secretariat took over regular operational functions and as the NWGs became established. Looking back over the long term, I recognise the limitations of the initiative. Because the process is so non-directed and egalitarian, it makes it difficult to reach final decisions. For that reason, I would not regard Dialogues as an instrument of executive authority... but as running alongside decision-making processes. This is not a criticism but a clarification. Despite these limitations, in some ways The Water Dialogues exceeded my expectations mostly where national dialogues were involved, i.e. listening to the national groups’ and sectors’ difficulties, and the report-back that they provided helped strengthen my own awareness of some of the issues and the practical difficulties involved in finding solutions.

“For me, the major achievements of The Water Dialogues from an international perspective are firstly that it was set up at all. At the outset, there was by no means any certainty that it would go ahead. To some extent our process has been recognised by people who were sceptical like World Bank and OECD so we have achieved a recognition of the concept. But we can’t over-claim that. What happens at national level is more concrete. So secondly, there are those achievements that have come out of the national groups. Given that it was decided in Berlin to make this a national-led approach, at that point the international process rightly took second place to the national processes and we have to be judged on the basis of their work.

“Over time I have felt that the debate is becoming less dogmatic and fixed on various issues [and] more pragmatic. It is difficult to say to what extent this is really true or just to what extent it mirrors my own views. I think there is something of both, not just as a result of the Dialogues, of course, but this experience has reinforced that general trend. I didn’t really experience any ‘a-ha!’ moments but The Water Dialogues has exposed me to a wider range of players which is why it has exceeded my expectations, simply by factor of the wide variety of people I have come across, including those I disagree with.

“To take just one example, from an academic/research standpoint I feel that the work emerging from Uganda and the Philippines Dialogues certainly helped to strengthen my awareness and interest of issues surrounding small-scale independent providers. At least their scale has been acknowledged regardless of whether their contribution takes place by default or by design. They cannot just be ignored, as was the case in past times.

“Overall, The Water Dialogues has reinforced my view that a wide range of people with a wide range of views can find common aspirations. No one has a monopoly of wisdom.”