



GLOBAL WATER ALLIANCE CONFERENCE AT THE WHARTON SCHOOL WAS RESOUNDING SUCCESS

On March 21, 2019, national and international experts offered solutions to one of the world's most pressing global health threats: supplying clean drinking water and safe sanitation to residents of developing countries and across the USA. Over 140 professionals, students, and other stakeholders gathered for the 12th annual conference of the Global Water Alliance (GWA) around the theme of finding solutions to inequities in the water sector: "Solving US and Global Water Inequities: Sharing Solutions from Around the World." Reports from the United Nations and other organizations show that, although significant progress has been made over the past three decades in providing water and sanitation services, the "poorest of the poor" have made little progress on a global average. For the full conference agenda including speakers and session titles, please see www.globalwateralliance.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019.03.19_Water-Conference-External-Agenda_Draft.pdf. A full summary of the conference, along with presentation slides and event photos will be posted on the GWA website, www.globalwateralliance.net, by mid-April. However, the following summary captures a sampling of the major themes and innovative solutions proposed during the full-day event.

Morning keynote speaker, Eleanor Allen, CEO of Water For People, addressed the urgency of the water crisis, noting that nearly 1 in 3 people globally still do not have safe access to water, and nearly 1 in 2 people still do not have safe access to adequate sanitation. Recognizing that the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 6 calls for access to drinking water and sanitation for all by the year 2030, her organization has established ambitious goals, and leverage health, finance, technology, information systems, and other multi-sectoral approaches in their work.

Luncheon keynote speaker, Seema Johnson, Women in Water Leader, USAID Water Team, focused on issues of water and gender. She noted that cultural norms and gender roles still hold us back due to stereotypes, stigmas, taboos, fear, and lack of information. She emphasized that gender equality must be advanced alongside water equality. She explained that gender equality can be promoted by changing laws that restrict women's autonomy, providing sanitation that is both safe and recognizes the dignity of women, empowering women through economic opportunities and leadership roles, and creating gender champions to oversee each of these initiatives.

The conference's panelists provided many recommendations for how to address the inequities in the water sector. The following are provided as a few examples:

Nishta Mehta, Water and Sanitation Specialist, World Bank, addressed how low-income rural communities can be helped by using the principles of micro-finance. Some proposed solutions include using local NGOs to help provide service to poor populations, creating organizations within slums, and giving loans to customers so they can buy toilets.

Dr. David Fuente, Assistant Professor, University of South Carolina, School of Earth, Ocean, and the Environment, discussed water pricing and the poor. He provided insights and data based on many years of analysis of pricing approaches such as block grants, subsidies, and other approaches.



Mustafa Santiago Ali, VP of Environmental Justice, National Wildlife Federation, emphasized the importance of education at all levels—including the education of political leaders—on issues relating to water and sanitation, such as the need for the funding of critical water and sanitation infrastructure. He also advocated recognizing that the close links between water, sanitation, and economic growth should be recognized when policies are developed.

Seung Lee, Senior Director, School Health and Nutrition, Save the Children USA, spoke about the importance of addressing the menstruation and privacy needs of young women when planning sanitation facilities, and how negligence and taboo around these issues drive systemic gender inequalities.

Ashish Daw, Senior Hydrogeologist, Uhl and Associates, provided lessons learned from projects evaluating water quality and improving water access around the world, looking at case studies in Monrovia and Liberia.

Steve Werner, Former Executive Director, Water For People; WASH Program and Resource, Development Consultant, Werner Consulting, provided examples of how his team worked in Kibera and Nairobi to rebuild kiosks, replace latrines with improved facilities, and teach health and hygiene as well as leadership to address WASH issues.

Kelly Bridges, Global Water 2020, lead an interactive audience brainstorming session resulting in a consensus around the importance of equal and early education, advancing the leadership of women, women involvement in water/sanitation business, and inter-disciplinary partnerships.

At the post-conference reception at the Fairmount Water Works, James Leitner, Mission Clean Water, told the inspiring story of his walk across the USA in support of clean water.

Much more information from the conference will soon be available at GWA's website www.globalwateralliance.net and social media pages.

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