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FirstBank, Mr. Jacob Ajekigbe, during a Community Involvement Project to clear refuse at Ijeh Community in Obalende, Lagos ...on Saturday, March 19, 2005.

WWD: Stakeholders differ on water privatisation

Dayo Ayeyemi

THE problem of inadequate quality water for human consumption again came to the fore last Tuesday in Lagos as stakeholders who gathered to mark this year's World Water Day Celebration examined the present condition and contributions made in the past by the government and private sector in meeting the United Nations' millennium goal of reducing by half, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe and quality water.

At a forum to mark WWD organised by a non-governmental organisation, International Nature Conservation and Environment Programme, its President, Mr. Abiodun Ogunbowale, acknowledged the fact that

about 96 per cent of the earth's water contained high proportion of salt, thus, rendering it unsuitable for drinking, farming and manufacturing purposes.

He lamented that in spite of huge water resources available, the nation still had a low amount of safe water, saying that 75 per cent of diseases in the country were spread through the consumption of unsafe water.

According to him, water shortage was responsible for the inability to deal with fire outbreaks and loss of lives in manufacturing industries, which are left out in government water schemes.

In order to compliment its efforts toward provision

of safe water, Ogunbowale enjoined government to remove the bottlenecks associated with water provision in order to allow the involvement of the private sector in the production and distribution of water.

At another forum however, a NGO, Civil Society Coalition Against Water Privatisation in Nigeria, criticised the water reform programme of Lagos State, saying that the commodity's provision should be a social service rather than an income-generating venture.

The Coordinator of the group, Mr. Babatope Babalobi, said that the Lagos State water reform was designed to encourage private sector participation in

the production and distribution of water services.

He said that privatised water schemes, especially those implemented with loans, would result to profit maximisation and full cost recovery by investors, and consequently lead to high water tariffs charged by firms that have invested in the project.

Babalobi stated that privatisation of water would not favour the poor as they would not be able to afford high water rates being charged by private investors.

He faulted the privatisation exercise, saying that it was not inclusive, open, transparent and participatory, and that local people were not consulted before

approving the exercise.

He urged that production, distribution and management of water services for the public should remain in the hands of government.

According to him, the World Bank should back out of the project, stating that privatisation should cease to be used as a condition for international lending to finance development of water and sewage.

Dr. Mathew Udoye, who represented the Director General, National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control, listed the importance of safe drinking water and efforts made by the agency to ensure that packaged water manufacturers adhered to basic standards in their production process.