

LOCAL ACTIONS FOR A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

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The Challenge

There are some who challenge the need for another World Water Forum. They say that the costs are high and that the benefits are marginal. We have already raised the awareness of the world population through the first three Forums. Why not spend the money that such a Forum would cost on providing water and sanitation for at least a few of those who lack it? How can the 4th World Water Forum make a difference that justifies the expense? In answering this question let me first begin with a bit of history.

History of the World Water Forums

The 1st World Water forum was held in Marrakech in March 1997. The event was attended by about 500 persons, mainly water sector professionals or officials responsible for providing water services and infrastructure. For the most part they presented papers about the challenges and what they planned to do. But the meeting did recognize that an overview of the state of the world's water resource and its future was desirable. They requested the World Water Council under then President Mahmoud Abu Zeid to prepare a Vision for Water, Life and the Environment in the 21st Century.

The Council responded to this challenge by establishing the World Water Commission under whose guidance a team prepared scenarios of the water futures of the world under different management strategies. In consultation with stakeholders from around the world, the team prepared the World Water Vision - Making Water Everybody's Business. This Vision, and several others like the Vision for Water and Nature, the Vision of Water for Food and Rural Development, and the African Water Vision, were presented and discussed with over 5,000 participants at the 2nd Forum in The Hague in March 2000. Ministers attending an associated Ministerial Conference identified six major challenge areas. The title of the Forum was "From Vision to Action". A limited number of commitments were made by governments and other stakeholders for action to be taken following the Forum.

Our Japanese colleagues who hosted the 3rd Forum in March 2003 were even more determined that all stakeholders be involved - not only as participants but also as designers of the program. They introduced the concepts of Water Voices and the Virtual Forum in advance of the Forum proper. Moreover, they wanted even more commitment to action and requested each session organiser to state what concrete action would follow their session. This produced hundreds of commitments from participants in both the Forum and the Ministerial Conference, although many of these were restatements of previous commitments. To-day and to-morrow we will be discussing the follow-up to these commitments

Where Do We Stand?

Twenty-four thousand people (24,000) attended the 3rd Forum. Thousands of articles were written about it and it received hours of international media coverage - in spite of competition from the launching of the war in Iraq. The leaders of the G-8 at their meeting in Evian France two months later dedicated a large part of their time to water issues, and referred specifically to following up on the Forum. So those who argue that awareness has been raised certainly do have a point.

Unfortunately, in the countries of the South there is little evidence that our efforts have had any significant impact. In many countries there is less investment in water than in previous decades. All countries committed at the UN Millennium Assembly in 2000 to meeting a set of goals designed to reduce poverty. Yet there is little recognition at the country level that hardly any of these goals can be met without water infrastructure and services. For example, some of the poorest countries still have not included investments in water in their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.

Perhaps this is because we have talked about the problems at the wrong levels. It is difficult to know where to begin to tackle a problem when it is expressed in terms of billions of people without access and billions of dollars of investment required. It becomes much more human and much more feasible when we talk about individuals:

- Consider the head of a family who has spent his whole life gathering enough resources to put a roof over their heads, only to see it washed away in a flood that could have been prevented by better water management (including perhaps reservoirs that would have stored the water for the next drought)...
- Consider the woman who remains housebound during the daylight hours because she has no place to relieve herself in private, and then faces the dangers of the unsanitary conditions of finding her way through a field of excrement in the dark - and even of sexual harassment.... And what if this person is handicapped and has to crawl to the place where she can relieve herself?
- Consider the girl-child who faces these problems in a school without sanitation facilities, or a female teacher in such a school who must teach all day without being able to relieve herself....
- Consider the poor farmer who was able to take water from a dug well to irrigate his crops, but as wealthier farmers lowered the groundwater table with more expensive techniques, now finds he must abandon his land....

4th World Water Forum

This is why I am pleased that our Mexican colleagues suggested that the theme of the 4th World Water Forum should be "Local Actions for a Global Challenge". For the people I have just described should be telling their stories in the 4th World Water Forum - to the

heads of their local governments and their members of parliament. They should be sharing experiences with each other about how they influence the power structure in their communities to obtain services that satisfy their basic needs.

We tend to talk about the investments required for water and sanitation infrastructure as if the only way the needs of these people will be met is by external intervention and financing. Experience in both the developing and developed worlds shows that this is not the case. Progress is made only when there is solidarity within the local community and the support of national authorities to address the problems. Approaches have been found to do so – even within the modest means of the people. These should be shared at the 4th Forum.

Local action is the only way we can address the issues that, when combined, have become more than just a global challenge, they have become a terrible shame to all humanity. Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. Minister, invited guests; the investment in dollars and efforts that will be made to hold the 4th World Water Forum *will* make a difference by encouraging action at the local level. I invite the world to join us in acting to meet the global challenge.

Thank you.