



Conference Report
International Conference on Freshwater
Bonn, Germany, 3-7 December 2001

The International Conference on Freshwater was organised in Bonn, 3-7 December. There were approximately 2500 participants from 122 countries, UN agencies, international organisations and the so-called “major groups”, which included local authorities, NGOs, groups working on gender, children and youth issues, and representatives from indigenous people, workers and trade unions, business and industry, farmers, and institutions dealing with science and technology, as well as hundreds of observers.

In addition to the Plenary and the Ministerial sessions, there were working groups and side-events on several important and not-so important topics. The working groups were on governance, integrated management and new partnership; mobilisation of financial resources; and capacity development and technology transfer. The side-events covered issues, among which were private and public partnerships for infrastructure development and services, local government panels, river basin management, frameworks and dialogues for cooperation, formal and non-formal training and education efforts, as well as case studies from different countries. It was undoubtedly the side-events where good interactions among the participants took place, not only because of the smaller number of people, but also because of the higher level of the discussions. Unfortunately, there were important groups that were grossly under-represented during this consultation. Among these were farmers, irrigation experts and scientists and technologists.

The Issue Paper prepared for the Conference identified five major areas where global attention is needed: access to affordable water and sanitation for the poor; protection of ecosystems and water resources; balance between water for food production and nature conservation; management of transboundary water; and management of floods and droughts. No clear rationale was given as to on the basis of which criteria these areas were identified. The Issue Paper recommended that actions are required in three main areas: governance, integrated management and new partnerships; mobilisation of financial resources; and capacity development and technology transfer.

The Conference for the most part was traditional, and did not cover any new grounds or considered any innovative alternatives. The only new issue that was raised was the one of corruption. For the first time it was recognised in public that it is “a bigger leak of resources compared to that due to rotten pipelines.” Water projects are linked to enormous amounts of money, and hence the risk of dishonest behaviours is high. It was noted that even though this problem is normally associated to the private sector companies, it also is an important concern within the public sector. Accountability, implementation of legal sanctions against corruption, monitoring of the performances of the public institutions and the private companies, development of codes of conduct, transparency in decision-

making, and civil society involvement, were noted as potential countermeasures to reduce, or even, eliminate corruption.

During the Second World Water Forum in The Hague, in March 2000, opinions and actions, were very much polarised, especially on issues like water pricing, privatisation, and construction of large dams. However, these issues were discussed in a more rational manner during the Bonn Conference. The importance of these topics was recognised not only because they could play a role in terms of more efficient water distribution and wastewater treatment, but also because properly planned and regulated, they could represent tools for poverty alleviation. It was agreed that there must be a balance between the costs and benefits of large water projects, and also that social and environmental issues should be an integral component for their development. For example, involuntary resettlement should be considered to be a development activity by itself. However, it was also emphasised that, when necessary, projects to develop additional water resources should remain a priority, especially in developing countries.

It was argued that prices should represent sufficient income to finance operation, maintenance and capital costs. However, tariff systems (subsidies) that allow social targeting should be considered. This, of course, should be adapted to the needs of the individual countries. It has yet to be conclusively proven that the private sector is consistently more efficient when compared to the public sector. Additionally, not only public-private partnerships represent a feasible option for water supply, infrastructure development and maintenance activities, public-public partnerships could also be an efficient alternative (i.e., the Baltic Sea between Sweden and its neighbouring countries). Hence, it is necessary to analyse in depth specific cases to understand what makes some management practices to be successful and efficient, and what makes them to fail.

It was generally agreed that external development assistance for the construction, operation, maintenance and rehabilitation of water infrastructures and services in developing countries needs to be increased significantly. Donor governments were urged to reach the target for the official development assistance of 0.7% of GDP, and make real progress towards reaching this target.

International financial assistance plays a very important role for the developing economies. However, there is an urgent need for better coordination among the donor agencies which work in specific geographical areas, since in many cases the requirements of one agency contravene those of the others, jeopardizing the projects and affecting the local people. Additionally, some claimed that the practices of international financial institutions are negatively affecting the developing countries. The most frequently mentioned example was the World Bank, which was accused of promoting privatisation of water resources and services, without prior analysis of what changes are necessary to make public sector institutions more efficient, or which type of public-private partnerships would be the most appropriate ones for individual cases. Privatisation should not be put forward as a priori best solution. The World Bank's water resources sector strategy was criticised because of "an unbalanced obsession" with the private sector.

Strangely enough, for the first time at an international water forum, poverty alleviation was stressed as a priority issue. As important as it is, it was not until early 2001, that an international forum was proposed in Ahmedabad, India, to specifically analyse and discuss policies and actions related to water development for poverty alleviation, economic growth, improvement of quality of life, and

management and protection of the environment and the ecosystems. Case studies on how properly planned and managed water projects can successfully reduce regional disparities and contribute to significant improvements in social well-being are still conspicuous by their absence.

The Ministerial Declaration was somewhat general, and focused on governance, funding, roles of the international community, capacity building, technology transfer, participation and gender. The Ministers agreed that “ten years after the UN Conference on Environment and Development and the Dublin Conference, and several years after the global water conferences in Paris and The Hague, there is still a need for greater commitment to implement commonly agreed principles on water resources management...” Even though governments should use internationally agreed principles to solve national and local problems, even now considerable doubt lingers as to the operational validity of the so-called international principles. There was no discussion of other possible principles which could be equally important, if not more important, than the so-called Dublin Principles.

Undoubtedly, the most impressive performance at Bonn was given by Dr. Uschi Eid, Parliamentary State Secretary, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany. Dr. Eid very clearly and objectively put into perspective the linkages among water, poverty alleviation and development. She made it clear what it is generally well known, but not always recognised: the uncertainty of the public reactions in terms of ideological push for the private sector. Instead it should be noted that there is a big gap in financing of the water sector, part of which could be filled by the private sector.

During the Closing Session, Dr. Eid pointed out that the main conclusion of the meeting had been that the need for action is more urgent than ever. She also questioned why, if it is known that water is crucial for peace, justice and social development, there is not yet enough progress towards the goal of water security for all. If the international development target to halve the proportion of people unable to reach or afford safe drinking water is considered, it would be necessary to provide access to clean water to more than 300,000 people per day, every day over the next 15 years. A similar target for sanitation would mean an extra 390,000 people per day would have to receive services. These will not be easy targets to meet, since simply at present, the financial gaps are of the magnitude of \$ 100 billion per year. Hence, private investment is necessary, but under a good, transparent, and functional regulatory regime.

The Draft Recommendations for Action stated that the Conference had the objective “to review the role of water issues for sustainable development, to take stock of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21, and to analyse the bottlenecks and constraints preventing better achievements.” Irrespective of the official statements, the conclusion of the multi-stakeholder dialogues expressed a sense of frustration at the “disconnect” between the rhetorics of the international water conferences and declarations and the reality of actions that have followed past meetings. Dr. Klaus Topfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, noted that poverty has to be overcome as a pre-condition to development, and the gaps between the North and the South should be closed. While every one agreed with this sentiment, the real issue is how it can be achieved. This issue was not even addressed. Dr. Topfer went on to say: “water is a key to social equity and environmental stability, the issue is then management, technology development and cooperation. We had the Second World Water Forum in The Hague in 2000. We will be in Japan in 2003 for the Third World Water Forum. But in the meantime we are here, where we must concentrate on Johannesburg so that we can make this a summit

of implementation, not of declaration. We have many declarations. It is now high time for action and cooperation.”

The concerns expressed by the participants in the Bonn Conference were not new: most of which are expressed every year at the Stockholm Water Symposium, which unquestionably has become the most important annual global water event. Discussions at Bonn focused on the need to increase investments for water supply and wastewater infrastructures and services, improve efficiency of water management practices, make water institutions more efficient, decision-making at the lowest possible level, and consideration of social and environmental factors.

Irrespective of the official recommendations for action, it was clear from the dialogues and discussions in the side-sessions, that there is an urgent need for governments to sit and listen to the opinions and suggestions of the rest of the participants. It was further suggested that the format of the ministerial conferences should be modified so that Ministers play parts in the sessions, and not limit their interactions to the Ministers-only discussions. Whether the Ministers will be willing to practice what they preach, that is, dialogue, communication and partnership, is still to be seen.

The Bonn Conference basically agreed that progress since the Dublin and Rio Conferences have been minimal. Two fundamental questions thus arise. First, what would be the contributions of the Bonn Conference for the water world? Second, what would be the benefits to the normal citizens of the developing world whose quality of life depends on the availability of water for all uses? For the first question, the German Government will put forward the Bonn recommendations to the World Summit of Sustainable Development, which will be held in Johannesburg in September 2002. This is contrary to what happened during the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, for which the Dublin Conference was expected to make the necessary inputs in the area of water. However, the Dublin-Rio process was fundamentally flawed since Dublin was organised as an expert group meeting, and not as an inter-ministerial meeting. Under international rules, Rio could consider only the results of intergovernmental meetings.

So far as the second question is concerned, only time will tell if the Bonn Conference will have perceptible impacts in terms of improving water supply and sanitation conditions in the developing countries.

The Declaration of the United Nations Millennium Assembly, in September 2001 stated that by 2015, the number of people in extreme poverty, as well as the number of people without access to safe and affordable water, should be reduced by half. This is an enormous challenge, considering the number of people that are to be served and its financial implications. However, if the governments and the international community are truly committed to achieve this goal, it should be possible.

The organisation of the Bonn Conference was excellent, and unlike The Hague Forum, there were no unnecessary distractions. Only time will tell what would be the real impacts of this Conference on the developing world and on the water profession as a whole. Irrespective of what may be its future impacts, the German Government should be applauded for taking the lead to host this Conference.

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