

Guest Editorial

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Introduction

In March 1977 the United Nations convened the only world conference in the area of water that has ever been held at a very high decision-making level. This global, intergovernmental conference was convened in Latin America at Mar del Plata, Argentina. More than 1500 participants attended this historic conference, representing 116 governments, and all the major United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations and liberation movements. It produced the Mar del Plata Action Plan, which became the definitive road map for water development, especially in developing countries, during the ensuing two decades.

Major changes have taken place in the Latin American and Caribbean countries in the field of water development and management since the Mar del Plata Conference some 20 years ago. Among the trends that could have been predicted two decades ago were increasing water requirements in all the Latin American countries due to population growth as well as higher per capita demands by the people from the more affluent sectors of society, intensification of the complexity of the problem of providing clean water and adequate sanitation to a rapidly urbanizing population, difficulties in ensuring proper water quality management and increasing conflicts between the various users in terms of both water

quantity and quality. Equally there have been many developments in recent years which are fundamentally different from the water management practices two decades ago, and which could not have been predicted with any certainty earlier. Among these unexpected but desirable changes are an increasing emphasis on social and environmental impacts of water development projects, decentralization of the management processes, demands for transparency in decision making, stakeholder participation, private sector involvement, transfer of irrigation districts to farmers, high health costs associated with poor water management, and the importance of water pricing and conservation.

All the above factors, and other related issues, have not only made water management tasks increasingly complex over time, but also have ensured that water currently has a much higher profile on the national and the regional political agendas of the Latin American and Caribbean countries than ever before. Decision makers have started to appreciate the fact that the national economics and welfare of the people are closely related to efficient management of the increasingly scarce water resources. Thus, not surprisingly, at the Summit of the Americas in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, in December 1996, the leaders unanimously declared:

Despite extensive efforts by countries in the Americas to improve water use and management, demand continues to rise while contamination has seriously degraded the quality of freshwater, spreading disease and causing economic losses.

Poor management structure and pricing, as well as lack of stakeholder commitment to water management and conservation, are important factors contributing to growing scarcity. Particularly troublesome are the projected demands of drinking water by urban populations, and potential conflicts among sectors, regions and countries that share water resources.

The Interamerican Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) has always been interested in water. The main water use in nearly all the countries of the region stems primarily from the various agricultural demands. In many countries, agricultural demands currently account for 80% to 90% of total water use. Equally, no large-scale agricultural production is possible without good and reliable water control. IICA thus has been interested in sustainable water management from its very inception because of the dependence of agricultural production on water.

In recent years, as demands for all types of uses have grown exponentially, water has become an increasingly scarce resource in the region. This trend of continually increasing water requirements is likely to continue in the coming several decades, unless radical changes can be made in the existing water management practices, and unless such changes could be accepted socially and politically by the populations concerned. Unquestionably all sectors of water use and especially agriculture, have to become increasingly efficient in the future. We have to ensure that agricultural yields can be steadily increased in the future but with less and less water consumption, and also that agricultural water uses do not contribute to water quality and environmental degradation. Increasing innovations will be necessary in terms of formulating new national policies to specifically consider rapidly changing sociopolitical conditions (decentralization stakeholder involvement, private sector involvement, social and environmental requirements), technologies (improvements in efficiencies of water uses, exten-

sive and better wastewater treatments, increasing reuse and recycling, desalination), training and capacity building (academic institutions must be urged to prepare water resources managers to meet the requirements of the next century) new economic instruments (water pricing, cost recovery, water rights) and radical modifications in the institutional arrangements through which water is currently being managed. Ensuring and managing such innovations will not be easy, but is absolutely essential so that the water resources of the region can be managed in an equitable, sustainable and cost-effective manner in the future.

Because of the increasing importance of water in the region, and also the fact that IICA would not be able to perform the tasks entrusted to it by the member governments unless the issues associated with water are given increasing emphasis, it was decided to convene a major water meeting for the region in Fortaleza, Brazil, in November 1997. The importance of this event can be recognized by the fact that it attracted some 445 participants from nearly all countries of the region. Among the participants were ministers, secretaries, technocrats, professors, researchers, and representatives of international organizations, the private sector and NGOs. This meeting was the first of its kind on water resources ever organized in Latin America and the Caribbean to attract so many people from diverse backgrounds, disciplines, institutions and interests.

The present issue of the journal contains some of the major papers that were presented during the meeting, as well as the Fortaleza Manifesto. We feel these papers will be of considerable interest not only to the water professionals from the Latin American and Caribbean regions but also from all over the world.