
It's Time for a World Water Council

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INTRODUCTION

The International Conference on Water and the Environment that took place in Dublin in January 1992 attracted some 600 water experts from around the world. Twenty-four UN agencies worked hard to ensure that water resources issues were well studied and discussed by the specialists who assembled at Dublin. The conference proceedings and their summary, the Dublin Statement, provide a valuable and timely overview of global water issues related to development.

The principal objective of the Dublin conference was to ensure that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which took place five months later in Rio in June 1992, would give proper emphasis to global water issues. Candidly we must admit that UNCED failed to attach much priority or urgency to water issues. The freshwater chapter in Agenda 21, the core document emerging from UNCED, reflects no substantive inputs from the Dublin conference.

Will water issues get the attention we believe they deserve, on a global basis, in the aftermath of UNCED? Not likely. The Commission on Sustainable Development, the sole institutional mechanism agreed at Rio for follow-up, will probably be preoccupied with issues with higher political priority, such as global warming, ozone depletion, biodiversity and forestry. Water issues, we believe, will continue to be out of the spotlight as far as environmental policy makers are concerned.

This indicates that "water blindness," the syndrome explained by Malin Falkenmark, and agreed by IWRA, is likely to persist. The World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), which first popularized "sustainable development" in 1987, overlooked global water issues. So, also, did UNCED.

"Water blindness" .. is likely to persist

Do these oversights indicate that water resources questions deserve relatively low priority on a global basis? DEFINITELY NOT! On the contrary, all evidence, and most informed environmental experts, agree that water issues are becoming increasingly important and merit urgent attention. This is particularly true in the developing countries, where roughly 80 per cent of the world's people reside. The World Bank's "World Development Report 1992" concentrates on Development and Environment. 'This report specifies water pollution and water scarcity as the first environmental problem. It presents inadequate sanitation and lack of safe drinking water as a first priority for action. What can be done internationally to focus policy makers on these fundamental development issues?

Water experts in Dublin were perceptive on this matter. In addition to outlining issues and recommended actions, they anticipated the need for superior institutional arrangements for follow-up and implementation. The Dublin Statement called for decisions on water resources to be made at the lowest appropriate level. Recognizing that some water issues cannot be adequately resolved at the local, regional, or national levels, Dublin participants outlined the need for improved global mechanisms. UNCED was urged to consider a world water council or forum as a possible follow-up mechanism. UNCED failed to take this advice. Now what?

We contend that the best constituency at this stage to advance the issue of improved institutional mechanisms for addressing water related issues at the international or global level may be the IWRA. The

UN agencies tried at Dublin but have so far failed to make appreciable progress. As noted earlier, environmentalists have too many other issues to deal within the next few years to be able to focus properly on water. So it may now be time for concerned and informed water specialists to exercise some leadership on this matter. What better group than IWRA to accept this challenge?

To help IWRA to assert leadership in this cause, we offer for review and discussion the prospective functions and activities of a world water council. Then we outline its potential membership and structure, following with a tentative agenda for action.

Let us first note that IWRA, as it presently exists, would complement and support, and in no way be a competitor with, the proposed world water council. IWRA is an association of some 1,800 individuals from some 120 countries who are acting in their individual capacities, rather than as representatives of any organization or government. (The authors of this article, as an example, are expressing their personal opinions in this article, representing nobody but themselves.) A world water council, by contrast and as explained subsequently, would be a forum wherein various constituencies (including governments, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations such as IWRA) could work together on topics of common interest. Associations such as IWRA are for individuals, whereas individuals could not participate in the proposed council except as representatives of the organizations that would be members of the council.

PROSPECTIVE FUNCTIONS AND ACTIVITIES OF A WORLD WATER COUNCIL

A global mechanism such as a world water council would build on and complement more extensive activities at the national and continental/regional levels. In line with the report of the Dublin Conference, three principal topics might be:

1. *Raise and maintain the global profile of freshwater issues*, to ensure sustained global commitment to resolving freshwater problems by:

*holding international conferences on water at regular intervals, perhaps every three years, in which critical water concerns, priorities, management principles, and means of implementation are identified and discussed;

-preparing and disseminating periodic reports and information on critical freshwater issues, aimed at high-level decision-makers and the public;

*facilitating and promoting the exchange of information on policies and activities relevant to water resources management, through international meetings and conferences and through the distribution of information products;

*through national committees, stimulating discussion and resolution of national water concerns and their relationship to broader global issues.

2. *Provide sound advice and recommendations on diverse topics and issues essential to improved water management*. Special commissions or committees could be created to deal with specific issues that are global or international in nature. Examples could include:

• recommendations concerning overall policies on water management, based on a global view of policies and practices at regional and national levels;

• promoting and enhancing the free exchange of information and data on water resources and their development;

• exploring transboundary water issues, beginning with an overview of international rivers, lakes, and aquifers and highlighting those where potential competition for limited water resources, or continuing water quality degradation, appear most pressing;

• reviewing water-related activities and programs of international agencies and developing recommendations on how the implementation and coordination of such programs could be improved;

• undertaking studies with a view to formulating recommendations for dealing with critical issues related to water. Examples might include: management and use of transboundary waters; management of water resources in light of potential climate change; global flows of financial resources into freshwater management efforts; and technology adaptation for sustainable water development and use.

3. *Provide an ongoing global review of the situation concerning the state and development of the world's water resources*, and of efforts to improve the management of these resources, by:

-preparing a periodic overview of key trends in the condition and management of the world's water, and of progress in implementing the freshwater component of Agenda 21 of UNCED;

*developing and tracking trends in key indicators related to freshwater quantity, quality, management and use;

-communicating the results of these assessments, in an easily understandable manner; to decision-

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makers concerned with freshwater and related issues at the national and international levels;

- providing periodic reviews of research results and suggesting needs for future research on priority topics.

POTENTIAL MEMBERSHIP AND STRUCTURE OF A WORLD WATER COUNCIL

There are models for global cooperation in other sectors. For example, the World Energy Council (WEC) comprises member committees from 91 countries. Membership of the national committees is decided by each country. The Canadian member committee (Energy Council of Canada), for example, includes private corporations, departments and agencies of the federal and provincial governments, associations, universities, and individuals. The WEC secretariat has its offices in London. WEC's costs (principally for this secretariat) are met by subscriptions from national committees and by revenues from the international technical congress that takes place every third year.

Other examples of global coordination mechanisms include the World Food Council and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council.

Based on our appreciation of these various models, we offer the following suggestions for consideration.

Membership of a world water council might comprise designated representatives from various constituencies with interests in the overall development and management of water resources, such as:

- national delegations (including members from the private and public sectors, from universities and research organizations, and from national water associations);
- *international nongovernmental organizations and institutions;
- international development banks and funds;
- United Nations organizations;
- regional/continental water councils (as they may come into existence in the future).

Representatives would participate on behalf of their constituencies, not as individuals. This would mean that delegations would have to be formed and work out their positions in advance of council discussions. Similarly the representatives would be capable of implementing, in their own jurisdictions, recommendations agreed with others in the meetings of the world water council. This process of participation would deliberately cause delegations to link their own activities to those of the council.

The *structure* of a world water council could include:

- members' assembly (meeting every 2-3 years in conjunction with technical conferences):

- executive committee (appointed by the members' assembly and meeting perhaps annually or semi-annually);
- standing and temporary committees, appointed by the members' assembly: and
- a small, permanent secretariat.

Costs associated with participation in council activities would be the responsibility of each delegation.

The proposed structure of the council would involve some expenditures for the accommodation, salaries, and expenses associated with the small secretariat. Such expenditures, probably less than \$2 million yearly, would have to be financed through subscriptions from the various members. Alternatively one or more donors might be persuaded to underwrite the secretariat's costs, at least for the initial few years of operation.

CONCLUSIONS AND FOLLOW-UP

We contend that:

- there is a strong case, already initiated at Dublin, for the creation of a global organization such as a world water council;
- an institutional vacuum now exists wherein no other constituency appears willing or able to promote the concept of a world water council; and
- IWRA is well placed to initiate further discussion and action on this concept.

How? We suggest that IWRA members act as follows:

1. Reflect personally on their own perceptions of this issue;
2. Discuss this matter extensively with colleagues in their own constituency and try to reach a consensus on whether and how such a global body might assist them in their activities related to water management;
3. Consider arranging for this issue to be reviewed and discussed in regional and national forums in their own countries. It should be noted that a national version of a world water council would be appropriate for each country willing to participate in such a global forum;
4. Be ready to participate actively in sessions sponsored by IWRA to make further progress on this matter. We suggest that the question of a world water council should be explicitly addressed at a special session during the VIIIth World Congress on Water Resources of IWRA will take place in Cairo in November 1994.

An institutional vacuum now exists
