

Editorial Comments on the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century

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The World Water Congress in Melbourne, Australia, and the World Water Forum in The Hague, The Netherlands, are now over. Both were very important meetings that were held in March 2000. The Melbourne Congress was certainly one of the best IWRA meetings I have attended in recent years, both technically and organizationally. IWRA needs to organize similar high quality gatherings in the coming years. The report on the Congress appears in this issue of *Water International*. Accordingly, the main focus of this Editorial is on the World Water Forum in The Hague, and some roles IWRA can play in water management practices in the world in the coming years.

The World Water Forum was an event of the World Water Council (WWC), the idea of which was first put forward by myself and Brian Grover within IWRA. The initial discussions on the formation of this Council took place within IWRA, including a special session which Brian and I organized at the World Water Congress in Cairo. With the successful completion of The Hague Forum, this “child” of IWRA has now clearly come of age.

The Forum was strongly supported organizationally and financially by the Government of the Netherlands. Some 4,600 participants from all over the world registered for this event. Unquestionably it was the biggest and the most important water meeting since the United Nations Water Conference was held in Mar de Plata in March 1977. Unlike Mar del Plata, however, the Forum was sponsored by the World Water Council, and not by an inter-governmental body like the United Nations, who organized similar high-profile fora in the past. The success of the Forum confirmed the new global trend of the 1990s in the water sector: the major roles played by the UN system in the past have started to decline, and these are now being taken over by new institutions like the WWC and the Global Water Partnership.

The centerpiece of the Forum was the report of the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, and the numerous activities that were preparatory components to this report. For the first time in the history of the world, an independent and impartial Commission looked at water holistically, futuristically, and comprehensively on a global basis.

The report of the Commission, activities at the Forum and the Melbourne Congress, and the subsequent follow-

up actions are likely to have significant impacts on the water management practices at global, regional, and local levels in the coming years. The Commission report is printed in full in this issue. Thus, no attempt will be made here to summarize its main findings, conclusions, and recommendations. However, it is worth noting that, according to the Commissioners, “the single most immediate and important measure” that they could recommend is the “systematic adoption of full-cost pricing for water services.” The report suggested that “an essential element will be to use targeted, time-bound subsidies to attract first-class service providers who can be paid the costs of their services and provide users with high-quality services.”

In my view, the day when water could be considered to be a free good that would be automatically provided by governments at very low or no cost is gradually, but most certainly, coming to an end. Achieving water pricing will not be an easy task because there are too many vested interests in maintaining the current practices and the status quo, too many dogmatic views that are often based on erroneous facts and/or understandings, and too many mindsets that belong to the past. In The Hague, many people automatically assumed that water pricing and making water management practices more efficient would mean automatic transfer of all the functions from the public to the private sector. This of course is not correct, since both public and private sectors have their strengths and weaknesses. In the future, the main focus will be to encourage public-private partnerships, not to continue the simplistic approach of public versus private sector considerations.

It is interesting to review the events that led to the Hague Forum and the preparation of a Vision for Water, Life, and the Environment, which was the theme of the report of the World Commission on Water. When, as the Chairman of the Technical Program Committee of the World Water Council, I first proposed that a long-term global vision on water be prepared, interest in the proposed exercise, by even some members of this Committee, was “lukewarm” at best. It took the foresight of Bert Diphooorn, Senior Water Advisor of the Government of the Netherlands, who saw its necessity and worked very hard to provide much of the funding and organizational

skills, to make the Vision exercise and the Forum possible. In about a decade's time, when some bright-eyed doctoral students analyze the Forum and its impacts on the world and the water management profession, Bert Diphorn and his colleagues like Aalt Leusink undoubtedly will be considered to be the "unsung heroes" who contributed significantly to the success of the Commission and the Forum.

Past experiences indicate that world commissions are not easy to organize and manage. Even more difficult is the establishment of a World Commission than can produce something useful and worthwhile that could have lasting impacts. There is no question that much of the success of the present Commission can be attributed to a single individual, Ismail Serageldin, Vice President of the World Bank, who as the Chairman of the Commission assembled a very distinguished group of individuals who willingly agreed to serve in the Commission. The fact that not even a single individual approached declined to become a Commissioner is a unique testimonial to Dr. Serageldin's standing in the development community in general, and the water profession in particular.

When Dr. Serageldin first approached me to be a Commissioner, my only concern was the strict timetable for the completion of the report. When I raised this issue with him, his response was the report was not only "doable but eminently doable." His dynamism, intellectual capabilities, and sheer hard work ensured that the report was completed on time. In this effort, he was very ably supported by a Secretariat with William Cosgrove and Frank Rijsberman as its leaders. Together they managed to complete a most difficult task successfully and on time, which lesser mortals would have found simply impossible to achieve.

In retrospect, probably the most unique aspect of the exercise was the participation of thousands of individuals in the process that led to the preparation of the Report of the Commission and the organization of the World Water Forum. These participants came from all sectors of the civil society and from various disciplines, backgrounds, and institutions. It was not restricted primarily to designated government officials, as was the case in similar major international fora in the past. Clearly the world of water will not be the same again after such an extensive and intensive participation of people interested in water from all walks of life and from all parts of the world.

Much credit also goes to the Dutch Government, which ensured that the event remained a public forum, where people could express their views and opinions. Thus, when a major OECD country formally requested the Forum organizers to "modify the program" so that the "officially designated representative" of that country could present the official "vision" of the country, instead of the representatives of the civil society as was planned, the request was politely but firmly declined by the organizers. This is a most welcome step that simply would not have been possible if the Forum was organized under the aegis of the United Na-

tions, or other similar intergovernmental institutions.

A month after the completion of the Melbourne Congress and the Hague Forum, all the signs are that these two events succeeded remarkably in bringing people from all over the world to discuss various water issues, share their views, and review their expectations of the future. The processes and the two events have raised the expectations of people from all over the world. The main issue now is how to maintain, or even enhance, the momentum generated by the work of the World Commission on Water, the Melbourne Congress, and the Hague Forum, as well as the enthusiasm and interest of the stakeholders concerned during the post-events period to ensure a water-secure world for all. This would not be an easy task, but it is a task that must be accomplished to ensure a better future for all people.

Unquestionably, IWRA has to play an increasingly important and proactive role in improving water management practices in the world. Historically, IWRA has been the only multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral professional association in the world that has looked at water in a holistic and integrated basis, even though in recent months two water associations have merged and are using a name that comes very close to IWRA. It is indeed flattering but annoying to note that they are even copying the title of the main IWRA event: World Water Congress.

IWRA, however, must look to the future and see how it can best continue its leadership role and improve water management practices in the world in the new millennium. Clearly we have to gear up our activities to a much higher level. Fortunately, President Braga has been dynamic, and under his leadership, IWRA has started to break new ground. This will no doubt continue under the new leadership of president-elect John Pigram in the post-2000 era. This is reflected by our increasing membership, whereas memberships of most other water associations have been declining in recent years. Not surprisingly, IWRA is being asked to play an increasingly important role in the international arena. Thus, for the Inter-Ministerial Meeting in The Hague, IWRA was the only professional association that was invited to make a formal presentation.

IWRA has initiated many new activities, and will undoubtedly initiate more activities to meet the challenges of the future. Only three important activities will be mentioned herein.

First is the formation of the Club of Tokyo by IWRA, Third World Centre for Water Management of Mexico City, and International Development Research Institute of Tokyo. Based loosely on the Club of Rome, this group consists of the 14 most influential water professionals as identified by a survey of our peer group. The members are indicated in an annex to this report. They will meet once a year, without any specific agenda, to discuss and brainstorm on global water issues. The Japan Foundation and the Third World Centre for Water Management will finance the activities of the Club of Tokyo for the first

three years. The first meeting of the Club will be held in Tokyo, 25–27 October 2000.

Second is the identification and mentoring of 14 potential water leaders of the next generation. Globally, younger water professionals have generally not been able to participate fully in the discussions of important water issues. Thus, IWRA and the Third World Centre for Water Management, with the active support of the Stockholm International Water Institute, initiated a program to identify the next generation of water leaders and mentor them for the next three years. Nominations were invited, and more than 250 nominations were received, ranging from Australia to Zimbabwe. From these, the 14 most outstanding candidates were selected by a jury of six eminent water experts. A special session was organized for this group at the Hague Forum, where all the members were present. The next meeting of the group will be held in India, 28 January–3 February. A report on this group's activities is included in this issue.

Third is the preparation of the first ever definitive survey of the state of the world's waters. During my work with the World Commission on Water, one item became very clear from the very beginning: the data currently available on the world's waters and associated issues are very poor. Thus, detailed national assessments are being prepared for about 30 major water countries. These reports will be the most authoritative information available on these countries in terms of water availability, use, demands, and quality and also in terms of analyses of investment, health, and environmental issues, especially as they relate to water.

The reports are now at various stages of preparation. Some assessments, like those on countries like Mexico, are now complete and have already been published. Others on countries like Brazil, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India and Malaysia are now in the final stages of preparation. This effort is being supported by the Nippon Foundation.

The above are just three of the many activities that are being organized by the IWRA Committee on International Collaboration. In addition, this Committee and the Third World Centre for Water Management are carrying out a major study on preparing a sustainable development framework for the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basins, with the support of the Dutch Government. The study has been carried out by three groups of eminent water experts from Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. The results of this framework development study were presented at both the Melbourne and The Hague meetings. As a follow up, we are organizing a meeting of influential parliamentarians from all the three countries in Dhaka, 30 September to 2 October 2000. The Speaker of the Parliament of Bangladesh has already accepted our invitation to chair the meeting in his capacity as the Chairman of the Asian Parliamentary Union. The results of the G-B-M framework study will shortly be published by Oxford University Press.

Another initiative that is currently at an advance stage

of discussion is the possible establishment of a World Commission on International Waters, Peace, and Security. Because of time constraints, the World Commission on Water was unable to consider the issue of international waters, that is rivers, lakes, and aquifers that are shared by two or more countries, in any significant depth. Initial reactions of people and institutions contacted who are directly associated with the management of such international water bodies as well as potential funding agencies for the establishment of such a Commission, have been overwhelmingly positive.

At present, it appears that a formal decision on this establishment could be taken within the next few months. If so, there is no doubt that many members of IWRA will play important roles in it.

These and other activities, both under way as well as under consideration, will undoubtedly ensure that IWRA will play an increasingly important role in water management in the new millennium. Globally, water has unquestionably become a critical resource issue for the next few decades in most countries of the world for a variety of reasons. Equally, forces of globalization, urbanization, population growth, technological developments, and information and communication revolution are changing the water sector with stunning speed. The world is moving into a new kind of economy and a new kind of society, where we need new mindsets and knowledge to resolve increasingly complex and interrelated issues. The water sector is no exception. Whether we like it or not, the world of water management is likely to change more during the next 20 years compared to the past 2000 years. The past experiences will often provide no guidance during this period of explosive change. The stakes are high, but equally gives us new opportunities to improve water management practices very significantly, like never before in human history. I believe that with a little luck, IWRA can play a very important role in managing these changes. The opportunities are clearly there, and thus IWRA must rise to meet these challenges successfully.

Members, Club of Tokyo

Co-chairs:

Dr. Asit K. Biswas, President, Third World Centre for Water Management, Mexico City, Past President, International Water Resources Association, Member, World Commission on Water

Dr. Kazuo Takahashi, Director, International Development Research Institute, Tokyo, Former Assistant Director-General, OECD, Paris, and Member World Commission on Water.

Members:

Dr. Mahmoud Abu-Zeid, Minister of Public Works and Water Resources, Cairo, Past President, International

Water Resources Association, and President World Water Council.

Dr. Mohamed Ait Kadi, Director General, Administration du Genie Rural, Rabat.

Prof. Benedito P.F. Braga, Jr., University of Sao Paulo, and President, International Water Resources Association.

Prof. Malin Falkenmark, Stockholm International Water Institute, and Former Vice President, International Water Resources Association.

Dr. Torkil Jonch-Clausen, Chair, Technical Advisory Committee, Global Water Partnership, and Former Director, Water Quality Institute, Copenhagen.

Dr. Aalt Leusink, Managing Director, NEDECO, The Hague, The Netherlands.

Prof. John Pigram, University of New England, Australia, and President-Elect, International Water Resources Association.

Dr. Ismail Serageldin, Vice-President, World Bank, Washington, DC, President, Global Water Partnership, and Chairman, World Commission on Water.

Dr. Aly Shady, Senior Water Policy Advisor, Canadian International Development Agency, and Past President, International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage.

Prof. Yutaka Takahasi, Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo.

Dr. Olcay Unver, President, GAP, Ankara, and Secretary General-elect, International Water Resources Association.

Jay Narayan Vyas, Minister of Water Resources, Gujrat, India.