



Editorial: World Water Forum—A Personal Reflection

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During 17–22 March 2000, the second World Water Forum took place in the Hague, The Netherlands. The Forum was an event of the World Water Council, and was strongly supported organizationally and financially by the Government of The Netherlands. Some 4600 participants from all over the world registered for this Forum.

The centrepiece of the Forum was the report of the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, and the numerous activities that were preparatory components of this report. The members of this high-powered blue-ribbon Commission are listed as an appendix to this Editorial. 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. All the Commissioners participated in this exercise in their personal capacity.

As both an Editor of this Journal and a member of the above Commission, I believe the report and the activities at the Forum are likely to have significant impacts on water management practices at global, regional and local levels in the coming years. The pathways through which these impacts will take place are likely to be many, some of which are predictable at present, but equally others may not be identifiable until a certain period of time has elapsed.

The report of the Commission 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 provided automatically by governments at very low or no cost is gradually, but most certainly, coming to an end. Achieving water pricing would not be an easy task because there are too many vested interests in maintaining current practices and also the status quo, too many dogmatic views which 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, and it will no longer be the continuation of 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 Programme Committee of the World Water Council, I first proposed that a long-term global vision on water be prepared, interest in the proposed exercise, even from some members of this Committee, was 'lukewarm' at best. It took the foresight of Bert Diphooorn, Senior Water Adviser to 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. It is likely that in about a decade's time, when some bright-eyed doctoral students analyse the Forum and its impacts on the world and the water management profession, Bert Diphooorn and his colleagues such as Aalt Leusink will undoubtedly 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 to establish 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 become 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 that the report was not only "do-able but eminently do-able". 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 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 extensive and intensive participation by people interested in water from all walks of life and from all parts of the world.

Much credit also goes to the Dutch Government, who 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 programme" so that the "officially designated representative" of that country could present the official "vision" of that country, instead

of 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 were organized under the aegis of the United Nations, or other similar major inter-governmental institutions.

A month after the completion of the Forum, all the signs are that the Forum was a resounding success in bringing people from all over the world to discuss various water issues, share their views and review their expectations of the future. The process and the event 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 Commission and the Forum, as well as the enthusiasm and interest of the stakeholders concerned during the post-Hague period to ensure a water-secure world for all. This will not be an easy task, but is a task that must be accomplished for the better future of all mankind.

Appendix: The World Commission on Water for the 21st Century

Chairman:

Ismail Serageldin, Vice-President, World Bank, Washington, DC, USA

Members:

Shahrizaila bin Abdullah, Past President, International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Anil Agarwal, Director, Centre for Science and the Environment, New Delhi, India

Abdel Latif Al-Hamad, Chairman of the Board, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Kuwait

Asit K. Biswas, President, Third World Centre for Water Management and Chairman, Committee on International Collaboration, IWRA, Mexico

Kader Asmal, Former Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa

Margaret Catley-Carlson, Former President, Population Council, New York, USA

Gordon Conway, President, Rockefeller Foundation, New York, USA

Mohamed T. El-Ashry, Chairman and CEO, Global Environment Facility, Washington, D.C. USA.

Howard Hjort, Former Deputy Director-General, FAO, Rome, Italy

Enrique Iglesias, President, Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, DC, USA

Yolanda Kakabadse, President, World Conservation Union, Costa Rica

Speciosa Wandira Kazibwe, Vice-President, Kampala, Uganda

Jessica Mathews, President, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Robert S. McNamara, Co-Chair, Global Coalition for Africa, Washington, DC, USA

Jerome Monod, Chairman of the Supervisory Board, Suez, Lyonnaise des Eaux, Paris, France

Peter Rogers, Division of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA.

Maurice Strong, Chairman, Earth Council, Ottawa, Canada

Kazuo Takahashi, Director, International Development Research Institute, FASID, Tokyo, Japan

Wilfred Thalwitz, Former Senior Vice President, World Bank, Washington, DC, USA

José Israel Vargas, Former Minister of Science and Technology, Brazil, and President, Third World Academy of Sciences, Brasilia, Brazil