



Second Committee Special Event

Panel discussion on “Enhancing Governance on Water”

**Friday, 06 November 2009, 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
Conference Room 2**

Summary Note

The Special Event entitled Enhancing Governance on Water was organized by the Division for Sustainable Development, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). The event was chaired by Chairperson of the Second Committee, H.E. Mr. Park In-kook, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the UN, and discussion was framed by four distinguished panelists: Dr. Colin Chartres (Director General, International Water Management Institute), Prof. Aaron Wolf (Oregon State University), Dr. Nikhil Chandavarkar (Chief in the Division for Sustainable Development, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary to UN-Water) and Ertuğrul Apakan, Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations.

Colin Chartres, Director of the International Water Management Institute, noted that, because of climate change and other challenges, such as population growth and little investment into agricultural water management, water had become scarcer over the last few decades, and emphasized that water issues must be addressed in a holistic manner. While water availability is impacted by climate change, population growth as well as more resource intensive consumption patterns highlight the need to act urgently and decisively. After the green revolution in agriculture, it was crucial to enable a "blue revolution". As the global population grew, the challenge became clear: the world would have to feed another 2.5 billion people with less water for agriculture than was now available.

He outlined the regions where water was most scarce, either because of physical or economic reasons, predominantly Africa, Asia and South America and said countries must focus on providing the poor with drinking water, sanitation services and water for agriculture. Solutions depended on investment and science to increase water productivity and reduce health and environmental risks from contaminated waters. Governance reform was vital as it could help bring

about a more equitable allocation. "Demand is going to outstrip supply of water over the next few years," he said, reiterating that climate change would compound the problem. In many zones where water was already scarce, temperatures were likely to rise with an immediate effect on the hydrological cycle. This would cause a shrinking of important freshwater reservoirs and make rainfall more variable, causing droughts and floods.

With regard to solutions, he said it was important to think broadly and laterally. Countries would have to look at conservation techniques such as water harvesting and various types of irrigation, among other things. The greatest return on investment could be expected from investing in rainfed agriculture. There were a range of solutions for different countries at different stages of development. In Asia, for example, investing in irrigation was vital to improve productivity, while in sub-Saharan Africa, water infrastructure must be developed. In general, it was crucial to attribute adequate funds into the blue revolution but with consideration for biophysical, social, economic and institutional settings. About 65 million rural poor in sub-Saharan Africa and 70 million poor in India could benefit from such interventions, which were estimated to cost about \$115 billion in sub-Saharan Africa and \$156 billion in India.

Looking ahead, he said the world would not be able to double food production in the next 40 years if things continued as they were, and a discussion of water reform was necessary. Annual investments in agricultural development must increase by 50 per cent, from \$142 billion to \$209 billion, to meet food demands, according to estimates from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). There was compelling evidence that the decline in official development assistance (ODA) had caused agricultural productivity to fall, and if that trend continued, the world would not be able to feed its population in another 30 or 40 years. However, the cost of preventing a global food and water crisis was small compared with the financial crisis bailout, which the BBC had estimated to cost more than USD 10 trillion.

Professor Wolf seconded these observations and highlighted the magnitude of this water crisis, in which we are: "This is as big as malaria, as big as HIV/AIDS. It's bigger than tsunamis, bigger than earthquakes; more people are affected each year by the water crisis than by all wars in any given year. It's a crisis as big as we face". About 1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water and 2.5 billion - almost half the world's population - has no access to basic sanitation. Every year, water-related ailments made 250 million people sick and claimed the lives of between 2.2 million and 5 million more.

Conflicts over water – commonly regarded by politicians and local farmers alike as the world's most precious resource - were at the heart of regional instability and national economies, but they could be a catalyst for cooperation and peace if managed properly, Aaron Wolf, a specialist in water resource policy and conflict resolution. "Two thirds of the time we do anything over shared water, we

cooperate. That is hugely important," said Prof. Wolf, Programme Director in Water Conflict Management and Transformation at Oregon State University. Politicians often threatened to take to the battlefield over water, but the last formal war over water had been fought in 2,500 B.C. between two Sumerian city-States contesting the Tigris Basin, he added. Since then, more than 3600 water-related treaties governing boundary demarcation and navigation had proven to be resilient over time, even as cross-border conflicts raged, he said, pointing out that the Mekong River Commission, created in 1957, had held technical exchanges throughout the Viet Nam War. The Indus River Commission had survived two wars between India and Pakistan, and the last armed conflict in which Arabs and Israelis hostilities included water directly as one factor among many had taken place in 1970.

The problem was that water was often managed unilaterally and thus inefficiently, and was used to exacerbate tensions, he said. Governments used man-made borders to protect their sovereignty, economies and nationalities, but water itself does not respect these political boundaries. Furthermore, policy discussions over water issues focused too much on global trends and solutions, while neglecting the regional and subregional water disputes that were a real security concern, responsible for poverty, disease and degradation in many parts of the world.

Ertuğrul Apakan, Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations, said the pressure on water resources continues to intensify as consumption of water has grown at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century. By 2025, 1.8 billion people would live in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, according to United Nations statistics. There is therefore a need to improve the management of the supply and demand of water.

Agriculture consumes the most freshwater resources, and in order to keep up with the growing demand for food, 14 per cent more freshwater would need to be withdrawn for agricultural purposes over the next 30 years, according to some estimates. He highlighted that as the world changes there is a need to adapt to water scarcity and water abundance through floods, noting that trans-boundary water issues, for example, were becoming a problem, as the current political, legal and institutional infrastructure was unable to deal with the complexity of the issue.

He highlighted the commitment of the Turkish government to engage on water issues, as they had organized together with an NGO called the World Water Council the Fifth World Water Forum, in Istanbul in March 2009. As a non-UN event this forum brings together stakeholders at all levels, including UN agencies and some governments, to develop a dialogue and increase cooperation among water users. The Istanbul Declaration of the Heads of States that attended this forum had called for greater water security and climate adaptation through more

strategic use of the world's most precious resource. He stressed that water deserved a higher priority on the world's agenda than it currently enjoys.

Dr. Nikhil Chandavarkar, Secretary of UN-Water and Branch Chief in the Division for Sustainable Development of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), said UN-Water had been established in 2003 as the inter-agency mechanism to deal with water-related issues vis-à-vis the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Millennium Development Goals. Its focus areas included water scarcity, sanitation, transboundary waters, climate change, financing and disaster reduction, among other things. It operated mainly through task forces and its four programmes (UNW-DPC in Bonn, WWAP in Perugia, UNW-DPAC in Zaragoza and the JMP – for more information please visit www.unwater.org).

He said each thematic initiative was hosted by a lead agency from the United Nations system and relied on a network of contributing partners. Historically, there had been a lack of coordination on water initiatives globally. Eventually, recognition had built within the United Nations system that more cohesiveness, organization and leadership were needed, which led to the creation of UN-Water in 2003. Due to the cross-cutting nature of water, which is reflected in most United Nations agencies mandates, not a new UN agency for water, but a light coordination mechanism was established, to create synergies, close gaps, avoid duplication and provide leadership that is shared throughout the UN system. UN-Water has its own limited financial resources, currently receiving funding from three donors. The coordination and policy work the UN system does through UN-Water is reflected in policy briefs and landmark reports that reflect the UN systems and their partners approach delivering as One. These reports target decision-makers and the public at large. A wealth of information, including UN-Water World Water Development Report, which is coordinated by UN-Water's WWAP, published every three years as an authoritative review of water challenges is available at the UN-Water website, www.unwater.org.

During the ensuing question-and-answer session, Dr. Chartres said that while it was important to provide water to the poor, it was also important to start thinking about the pricing of water, in part because a pricing mechanism could be used to drive up efficiency for the largest water users in agriculture and industries. The world could not go on with business as usual — in 20 to 40 years, countries would have to produce the same amount of food as they did today, but with less water. The key was to get the right kind of information to identify the appropriate solutions. Furthermore, there was a need to build capacity among poor farmers so as to drive up productivity. On the national level, water governance reform would have to be enacted.

Prof. Wolf responded to a question about the relationship between dams and the environment by emphasizing the need for added storage capacity given the changing weather patterns caused by climate change. Several states in the

western United States were looking at the possibility of building large dams because of increasingly volatile weather patterns. With snow caps melting globally, raising for example questions about supplies to the 1.3 billion people who relied upon water from the Himalayas as an effect of climate change, there was no question that the world would have to look again at increasing storage capacity to mitigate shortages. However, he cautioned that these infrastructure solutions must be carefully handled. They would have to be considered carefully along with soft approaches, such as demand side approaches and better water management, including the use of proven low-cost technology.

In answer to a question about international cooperation, Prof. Wolf said there was a need to grow and enhance global meetings but parties should not try to agree to too much. The more countries strove for consensus, the less those meetings seem to accomplish. Instead of compromise, countries should seek real solutions because water scarcity was "as destructive as anything else out there", he said, adding: "Our lack of will to grapple with this issue is astonishing and perhaps criminal."

On the role of local authorities, Mr. Apakan said they were the main providers of water services. During the Water Forum in March in Istanbul, the mayors and local authorities present had adopted the Istanbul Water Consensus after almost 18 months of negotiations. It set forth the perspectives of local authorities, the role of which must be reassessed and upgraded.

Asked by some UN member states about the budget of UN-Water, Dr. Chandavarkar said it should not be judged by the about USD 3 million it received in direct funding for core activities. The budgets of the water divisions of its 26 participating agencies, which are not included in that number, were far larger than that amount. The about USD 3 million of the core UN-Water budget should be seen as seed money for larger capital investments with a strong multiplier effect on water management issues. This seed money creates a knowledge base and policy advice and thus fosters real leadership applicable all the way from the global to the local level to address this crisis effectively.

On the role of desalination, Dr. Chandavarkar said that subject was dealt with in chapter 9 of the World Water Development Report. An estimated 0.4 per cent of the world's available freshwater came from desalination, a figure that would double in the coming decades. There are important environmental impacts to consider as water and waste products resulting from desalination and the energy use still makes the cost of the technology still prohibitive in many areas of the world that face issues of water scarcity. While an important source, desalinated water was not the "silver bullet" it is sometimes made out to be. Concentrating on managing the demand of water and using the existing water resources more efficient and responsibly often prove to be the more sustainable solution to tackling the water crisis.

Asked whether UN-Water should remain a coordinating mechanism or become a United Nations agency, he said its member and partner institutions and the large majority of the UN member states have sent strong signals against creating another UN agency. The reason is that water management is really about agriculture, climate, health, environmental and even cultural aspects. The crosscutting nature of water, as a crucial sustainable development issue, is reflected in the UN-Water approach with the membership of almost all UN system organizations and strategic partnerships with governments and civil society organizations. As delegates raised funding concerns for UN-Water, Dr. Chandavarkar said that only three generous donors were providing money for its multi-donor trust fund. He encouraged new and emerging donors to contribute, in order to share the financial burden more evenly.

Ambassador Park, the chair, thanked the panelists for their presentations and emphasized the crucial importance of water issues for achieving sustainable development and peace and security, as well as the important role the United Nations plays in that regard.