



International Year of Freshwater 2003



LAUNCH OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF FRESHWATER 2003 United Nations, New York, 12 December 2002

A Summary

Background

The availability of clean, freshwater is one of the most important issues facing humanity today - and will be increasingly critical for the future, as growing demands outstrip supplies and pollution continues to contaminate rivers, lakes and streams. Water scarcity is also a critical issue for future development. Water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population during the 20th century.

To raise awareness and galvanize action, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater (WaterYear2003). The main objectives of the Year concern raising awareness of the essential importance of freshwater resources for satisfying basic human needs, for health and food production and the preservation of ecosystems, as well as for overall economic and social development. The activities for the Year are being coordinated by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The International Year was officially launched at UN Headquarters in New York on 12 December 2002 with the participation of governments, UN agencies, civil society and prominent persons. The events of the day were jointly organized by the Departments of Public Information and Economic and Social Affairs. A dialogue on "The Challenges of Freshwater" was convened and a luncheon was hosted by UN/DESA and DPI to launch the Year. The following is summary of the event which also included: a press conference, a presentation of a new children's book on water written by Mrs. Nane Annan, a video presentation, a musical performance and an exhibit.

The Challenges of Freshwater: A Dialogue

The dialogue was moderated by Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information **Shashi Tharoor**, who welcomed the enthusiastic group of water advocates -- representatives of international organizations, governments, business and civil society, as well as experts and entertainers -- to the launch of the International Year of Freshwater. He then invited the UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette to make opening remarks and H.E. Mr. Talbak Nazarov, Foreign Minister of Tajikistan, to respond.

Ms. Louise Fréchette, Deputy Secretary-General noted that the International Year of Freshwater, was initiated by the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, and that it had been widely welcomed. She stated that, considering that more than one billion people lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation services, threats to health, food security, the environment and social stability due to lack of water would worsen if current patterns were allowed to continue. Prevention of future catastrophes could be averted through investments that are within the means of the world's leaders, who have pledged in the Millennium Declaration and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation to halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

In pursuit of these goals, Ms. Fréchette emphasized that the International Year of Freshwater should raise awareness on current and future crises, possible solutions, policy options and the need for leadership on water issues. It should be a platform for creativity, new

strategies, new ideas and technology, highlighting what works and what doesn't. It should promote participation, spurring the active involvement of everyone from schoolchildren in rural communities to Heads of State, drawing on the wealth of knowledge held by local communities and women's organizations.

Noting the controversy surrounding participation of the private sector and the fear that corporate involvement would raise water prices beyond the reach of those already mired in poverty, she stated that working with the private sector must entail collaboration among governments and all stakeholders to define equitable and environmentally sound solutions, with government engaged in oversight and regulation. She added that the International Year of Freshwater should also promote peaceful dialogue, and that shared water could serve as a catalyst for cooperation among countries.

Announcing the upcoming publication of the World Water Development Report, which will offer a comprehensive view of today's water problems and provide wide-ranging recommendations for meeting future demands, she then urged everyone to help make the coming year a success, to address one of the major challenges of our times.

Mr. Talbak Nazarov, Foreign Minister of Tajikistan, noted that proclaiming 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater was supported by 148 countries in the General Assembly. He indicated that the issue of freshwater resources had attracted substantial support by the international community and stated that intense irrigation and deforestation had caused severe stress on water resources in his region. Central and South Asia would not be able to maintain sustainable agricultural production without addressing the issues of water resources quality and quantity. He referred to regional cooperation as being essential to effective water resources management and noted that Tajikistan is the source of most of the water of Central Asia. Mr. Nazarov emphasized that conservation and stewardship of freshwater resources had become critical to humankind's survival and cautioned against the threat of severe water-related events caused by global warming and sea level rise. He observed that while many developing countries already faced water stress, it is bound to increase in the next 25 years and called for action to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources. He proposed that a focus group of interested Permanent Representatives to the UN in New York be convened to mobilize support for the International Year of Freshwater at the highest political level and encouraged countries to become actively involved.

Moderator **Shashi Tharoor** said that the Year of Freshwater could prove to be a new model for International Years, moving beyond the raising of awareness to the definition of serious and workable action to confront current and future challenges. He said most people acknowledge that water scarcity results from increasing demands, pollution and global warming. The extension of water and sanitation services with equitable allocation of resources is required to meet the needs of the world's population and mobilization of resources. Innovative partnerships are needed to meet these challenges. He then raised the question of what the United Nations, national governments, and civil society could do together as a starting point for the discussion, introduced the panel of discussants, and invited their comments.

Mr. Nitin Desai, Under Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and the Secretary-General of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), noted that DESA was working in collaboration with UNESCO and UNEP to promote the activities surrounding the Year of Freshwater. "In getting water management right, we can develop a strategic agenda that covers much more than freshwater, including girls' education, climate change and drought." He emphasized the interconnectedness among sectors and participants at Johannesburg, particularly those involved in the Water Dome events. He said the problem of water scarcity entailed the real issue of availability at local, national and international levels and the challenge of how to get water to where it is needed. Emerging scarcities must be addressed in response to rising demands. Improving water quality, particularly where health and nutrition are concerned, is central for children's health and other health issues as well.

Responding to Ms. Fréchette's comments on partnerships with the private sector, he underscored that equitable access would require private sector resources for operational and managerial services to provide water, but that the water resource itself could not be privatized. He also emphasized linkages and highlighted a focus in Johannesburg on integration, new technologies, better understanding of the potential of traditional technologies, awareness that quality and access can be best addressed by communities in many areas, and viewing the community as the key to development and efficiency plans. Partnerships and contributions from civil society, for example, in rainwater harvesting for schools, are the tangible outputs from Johannesburg, and should help raise awareness on potential solutions among all sectors to manage, network and mobilize more effectively and maximize the potential of the coming year.

Ambassador Milos Alcalay, Permanent Representative of Venezuela to the United Nations and Chairman of the Group of 77 and China, expressed the Group's commitment to meeting the Millennium Development Goals and the WSSD targets on access to water resources and basic sanitation services. He said the G-77/China would work with governments, UN agencies and civil society to make the International Year a success.

Ambassador Alcalay emphasized that access to clean water and sanitation is a fundamental human right. He indicated that many children and people die of water-borne diseases on a daily basis and acknowledged that producing safe drinking water to meet the demands of an increasing population was a challenge developing nations currently confront. He emphasized that making safe drinking water accessible was a priority for the Group and noted that its members had pledged to intensify efforts to achieve this objective over the next 10 years. Ambassador Alcalay referred to a high level-meeting on Science and Technology for the South recently held in Dubai which focused on a number of alternative ways to increase knowledge and use of technologies to make safe drinking water more widely accessible and called upon the international community to support these initiatives.

Ambassador June Clarke, Permanent Representative of Barbados and a Vice-President of the General Assembly, elaborated on the number of special challenges facing small island developing states (SIDS), with an emphasis on their vulnerability and their inextricable link to water issues. With small open economies at risk to external shocks, low levels of aggregate GDP, and constant possibility of damage to natural habitats and freshwater supply due to climate change, the problems faced by SIDS require ongoing action by the international community. United Nations agencies and programmes have taken action to address water quality and education, and freshwater has been given priority through the Barbados Programme of Action, although a lack of resources has prevented progress.

Citing a recent survey by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) that found freshwater awareness had risen and is higher on the agenda than ever among SIDS, she said that efforts must continue in building necessary frameworks for human and industrial consumption, carrying out impact assessments, paying attention to human resource development and ensuring a greater degree of self-reliance. In the context of climate change and sea-level rise, she highlighted depletion of aquifers due to drought, loss of wetlands and mangroves due to increased irrigation, and saltwater intrusion into groundwater. She called on the international community to assist SIDS in: improving conservation policies, by fostering changes in attitudes to water use, maintaining and employing land use policy to safeguard resources and allowing for long-term effective planning, and in utilizing desalination for potable use. Finally, she briefly reflected on the role that women can play in sensitization and changing unsustainable practices.

Mr. Gourisankar Ghosh, Executive Director of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), highlighted the need to create a multistakeholder platform to discuss water and sanitation issues. He said the WSSCC was ready to increase coordination and facilitate partnerships among different stakeholders. He noted that while the WSSCC is "not fully UN," it is a successful experiment in terms of partnering closely with the UN on water and sanitation issues. He referred to the "Water, Sanitation and Hygiene For All" (WASH) initiative as an example of the type of work WSSCC is undertaking. WASH focuses on teaching basic sanitation and hygiene to school children and communities, with emphasis on girl's education, as a necessary complement to water and sanitation infrastructure projects. The WASH initiative also seeks to mobilize political will and resources to deliver water and sanitation services to under-served communities. Mr. Ghosh indicated that "WASH" had been chosen as the name for the initiative because it communicates the idea behind the initiative easily. He emphasized the importance of communicating effectively and noted that people's awareness and behaviour on water and sanitation was the focus of the WASH campaign. Responding to a remark by another panelist on privatization of water services, Mr. Ghosh noted that while access to water was free, delivery was not. He indicated that "free delivery is not deliverable," even for the poorest of the poor and noted that collaborative partnerships could be the solution.

Mr. Tharoor then turned to the audience to request their views. Regarding connections with UN Habitat, **Ms. Anna Tibaijuka**, Executive Director of UNCHS (Habitat), responded by saying that people could no longer supply water for themselves in many places due to rapid urbanization. Thus, UN Habitat was assisting cities to manage water using a "demand management" approach, whereby profligate use is countered by punitive tariffs to rectify inequalities found in municipal water use among impoverished and wealthy communities. She also noted that municipalities often cannot account for water loss due to leakages and poor accounting, and that the Water for Cities programme tries to address these problems on the ground.

Ambassador Remo Gautschi, Deputy Director General of the Swiss Department for Development and Cooperation, drew attention to the fact that mountains provide freshwater for half of humanity and indicated that the International Year of Freshwater is ideally timed to

follow the International Year of Mountains and the WSSD. He stated that it was time to "put slogans into action" and recalled lessons learned from the International Year of Mountains. He said that creating awareness is crucial to mobilizing resources -- "effective coordination and networking are means for making full use of existing institutions and programmes." "It is a matter of implementing what we already know and not attempting to 'reinvent the wheel.'" He said that the long-term success of the Year of Mountains will depend on the success of the Year of Freshwater and vice versa and called upon the international community to support these initiatives to ensure the continuity and success of both. He also indicated that the Swiss Government intended to provide financial resources to support the activities of the International Year of Freshwater.

Mr. Tharoor then addressed **Mr. Roberto Lenton**, Chair of the Millennium Project Task Force on Water and Sanitation, asking whether the goals for freshwater and sanitation could indeed be met. Mr. Lenton responded that although technology barriers exist and institutional and financial barriers are formidable, meeting the water and sanitation goals is possible because relevant actors are in a position to be able to act. He noted the important confluence of events, including agreement among the international community, the launching of the task force linked to the Millennium Development Goals, and this launch of the International Year of Freshwater.

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Participants were then shown three short **public service announcements**, one produced by the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for all (WASH) campaign, and two by the ABC television network. Mr. Tharoor also drew attention to an exhibit for the Year of Freshwater on display at the UN visitors entrance. A **musical performance** by Pete Seeger and Bob Reid with the David Grover Big Bear Band and the United Nations International School Children's Choir in national dress closed the dialogue. The audience all joined in the chorus of the Year's theme song, "Water Water."

Luncheon: "Coping with Today's Freshwater Challenges: Solutions for the Future"

A luncheon co-hosted by Messrs. Nitin Desai and Shashi Tharoor and sponsored by Singapore Public Utilities Board and CH2M Hill followed the morning session. It focused on solutions to freshwater challenges and featured Mrs. Nane Annan, Mr. Alex Matthiessen, the Hudson Riverkeeper, and Ambassador Kishore Mahbubani, Permanent Representative of Singapore, as keynote speakers. The luncheon was attended by more than 160 people, including representatives of government, local authorities, businesses, non-governmental organizations and the media.

Mr. Nitin Desai welcomed guests and expressed his appreciation to the Public Utilities Board of Singapore and CH2M Hill for sponsoring the luncheon. He introduced the keynote speakers and invited their remarks.

Mrs. Nane Annan's remarks focused on how water transforms the lives of women and children. She drew attention to the fact that in one place a drop of water, clean and clear, was the very essence of life, while in another it was contaminated, bringing death and disease. She said that no stop signs warned children and their families about the risks of drinking contaminated water and, even if they did, many people had no choice. As a result, almost 6,000 children die every day from water borne diseases. She observed that women and girls bore the brunt of the burden of lack of safe drinking water and sanitation because they are the ones carrying the water and managing it, the ones cooking, cleaning and washing babies and infants.

Mrs. Annan noted that the simple act of washing hands at key times with soap and water could reduce the death toll from diarrhoeal disease by more than a third. She recounted her experiences in Ghana and Mozambique where she visited water projects and stressed that simple, low-tech solutions such as a hand-pump, a water tap, a bar of soap, or a slab of concrete would reduce child mortality and give people, especially women, more time to engage in income-generating ventures and enable girls to go to school. Mrs. Annan concluded her remarks by thanking all partners engaged in promoting freshwater, sanitation and hygiene for all.

Mr. Alex Matthiessen, Executive Director and the Hudson Riverkeeper, said the mission of his organization was to safeguard the ecological integrity of the Hudson River, its tributaries and the watershed of New York City (protecting the city's drinking water supply) by tracking down and stopping polluters. He said that as a member of the Peace Corps in Zaire (the Congo) and Indonesia, he had personally witnessed how lack of access to water affects people, particularly women and girls. He noted that clean water is the foundation of life on Earth and said we were squandering it. He emphasized that access to safe drinking water is a fundamental right and noted that 40% of lakes and estuaries in the United States do not meet clean water standards. He indicated that since 1983, Riverkeeper has

investigated and brought to justice more than 300 environmental lawbreakers and stressed the belief in the rights of every citizen to enjoy and defend water resources.

He noted that while enacting legislation to protect water resources was important, it was insufficient without people's active involvement and commitment to enforcing the legislation and concluded that the International Year of Freshwater was a unique opportunity to raise awareness and galvanize action.

Ambassador Kishore Mahubani, Permanent Representative of Singapore, focused on water resources reclamation and re-use. He noted that as a densely populated city-state, Singapore tries "to catch every rain drop that falls" and tries to "use every single drop of water more than once." He referred to a water-recycling programme known as "NEWater" which Singapore has introduced. He said the project uses new technology that enables taking sewage and wastewater, treating it and re-using it for industrial and domestic purposes. He said that the water's quality after treatment was as good as drinking water. He noted that, while Singapore's population was initially apprehensive, they are now embracing the project because the new technology "does what nature does to water." He concluded that the International Year of Freshwater should be a platform for creativity to disseminate and make use of new strategies and new technologies to make better use of water resources.

Mr. Nitin Desai thanked the keynote speakers for their remarks and proposed a toast to launch the International Year of Freshwater, 2003.

Other activities in New York to launch the International Year of Freshwater:

1. Children and Wash: The Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and its WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) campaign organized a children's event to mark the launch of the International Year of Freshwater with a presentation of a new children's book by Mrs. Nane Annan called "Tip and Top: the Adventures of Two Water Drops." The event was held at the Ford Foundation in New York with the participation of WSSCC Executive Director, Mr. Gourisankar Ghosh, Mrs. Annan and children from the UN International School for a discussion on some of the key WASH campaign messages.

2. Video Presentation: An eight-minute informational video featuring excerpts from "Water: A Drop of Life", produced by Swynk Productions, was viewed prior to the dialogue.

3. Press Conference: A press conference moderated by Ms. Susan Markham and presented by Mr. Nitin Desai (Under-Secretary-General, Department of Economic and Social Affairs), Mr. Alex Matthiessen (Hudson Riverkeeper) and Mr. Gourisankar Ghosh (Executive Director, WSSCC) was held prior to the luncheon.

4. Exhibit: A small exhibit showing an inspirational video on freshwater issues, also produced by Swynk Productions, was placed at the UN Visitor's Entrance for public viewing. The video was created for the International Year by Swynk Productions in the Netherlands and was exhibited at the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

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