

Summary of the High-Level Interactive Dialogue on Water, 22 March 2010

In keeping with the priorities of the sixty-fourth session as outlined in his letter of December 24, and at the request of Members States as contained in the resolution 64/198, the President of the General Assembly, H. E. Dr. Ali Abdussalam Treki, convened a High Level Interactive Dialogue on World Water Day, in New York on 22 March 2010, with the participation of representatives of governmental and non governmental organizations, civil society and private sector, focusing on the implementation of the International Decade for Action “Water for Life 2005-2015” and the realization of the internationally agreed water-related goals.

The dialogue, held at the Ministerial Level, comprised of an opening and closing segment and three interactive multi stakeholder panels on the following themes:

- Water and the Millennium Development Goals;
- Water and climate change and disasters;
- Water and peace and security.

Welcoming all participants, President Ali Abdussalam Treki, in his opening remarks, underlined the crucial significance of water as a common resource of the mankind, in the achievement of peace and development objectives, and the need for its efficient utilization and preservation for the good of the present and future generations. The High Level Dialogue presented a timely opportunity to review and speed up the full implementation of the water related goals. The President of the General Assembly invited H.E. Asha-Rose Migiro, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General and H.E. Akil Ghaibullayevich Akilov, Prime Minister of Tajikistan to address the opening segment. Mr. Sha Zhukang, Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, made a special presentation.

The Prime Minister of Tajikistan also took the opportunity to invite Member States to the High Level International Conference on Mid-term Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the International Decade for Action “Water for Life” 2005-2015, to be held in June 8-10, 2010 in Dushanbe.

Through a video link with the celebrations of World Water Day from Nairobi, His Royal Highness, Prince Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands and H.E. Achim Steiner, Executive Director of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) conveyed the results of the discussions in Nairobi to the High-Level Interactive Dialogue in New York.

The high level and expertise of Moderators and panelists and the overwhelming participation of Member States enriched the discussions and promoted a fruitful and interactive dialogue.

Panel I: “Water and Millennium Development Goals”

Moderator: H.E. Jan Eliasson, President of the 60th Session of the United Nations General Assembly and Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden.

Panelists:

H.E. Ms. Buyelwa Patience Sonjica, Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, South Africa, Chair of the African Ministers Council on Water (AMCOW)

H.E. Ambassador Mohamed Mijarul Quayes, Foreign Secretary of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh

Mr. Richard A. Grainier, CEO Hestiun Environment.

Water is central to achieving each and every one of the Millennium Development Goals. There is no substitute for water. Access to water for drinking and productive activities, as well as access to sanitation services are a prerequisite for lifting people out of poverty, food security, for promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality and increasing maternal health. Water and sanitation relate directly to human development and dignity.

Sustainable management of water resources is vital for achieving economic growth and safeguarding ecosystems. Preventing pollution, treating polluted water and restoring ecosystems are vital to safeguard water quality. It is estimated that about 700 million people in 43 countries suffer from water scarcity, and by 2025, this figure could increase to more than 3 billion.

Almost one billion people do not have access to improved sources of safe drinking-water. 2.6 billion people do not have access to improved sanitation. It impacts health and productivity and is a key impediment in achieving the development potential of communities. Lack of financial resources and their allocation, as well as lack of means of implementation, especially in developing countries, have held back progress on providing access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Water resource management issues, as well as providing access to safe drinking water and sanitation services, present a global challenge, which must be addressed at the local, national, regional and international levels. It is vital to engage Governments, the private sector, NGOs, international organizations and all stakeholders to strengthen existing partnerships and create new partnerships where needed.

Women are often not adequately involved in the decision making processes on water, while it is recognized that they are often the most informed of local water sources.

Some Member States recognized the right to access to safe drinking water and sanitation as essential for securing an adequate standard of living, particularly since it was one of

the most fundamental prerequisites for survival, and which was recognized in some of their own Constitutions and legislations.

There are human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation, they being inextricably linked to the enjoyment of many human rights including the right to education, food, health, housing, life, physical security and the freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment.

Member States urged and encouraged the Ministers of Finance, of water and development gathering in Washington DC on 23rd April 2010, to take global action on the most basic of rights of the world's citizens – access to a safe toilet and clean water.

It is essential to turn words into action. A focus on sustainability is needed as well as a global commitment, accountability, financial resources and capacity building. Water resources and sanitation must be managed in a sustainable manner to allow human development, dignity, and economic growth as well as to safeguard water quality and ecosystems.

Member States underlined their engagement on water related issues by reflecting to the best practices and cooperation patterns adopted by them for the development and implementation of country-led water and sanitation plans with their partners, as well as the mechanisms for managing water resources.

A proposal was made to develop a global action plan on water in 2012 to reflect existing water and sanitation related goals, fill the gaps in the international water and sanitation agenda, highlight recent accomplishments and outline a roadmap to make progress on the water and sanitation agenda as a whole. While efforts under different initiatives were recognized, it was also noted that water can be best managed in an integral way through an inclusive organ like the United Nations.

The private sector was also active in proposals on finding ways of cleaning the water at source. There were new ways on identifying, researching and developing products and solutions that take into account environmental concerns and cost constraints.

2010 was signaled this is as a critical year halfway through the International Decade for Water and approaching the 10 year milestone towards the MDG targets.

Panel II: "Water, climate change and disasters"

Moderator: H.E. Mr. Jorge Jurado M., Minister for Water of Ecuador

Panelists:

H.E. Abdelkebir Zahoud, State Secretary for Water and Environment, Ministry of Energy, Mines, Water and Environment of Morocco.

Mr. Salvano Briceño, Director, United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), Geneva.

Barbara Frost, Executive Director of WaterAid, United Kingdom.

Water-related impacts of climate change are already being experienced, as more severe and frequent droughts and floods occur. Higher temperatures and changes in extreme weather conditions are projected to affect the availability and distribution of rainfall, snowmelt, river flows and groundwater, and further deteriorate water quality. It is mainly through water that climate change affects people's livelihoods and well-being.

As it was pointed out by the panelists, when disasters strike, a lack of drinking water and sanitation can become especially acute, such as in Haiti. With increasing floods, pit latrines overflow and pollute the wells. Women and children often suffer the most.

Building resilience and reducing vulnerabilities to extreme events is vital. Water related hazards can result from too much water causing floods and landslides or too little water causing droughts, forest fires and the loss of wetlands. It is however, the lack of resilience as well as poor infrastructure, urban planning and water management that mainly create the risks for the population.

Disaster risks threaten the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Reducing these risks to natural hazards can contribute greatly to climate change adaptation by implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action and available technical methods, as well as the capacity development tools for new legislation, multi-stakeholder national platforms, scientific and technical networks, community-based risk management and resilience programmes, along with risk (hazard and vulnerability) assessments, land use planning and environmental protection, awareness of appropriate construction codes, early warning systems, and risk education, training and awareness.

Water stress is already high, particularly in many developing countries; improved management is critical to ensure sustainable development. Managing increased variability

of water resources requires additional natural and constructed water storage, support frameworks for regional and international cooperation, south-south cooperation, and other forms of partnerships. Improving the management of water resource management systems will help countries to adapt to the challenges of climate change.

Transfer of technology, such as remote sensing devices, can provide the tools to forecast and better prepare for an impending disaster and thus help reduce vulnerabilities.

Agriculture as the main user of water is particularly affected by climate change. As most countries in the world still depend primarily on rain fed agriculture, changing rainfall patterns constitute a risk for food security and livelihoods. Improved water management and adapted irrigation technologies that increase the efficiency of water use are vital in many regions to adapt to climate change and reduce vulnerabilities.

There was a call for the international community to work inclusively and productively to achieve effective actions and leverage further commitments at the UNFCCC COP-17 in Mexico at the end of this year. A call was also made to fulfill the pledges made in relation to fast track financing in order to improve the resistance, especially by Small Islands Developing States, to rising sea levels, increased droughts and severe weather events.

Panel III: "Water and peace and security"

Moderator: Dr. Mahmoud ABU-ZEID, President of Arab Water Council and Former Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation of Egypt

Panelists:

H.E. Mr. Joao Gomes Cravinho, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal.

Mr. Olcay Unver, Coordinator - UN-Water's World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) (UNESCO)

Mr. Jan Kubis, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and Coordinator of the Regional Commissions.

History shows that cooperation, not conflict, is the most common response to transboundary water management issues. Past experiences confirm that it is possible for parties with divergent interests to use a common resource in a cooperative spirit. Many emphasized the fact that water management can be a catalyst for cooperation and that water is an essentially unifying element for cultures, politics and policies. However, population growth, changing consumption and production patterns and climate change create new challenges for the equitable and peaceful management of shared water resources.

Transboundary water management arrangements must be tailored to a given basin's characteristics and reflect a range of environmental, hydrological, political, economic, social and cultural circumstances. Moreover, cooperation on water management may serve as a catalyst for integration in other areas. Water resources policy must also be coordinated with other natural resources and sectoral policies, such as land-use management and spatial planning. It is critical to think "outside the waterbox" as one participant put it. Climate change will bring new challenges to water management negotiations.

Peace is a precondition for security, and at the same time a sense of security is essential for the sustainability of peace. A combination of both peace and security is necessary to

achieve stability, sustainable development and decent governance. None of these values should be taken for granted, as they require a constant effort of dialogue, mutual understanding, cooperation and negotiation.

There is an urgent need to cope with the existing legal frameworks and other negotiating tools such as the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, adopted in 1997 by the General Assembly, the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes adopted in Helsinki in 1992, as well as resolutions of the General Assembly in the framework of the Commission of International Law on transboundary aquifers.

A proposal on the possible framework for agreements, which came from one of the panelists, comprised the need to establish a shared long-term vision of common goals and benefits; a definition of global strategy for the good management of water resources; a permanent effort of surveillance and control; and the active involvement of citizens in the process, since a participatory approach with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders has proved to be highly useful for the success of any transboundary water management strategy.

Exchange of data and joint or at least harmonized monitoring and assessment among all riparian countries represent the basis and a possible starting point for effective transboundary water management. The deterioration of monitoring networks to collect water data presents a challenge for its effective management.

Successful experiences have been registered in water related issues through South-South cooperation mechanisms among Asia, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean countries, but there is a need to promote sub-regional, regional and international South-South partnerships including civil society, community groups, the private sector and academia. Public participation is fundamental to enhance transparency in the decision-making process.

There were special presentations from Member States on the national, regional and international initiatives where water issues have been addressed in a very timely manner. Member States from different regions informed on their proposals to host regional and international Conferences in order to address the emerging challenges of water and to promote water management.

This summary of the High Level Dialogue is intended to give Member States an account of the common challenges as well as opportunities in order to address the water related issues in the future. As the President of the General Assembly invited Member States to provide their points of view as well as the national, regional and international proposals on how to accomplish the goals, all presentations received have been uploaded to the website of the event. All Member States are also encouraged to refer to detailed presentations as well as the webcast of the World Water Day for more information.