

Turning 22 March into World Water Action Day

Speech by His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange at the opening of World Water Day 2007, Rome, at 10.50 on Thursday 22 March 2007

Your Excellencies, Honoured Guests, Ladies and gentlemen, Waterfriends!

The twenty-second of March is a red letter day for all water managers – and I am no exception. World Water Day is our annual wake up call to the world. The day on which we draw its attention to the gravity of the water crisis. We are holding it today for the fifteenth time.

So World Water Day has become an institution – one that enjoys broad support within the UN. That is important, but institutions tend to institutionalise, making words more important than deeds. We cannot let that happen. Certainly now that achieving the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation seems more and more doubtful.

If current trends continue, the world will miss the sanitation target in 2015 by more than half a billion people. Every year, 1.6 million children under the age of five die through unsafe water and lack of basic sanitation. That is more than eight times the number of victims claimed by the Asian tsunami in late 2004. So it is an enormous understatement to say that sanitation is very important. The readers of the eminent British Medical Journal will underscore that. They recently voted sanitation the most important medical breakthrough since the mid-nineteenth century. Even more important than the discovery of penicillin or DNA.

Safe water and basic sanitation could and should be first on the scope of the healthcare sector. They are a prerequisite for achieving MDG's 4, 5 and part of 6, the reduction of child mortality, the improvement of maternal health and to combat malaria and other life threatening waterborne diseases. Safe water and basic sanitation should be high on the list of the education sector, because if you want to achieve MDG's 2 and 3, to ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary education and to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and at all levels by 2015, you will first have to make sure that they, and with them I mean girls or young women in almost all cases, come to school in the first place, because they don't have to walk for miles and miles a day to collect drinking water for their families. And you have to provide decent sanitation at school so that young women from all cultures can go to school all the time with respect for their dignity. As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, a dollar spent on MDG 7, reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation, is an absolute bargain! Every dollar spent on this Millennium Development Goal achieves results in more than half of all eight MDG's and I bet that is the first time you hear this good and cheap news!

In 2004, Mr Kofi Annan decided to install the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation– UNSGAB for short. I have occupied the chair now for several months. UNSGAB was set up to advise the Secretary-General on matters concerning water and sanitation in relation to achieving the MDG's, but we believe that our responsibilities go further than that. In our own Hashimoto Action Plan,

named in memory of my predecessor, Mr Ryutaro Hashimoto, UNSGAB has identified six key areas in which radical change and swift, resolute action is needed. Our plan is only eleven pages long. It is based on existing knowledge and widely held opinions. And, most importantly, it is action-based. You shouldn't expect any more big plans from UNSGAB. But we will do all we can to keep everyone on track, and their sights firmly set on achieving the MDGs for water and sanitation. All the right answers are out there, we just have start asking the right questions.

Sometimes, solutions strike you because they are so wonderfully simple. A few weeks ago, for example, I received an email about a special initiative launched by the Case Foundation. The project was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative last September. It entails installing four thousand Play Pumps, mechanical merry-go-rounds attached to a water pump and a 660 gallon storage tank. I don't know how you feel about projects like this. But I think it is a wonderful idea that children should provide the family drinking water supply as they play. And don't make any mistake about it. This is not a symbolic project. The aim is to give ten million people access to clean water. So it's more than a drop in the ocean and it can be done in after school hours, when kids need play and physical exercise.

This is an inspiring example. And it can be as simple as that. But of course things are usually much more complicated and I would be the first to admit that. Earlier this week, I compared efforts to achieve the MDGs to Rubik's famous cube. The MDGs also have six sides: water, food, energy, poverty reduction, health and ecosystems. And as you all know, a twist on one side has an immediate impact, positive or negative, on all the others.

Let me explain how this kind of interaction works. As you probably know, the European Union has almost stopped all subsidies for agricultural production and replaced them with support for various kinds of landscape management . If everything goes to plan, export subsidies will follow in 2013. And certain European countries, among them the Netherlands, also want to take serious action in the next few years to improve market access for farmers from non-western countries. For instance by helping them meet Western food safety standards. In principle, all these measures could create new scope for growing cash crops in the Third World. That is good news, because agriculture is still the main engine behind development. This development could in theory lead to a financial scope to develop large-scale, socially and ecologically responsible hydropower – in Africa in particular, where more than 95 per cent of the hydropower potential still goes unused and water storage capacity per person is lagging behind drastically, especially in relation to the very erratic precipitation patterns. And of course, economic growth could also lead to better sanitation.

But, ladies and gentlemen, if you have listened carefully, you will have heard the caution in my words. Because there is a very big 'if'. The governments concerned will have to take the lead and put this development on the right track. Because otherwise, the remedy will soon be worse than the disease. More cash crops will automatically make greater claims on water resources that are already in short supply. And what's more, there is no guarantee that economic success in agriculture will also lead to success in other fields. That calls for good governance, starting with a fair and effective tax system. It also calls for solid investment plans and a reliable, efficient

government. Furthermore, as agriculture uses roughly 80 percent of all available water resources, every percentage point saved, provides 5 per cent extra for other users like industry and households. These are all matters on which the UN and other organisations need to lend a helping hand, to make the transition possible. Not by explaining that every drop counts – we know that by now – but by rolling up their sleeves and getting to work.

And that brings me back to the point where I started – the threat of words becoming more important than deeds. I am worried about that. The Human Development Report 2006, in which water plays a central role, stated clearly that the primary cause of the water crisis of the twenty-first century is not a shortage of water, but of political commitment and good water management. The report – which doesn't mince its words – shows how fragmentation is hampering a vigorous, concrete strategy. It even talks about a *surplus of conference activity and a deficit of action*. We should take this criticism to heart.

The Human Development Report also calls for a Global Action Plan and sets out the contours. It contains recommendations on ways of strengthening and reforming the funding structure. UNSGAB is actively supporting this process by organising a series of regional consultation rounds, which lead to regional action programmes. Last year it was Africa's turn, this year Asia's and Latin America's. And of course, funding structures are high on the agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My message on this fifteenth World Water Day is that we need to work harder to turn words into deeds. I am saying that to no one in particular and therefore to everyone. World Water Day was first introduced to raise awareness. I believe that the world **is** aware now, and that World Water Day has now become an institution – which is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, you can use institutions as agents of change too. So let us work together to ensure that, from now, the twenty-second of March will be known as World Water Action Day.

Thank you.