UN-HABITAT

Keynote Address on "Water for Thirsty Cities"
Dr. Anna Tibaijuka, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations & Executive Director UN-HABITAT
At the Opening Plenary Session of the Stockholm World Water Week
Monday 13th August 2007
(10:35 – 11:05 hrs)

Your Excellency, Prime Minister Mr. Fredrik Reinfeldt of Sweden,
Your Excellency, Mayor Ms. Kristina Axen Olin of Sweden,
Mr. Anders Berntell, Executive Director, SIWI,
Prof. Perry L. McCarty, Stanford University, California, USA,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction:

It is a great joy and honour for me to be here in Stockholm on the occasion of the 17th World Water Week Symposium. I would also like to applaud the Organisers for choosing the theme "**Progress and Prospects on Water: Striving for Sustainability in a Changing World"** for this year's Symposium. It has come indeed at a very timely point in human development as in a rapidly changing world humanity finds itself at a critical juncture in evolution. 2007 is a year when human beings will become a predominantly urban species, which is being called H*omo urbanus*.

It is thus a great pleasure for me to share my thoughts on the theme of **"Water for Thirsty Cities"**. This is a topic which is at the crossroads of the environment and development - a topic which decides not only the quality of life but life itself on this planet - a topic which has brought the multitude of professionals and policy makers from every corner of the globe to this Symposium.

The challenge that has brought us together here in this beautiful city abundant with water is our collective concern for water security in the 21st Century. Water and sanitation which are closely interrelated are essential not just to development, but indeed to live life itself: “Water is life and Sanitation is dignity”. There is a growing consensus that an increasing part of this challenge will have to be met in the coming decades in all our human settlements. The international community has made a commitment to improve access to safe water and sanitation for people around the world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We all agree that there is need to act and that the time for action is now. But are we willing to go the next step and make the right value choices? Let us not forget the choice is ours and will influence how our common future evolves.

Urbanizing World

Today more people are living in cities than ever before. The world's population living in cities will pass the 50 per cent mark sometime now. It may be happening even as you listen to me at present. Homo sapiens are slowly becoming Homo Urbanus. It is this new Homo Urbanus in developing countries which is becoming the victim of bad public planning and provides the challenge for sustainability.

Urbanisation is a reality that we must face and turn to our advantage as cities are the centres of economic and social development. Urbanisation, however, has put enormous pressure on the world's natural resources, water in particular. Depletion, wastage and pollution of water resources are threatening the sustainabilty of economic and social development. The provision of adequate supplies of water to industry, agriculture and growing numbers of urban residents, especially the urban poor is one of the biggest challenges facing governments and local authorities in the near future.

Water scarcity is also a potential source of social and political conflicts. Rapid population growth in urban areas, particularly in the mega cities of the developing world, has led to degraded environments and increasing competition for resources. This competition, particularly over land and water, may lead to social unrest, and indeed, already has in virtually every region of the world.

The poor cut their consumption of clean water and pay the price in disease and lost wages. But what is often forgotten is that the cities and countries pay equally dearly when the lack of these life sustaining services result in epidemics that engulf a city or even a region - as it happened in Peru in the early nineties and more recently in East Africa - with disastrous effect in lost lives, trade and tourism and enormous national medical bills.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The theme of my key note is 'Water for Thirsty Cities' which emphasizes not only the growing water crisis faced by cities across the world, but also provision of sanitation which is so closely interrelated with access to water and which threatens the sustainability of their social and economic development. Five key issues highlight the challenges faced by thirsty cities and how these can be met.

Providing Water and Sanitation for All

Water is for all. It is for the city of the poor and the city of the rich, for health and for economic development. Providing water and sanitation for all is, however, not an easy task. It is one of the Millennium Development Goals to halve the proportion of people not served with safe access to water and basic sanitation by 2015; but just eight years short of 2015, nearly one billion people still do not have access to safe drinking water; and more than 2 billion have no access to proper sanitation facilities.

It is poorer groups who bear most of the ill-health and other costs of environmental problems. They are the least able to afford good quality housing in neighbourhoods with piped water and adequate provision for sanitation, garbage collection, paved roads and drains.

Water is essential to good health and economic progress. Yet its provision to most urban residents in the developing world is still an unattainable goal. The urban areas have to balance the conflicting and growing demands of water consumers. There are certain things that need to be done to achieve a fairer distribution of water. These include (i) allocation of water and prioritization of investments according to national and local development goals; (ii) involving, urban consumers in the decision-making process and (iii) working for more efficient allocations and use of water.

Rising cost of water supply

As cities grow, their water supply needs increase. When sources close to cities become depleted or contaminated, new supplies of water have to be sought from further away. In addition contaminated water requires intensive and expensive treatment. These factors significantly increase the cost of supply both to the provider and to the consumer.

Freshwater, from practically all sources, has to be treated at water treatment plants to make it safe for human consumption. It must then be pumped through water mains into water distribution networks and then to our homes. All these stages contribute to the cost and represent a very high investment in human resources, machinery and infrastructure which increases as the sources become more remote.

The major challenge, therefore, is as to how can the cities meet the soaring cost of supplying water?

Reducing Wastage of Water

Cities can stop wastage of water. Nearly half the water supplied to cities is lost today because of leakage and wastage, often the result of neglect and profligacy. Reducing this wastage could free water to reach those still without adequate access.

Building Partnerships

We urgently need to find new approaches which better utilize our abundant human resources, our precious natural resources and our scarce financial resources.

Building partnerships for water can mobilize the vast, and largely untapped, resources of communities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the private sector in all areas of urban water management, enhancing efficiency and accountability in the supply, use and protection of water.

Sustainability

Water is going to be the dominant world issue into the current century. The supply of water may threaten the social stability of the world.

The explosive growth of urban centres over the last thirty years, which continues unabated, is rapidly depleting previously plentiful water resources. We have to ask ourselves a question, if things are going alright or not? Unfortunately the answer is 'No'. Several metropolitan cities are knee-deep in problems. Take for example, Mexico city-which has sunk some eleven metres over the past 70 years. The cause? Withdrawal of water from the ground water sources or aquifer below. Water pollution and intrusion of salt water into aquifers are among other problems which many cities are now facing.

Saving water for the future, therefore, is not striving for a distant and uncertain goal; the current trends of depletion, pollution and degradation of urban water resources have reached alarming proportions and would affect sustainable supplies within the foreseeable future if the current trends are not reversed.

There is a need to arrive at a consensus on how the soaring water demands of the cities and towns of the world could be met without compromising the needs of the future generations.

Cautioning the Impact of Climate Change

The world today is also facing the challenge of mitigating the impact of climate change which may bring many disasters like floods or droughts. Both situations create drinking water crisis making the cities thirstier.

Ladies and Gentlemen

As our climate changes things are getting worse, threatening more extreme weather. UN figures show that this year alone, 117 million people around the world have suffered from

some 300 natural disasters, including devastating droughts in China and Africa, and massive flooding in Asia and Africa, costing nearly $15 billion in damages.

Everywhere the urban poor live in places no-one else would dare set foot – along beaches vulnerable to flooding, by the side of railway lines, on slopes prone to landslides, near polluted grounds. They scratch out a living in shaky structures that would be flattened the instant a hurricane hit causing untold loss in lives and destruction. In this new urban age, the mega-cities, therefore, loom as giant potential flood and disaster traps. In sub-Saharan Africa, slum dwellers constitute over 70 percent of the urban populations. In other parts of the developing world that figure is a shocking 50 percent.

The Kyoto protocol sets binding targets for industrialized countries for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions that would lower the risk of global climate change. Among others, it establishes the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), which was designed to mobilize additional financial resources for developing countries to implement projects that reduce green house gases and promote sustainable development and generate emission reduction credits that can help industrialized countries meet commitments to the international community more cost effectively. There is a need to boost investment in new Clean Development Mechanisms. The developing world needs support for climate change mitigation and resources for greenhouse gas mitigation projects.

Need for Inhvestments and higher levels of ODA

First, the current level of investment in water and sanitation in developing countries remains woefully inadequate to bridging the growing demand-supply gap. According to one estimate, there is a need to increase the current level of investment by three times. With little prospects in sight for significant increases in official development assistance from multilateral and bilateral sources, which accounts for only about ten per cent of current investments, we urgently need to find new and innovative approaches and solutions which could make the best use of past investments and tap new channels for additional resources. The Camdessus Report in 2003 recommended all financing flows to double besides sustainable cost recovery for long-term sustainability. The Gurria Report shifted the emphasis from supply side to demand side and the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board have made several financial recommendations for improving access to finance by local governments, water utilities and operators by developing local financial markets and pooling mechanisms.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The most serious obstacle to making a clear break from the past is our inability to perceive the economic, social and environmental value of water in all its competing uses and to put in place realistic pricing policies that will allow its conservation, discourage waste, and ensure that the poor will be able to meet their basic needs at a price they can afford.

For this to happen, we must first deal with the myth that the poor cannot afford to pay for water. In reality, the urban poor are rarely connected to municipal supplies, and pay exorbitant prices for water to private vendors, from four times to a hundred times more than their affluent neighbours, who get subsidized water piped to their homes.

What we need is to find out from communities the level of service they want, the price they can afford and are willing to pay for. When they need help which they must as the cost of supplying water to cities continues to rise - experience shows that it is much more effective to provide direct subsidies to the poor than underpricing water.

A realistic pricing policy for water, administered with due safeguards for the poor, will provide a sound foundation for mobilizing the much needed financial resources for the expansion of service coverage to the growing numbers who still remain unserved.
The government of South Africa has for example introduced the lifeline tariff, guaranteeing access to water for all but charging more for the high consumers.

Improving the efficiency of service providers

Community participation in the water sector has special advantages. This not only ensures that the community is provided with what it wants rather than what the government thinks it needs, but it also provides the community with a sense of belonging and ownership. This inevitably results in better care for the investment and a greater willingness to pay for the services. This can go a long way towards cost recovery and long-term sustainability of services. The women of the community, in particular, can be important agents for change.

The private sector can bring significant efficiency gains and the much needed investment funds to the water sector. Here, we have to remember that private sector capital is not unlimited and there are many demands for capital financing in the infrastructure sector. Sound strategies will be needed to ensure that more water and sanitation projects attract private sector financing.

Presently about 90 percent of all utilities are publicly managed. Even modest improvements in these utilities will go along way to meeting the MDG targets for water and sanitation. Following the recommendations of the Hashimoto Action Plan, the United Nations Secretary General mandated UN-HABITAT to promote and coordinate activities related to water operators partnership at the international level. I am pleased to announce that UN-HABITAT has taken up this challenge, and has devoted human and financial resources to initiate a process for the establishment of Global Water Operators Partnership Alliance centre. We shall work for a win win situation for all. And it is possible.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The time has come for us to do away with the business-as-usual attitude and embrace change, a fundamental change in approach, in the water and sanitation sector. I am confident that with courage, will and determination, this change will be possible.

We are all together in this spaceship Earth. There is no second spaceship in sight. We cannot live in an island of security when the vast majority on this earth is denied the very basic necessities of life – Water and Sanitation which should be treated as the basic human rights for all.

Water is the most shared natural resource on this earth. We must learn to share and care. Information, education, communication and awareness are key in this process. Let us not forget: **"Life is water, do not waste a drop".**

Realizing the importance of water and sanitation to leading a full healthy and productive life, I would like to urge upon the international community, the national governments and all other stakeholders to ensure (i) delivery of drinking water immediately to all (ii) aim for total sanitation coverage by communities and (iii) move water and sanitation up on the national agenda. With political will and commitment, we should be able to provide water and sanitation for all, address the challenge of rising costs and reducing wastage. Through partnerships and commitment, we should be able to achieve both Targets 10 & 11.

Shared responsibility and solidarity hold the key to water security in the twenty-first century. The Millennium Summit, the Monterrey Consensus and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, together, provided a unique platform for building an international consensus. Let us not forget that the rich countries have as much at stake as the poor ones. there was a need for solidarity and partnership at local, national and global levels, if we want to quench the thirst of our cities. Let us not forget that what we consume today is only borrowed from our children and grandchildren.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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