

Global WOPs Congress Opening Address

Dr. Joan Clos, Under-Secretary General and Executive Director, UN-HABITAT

It is my pleasure to join you in opening this first Global Water Operators' Partnerships Congress and Alliance General Assembly. I am truly impressed by this international gathering of water and sanitation utility representatives and partners in support of Water Operators' Partnerships and take it as an encouraging sign of your commitment to WOPs.

I think it is most fitting that this WOPs Congress is being held in the context of World Water Day Celebrations, given this year's theme of *Water and Urbanization*. Water and sanitation operators are at the very heart of this theme. You provide the critical link between *water* and *cities* – managing the resources, building the networks, providing the essential services. In short, making cities places where the water flows.

Your role can hardly be underestimated. As those entrusted with serving over 90% of the world's urban populations with water, public water and sanitation utilities have a central role in efforts to build the kinds of cities this urban world needs.

The provision of basic services like water and sanitation underpins efforts to make cities more equitable and livable places. Over ten years ago, the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation provided the world with a clear rallying call to tackle the intolerable reality that so many of our fellow citizens are deprived of services so fundamental to their wellbeing and dignity. The recent United Nations General Assembly's resolution declaring water as a human right has taken this call a big step further, a resonant pronouncement by the world's governments that simply reducing the proportion of un-served is insufficient. The declaration gives states the legal obligation to ensure, in a progressive manner and within available resources, that *everyone* has access to water and sanitation. Urban water service providers will be on the delivering end of this promise, and will be called upon, more than ever, to apply practical solutions for extending service delivery as part of efforts to overcome social inequality and exclusion in our cities.

Utilities need to join hands with urban planners and other urban managers to help ensure that infrastructure and services are accessible to all. As you know, extending access is not just about laying down infrastructure, but also investing in the capacity to use it well. Utilities are the originators of a wealth of approaches for serving the poor and have ample experience to share with one another. In Nairobi, where two thirds of the population is estimated to be living in informal settlements, the Nairobi Water Company has a dedicated pro-poor unit working with diverse municipal actors to address the host of social, financial and technical barriers to serve this population. In other cities, smart solutions like remote-sensing-based Management Information Systems that give us real-time information about the state of our networks and services, or human sensor webs that allow citizens to provide dynamic feedback on water in public taps via their cell phones are helping improve utility efficiency, helping them to sustainably serve their citizens. These are some of the kinds of practices that should be shared to help utilities in other cities facing similar challenges.

As urban water managers, your leadership is equally important in building environmentally sound and resilient cities. In addition to seeing that water resources are wisely extracted and used, and wastewaters safely and efficiently treated and returned to the environment, utilities have a growing role in mitigating and responding to climate change. Two to three percent of the world's energy consumption and a full *half*

of municipal budgets are commonly consumed *simply* by the cost of pumping water through inefficient networks. With modified hydrological cycles and increasingly frequent extreme weather events an inevitable consequence of climate change, ensuring populations with a safe and continuous water supply will be an increasing challenge for water and sanitation utilities. The risks of inaction are so significant that it is no exaggeration to say that water utilities will be instrumental in protecting populations from widespread drought, disasters and epidemics. But there are a good many solutions being applied in utilities around the world. Improved management and relatively small investments in water supply infrastructure can make huge energy – and water – savings and see a rapid return on investment. And Water Safety Planning can help utilities significantly reduce the risks of climate-induced change and disaster.

We all need to continue lobbying decision makers to grant urban water utilities resources and decision-making powers commensurate with their responsibilities. But we must not wait for this. Meaningful action is already in your hands. This is why I am very supportive of Water Operators' Partnerships. While, on the one hand, the WOPs approach recognizes public utilities as carrying the biggest burden in serving the world's urban population with water and sanitation, it also celebrates utilities as the source of innovative, expert solutions. WOPs helps us acknowledge the champions out there who are addressing these issues and helps them serve as examples to others.

In our experience at UN-HABITAT, we have seen how often the solutions arise not from national level but from cities themselves. In addressing some of our most pressing global issues, cities are leading the way in taking appropriate action on the ground. There are a growing number of examples where municipal exchanges and technical assistance programmes that partner experts with their professional peers have been effective in extending good practices and allowing them to be locally adapted for real betterment in the lives of urban dwellers. We encourage this approach.

When the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board entrusted UN-HABITAT with the creation of a mechanism to scale up peer support between the world's water operators back in 2006, my agency took on this challenge wholeheartedly. Knowing that we could not do it alone, we called on the support of all of you to make this a reality. Since the launching of the Global WOPs Alliance in 2007, we have seen veritable movement and WOPs have taken off around the world as a viable approach to addressing the capacity barriers to achieving the MDGs. We are proud of the progress that together we have achieved and we look forward to going further with you.

In today's financial climate, WOPs is the kind of no-nonsense, cost-effective response we need to promote to help utilities play their full role in addressing the mounting challenges on their table. But we need to get more people involved. We need to continue to tell people about WOPs and let them understand the benefits. We need to lower the bar for entry – make it easier for utilities to get involved by assisting in finding appropriate partners and designing meaningful results-oriented exchanges. We need to continue to learn from practice and translate these lessons into improved design. And we need to extend the benefits by linking enhanced capacity with additional finance.

Your presence here today gives me confidence that a growing number of important partners also believe that WOPs has the potential to make a difference. I'm really looking forward to the experience exchange and idea generation that will happen here today and tomorrow, and I wish you the very best in your deliberations. The Global WOPs Alliance looks forward to working with you to *help water operators help one another*.

Thank you for your attention.