



D+C Development and Cooperation (No. 3, May/June 2002, p. 15-17)

Water - Key to Sustainable Development The International Freshwater Conference in Bonn

Dieter Brauer

Water will be one of the central issues at the Rio+10 conference in Johannesburg. It was the only issue on which a special preparatory conference was held involving all the stakeholders from governments, international organisations, and major groups of civil society. The Freshwater Conference in Bonn developed a catalogue of Recommendations for Action which will be a major input for the summit in Johannesburg.

The availability of freshwater is a key to sustainable development and an essential element in health, food production, and poverty reduction. Without an adequate supply of safe water, all other development efforts are doomed to fail.

However, 1.2 billion people around the world lack access to safe drinking water, and close to 2.5 billion are not provided with adequate sanitation. And if present trends continue, even less water will be available in the future as more water is needed for food production and growing populations, and pollution is increasing rapidly.

The International Conference on Freshwater in Bonn (3-7 December, 2001), convened by two German ministries - Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and Environment (BMU) - brought together 118 national governments, 47 international organisations (among them UN and EU), and 73 organisations from civil society to discuss and work out a set of recommendations for action on how to cope with this enormous problem.

In an innovative approach - which was also seen as a model for the Johannesburg summit - business and civil society representatives were not relegated to the sidelines, meeting in separate venues away from the main conference. In Bonn, they provided an essential input for the conference itself. The so-called Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue, which went on in the plenary for two days, included nine major groups from civil society as identified earlier in the Agenda 21 of the Rio Summit: women; children and youth; indigenous peoples; NGOs; local authorities; workers and trade unions; business and industry; science and technology; and farmers. Altogether, some 1500 people participated in the conference and its many side events.

Conference results

After such a giant conference, one always asks oneself: what has been achieved? First, some basic principles were established or reconfirmed to guide future water policies. "Water is an economic and social good, and should be allocated first to satisfy basic human needs... Providing water security is a key dimension of poverty reduction", says the preamble to the Recommendations for Action adopted by consensus by the plenary. And in the main body of

the document it says further: "Water should be equitably and sustainably allocated, firstly to basic human needs and then to the functioning of ecosystems and different economic uses including food security."

This is an important statement because it clearly establishes the priority of human needs over economic uses of water. At a time of growing water scarcity, this means that less water may have to be allocated for agriculture, which at present uses about 80 per cent of available freshwater resources in developing countries. The statement also establishes the priority of the preservation of ecosystems over other water uses when it says: "The value of ecosystems should be recognised in water allocation and river basin management. Allocations should at a minimum ensure flows through ecosystems at levels that maintain their integrity".

Issues of water allocation, of course, lead to all sorts of conflicts between major stakeholder groups: the poor need drinking water for survival and for their livelihoods; farmers want water for irrigation, industry for production; and the urban elites claim water for basic as well as luxury consumption. Water uses and water rights, therefore, also touch on power issues in the society which can only effectively be negotiated by the state. The Recommendations for Action, therefore, clearly state: "The primary responsibility for ensuring equitable and sustainable water resources management rests with governments...Public responsibility includes the task to set and enforce stable and transparent rules that enable all water users to gain equitable access to, and make use of, water".

The strong role of the state in water policies does not rule out more participation of the poor in decision-making, nor the decentralisation of national policy to the local level. In fact, many of the discussions in Bonn revolved around these issues. The final document says water should be managed at the lowest appropriate level, preferably the watershed level. "Local governments, community-based organisations and private service providers (where they exist) should be the key players in local management and the provision of local services."

Need for huge funds

Improved water management at the national and local levels, including freshwater supply, sanitation and wastewater treatment requires huge sums of money. In Bonn, the Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidmarie Wieczorek-Zeul, quoted the following estimates: to reach the internationally agreed target to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people unable to reach or afford safe drinking water, we will have to provide new access to water for 300 000 people each day. For a similar target in sanitation, an extra 390 000 people per day will have to be provided with new services. This adds up to investments in the water sector of 180 billion dollars per year. But only between 70 and 80 billion are invested at present, leaving a gap of some 100 billion dollars a year.

Where is this money to come from? The answer of the Bonn conference was that all sources of funding must be strengthened - public revenues, water tariffs and charges, external assistance, and private investment. But this raises a number of sensitive issues. Traditionally, water, like fresh air, was regarded as a gift of god which is a common good and, therefore, should not be paid for. For this reason, there is still strong resistance to the introduction of users' fees. It will take time until people in traditional societies understand that while water itself may be free, the provision of water, the infrastructure needed for its distribution, and the cost of water treatment are services which need to be financed and must be covered by water charges.

Hotly debated in Bonn was the question to what extent the private sector should be allowed to invest in water supply and management in developing countries. In search of new sources of funding, many governments are now banking on Public Private Partnerships (PPP) for developing water markets. Large transnational corporations are interested in the huge business

opportunities opening up in developing countries. To provide the megacities in Africa, Asia and Latin America with effective water supply and sanitation systems is seen as a profitable investment. But there are fears, not unfounded, from NGOs and community organisations that private investors will only be interested in providing services where it is profitable, while the slum areas in the cities and the huge rural areas where 70 per cent of the poor live will remain without adequate services.

The Bonn Recommendations for Action make it clear that this is not what is intended by involving the private sector. The document says: "Water service providers should aim for financial sustainability through receiving sufficient income from their customers to finance operation, maintenance, and capital cost. Balancing this aim, however, cost recovery objectives should not be a barrier to poor people's access to water supply and sanitation. Where poor cannot afford to pay the full cost...tariff systems that allow social targeting should be established." And further: "Efforts to recover costs should focus on those consumers who use the most water. The authorities that set tariffs should be willing to charge the full cost to users that can afford to pay."

These provisions apply both to public and private suppliers. In regard to private investors, the Bonn document says "privately-managed service delivery does not imply private ownership of water resources". Private investors must be subject to strict regulation, monitoring and transparent contracting procedures ruling out corruption, mismanagement and misuse of their power as service providers. As Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul put it in her final statement: "The key is to create an environment which allows the private sector to work successfully, and at the same time maintains the authority of the public to define rules under which the providers operate." However, the German advocacy group World Economy, Ecology & Environment (WEED) criticised that governments, communities and regulatory institutions in developing countries are often too weak to effectively control powerful transnationals and protect the interests of the public. The result was, WEED said, that national and local governments were actually losing control over a vital common good to globally active, profit-oriented corporations.

The different views on the benefits and dangers of privatisation in the water sector are likely to be carried forward to the Johannesburg Summit and beyond it to the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto in 2003.

The Bonn conference also dealt with some of the international aspects of the water issue. On the one hand, this refers to the fact that there are 261 transboundary water basins, affecting 145 states worldwide. These common waters are often the source of conflict and rivaling claims to water uses. But as the conference document says, water can also promote regional cooperation, since "watersheds, river basins, lakes, and aquifers must be the primary frame of reference for water resources management". Successful examples such as the River Rhine convention show what benefits can be derived for upstream and downstream riparians by cooperation of all partners. Participants at the Bonn conference had a chance not only see the nearby Rhine during conference breaks but also to make a field trip to study this successful model in practice. Unfortunately, in many other river basins - the Middle East, the Ganges, or the Mekong - political conflicts make it difficult to imitate the European example.

Responsibility of the North

Another, less obvious aspect of the international implications of the water issue was brought up in the opening session by German environment minister Jürgen Trittin. Referring to countries which squander their scarce freshwater in order to export cheap agricultural produce to water-rich countries in the North, whose behaviour as purchasing countries was no more sustainable than that of the producing countries. "We buy, in the shape of products, the water

which the local population has far greater need for", he said. And in his closing remarks, he once again came back to this subject: "We must clean up the traces left behind by our ecological footprints, so that 1.2 billion people in the South that have insufficient access to water will be granted development opportunities...Just as an example, it is healthy to wear cotton, but it is not healthy for this planet to produce the amount of cotton needed for all the t-shirts and jeans that people in the North like to have in their closets."

Insights such as these into the mutual responsibility of the North and the South will be useful at the Johannesburg conference when water as a cross-cutting issue, touching on poverty, gender empowerment, food security, health, agriculture, and economic development, will figure high on the agenda. The consensus reached at the International Conference on Freshwater in Bonn, with its Recommendations for Action, will help to set the framework for decisions on water as a key to sustainable development.

The Bonn Keys

We are convinced that we can manage water better, and that this will be a major step forward toward achieving sustainable development.

1. The first key is to meet the water security needs of the poor - for livelihoods, health and welfare, production and food security, and reducing vulnerability to disasters. Pro poor water policies focus on listening to the poor about their priority water security needs...
2. Decentralisation is key. The local level is where national policy meets community needs. Local authorities - if delegated the power and the means, and if supported to build their capacities - can provide for increased responsiveness and transparency in water management, and increase the participation of women and men, farmer and fisher, young and old, town and country dweller.
3. The key to better water outreach is partnerships. From creating water wisdom, to cleaning up our watersheds, to reaching into communities - we need new coalitions. Energised, organised communities will find innovative solutions. An informed citizenry is the frontline against corruption. New technologies can help. So can traditional techniques and indigenous knowledge...
4. The key to long-term harmony with nature and neighbour is cooperative arrangements at the water basin level, including across waters that touch many shores. We need integrated water resource management to bring all water users to the information sharing and decision-making tables. Although we have great difficulty with the legal framework and the form agreements might take, there is substantial accord that we must increase cooperation within river basins, and make existing agreements more vital and valid.
5. The essential key is stronger, better performing governance arrangements. National water management strategies are needed now to address the fundamental responsibilities of governments: laws, rules and standard setting; the movement from service delivery to the creator and manager of an effective legal and regulatory framework. Effective regulatory arrangements that are transparent and can be monitored are the way to effective, responsive, financially sustainable services. Within these, we will welcome both improved public sector and private sector delivery arrangements.

Water is essential to our health, our spiritual needs, our comfort, our livelihoods, and our ecosystems. Yet everywhere water quality is declining, and the water stress on humanity and our ecosystems increases. More and more people live in very fragile environments. The reality of floods and droughts touches increasing numbers and many live with scarcity. We are convinced that we can act, and we must. We have the keys.

Margaret Catley-Carlson, facilitator for the Bonn conference, drew up this personal

summary of the main points that emerged from the discussions.

D+C Development and Cooperation,

published by: Deutsche Stiftung für internationale Entwicklung (DSE)

Editorial office, postal address:

D+C Development and Cooperation, P.O. Box, D-60268 Frankfurt, Germany.

E-Mail: HDBrauer@cs.com



[Contents](#)

[Top of page](#)



[German Foundation for International Development \(DSE\)](#)[Development Policy Forum \(EF\)](#)[International Institute for Journalism \(IJJ\) Education Section](#)[Development Information Centre \(IZEP\)](#)[Centre for Economic, Financial and Social Policy](#)[Area Orientation Centre \(ZA\)](#)[Public Administration Promotion Section](#)[Industrial Occupations Promotion Centre \(ZGB\)](#)[Centre for Food, Rural Development and the Environment \(ZEL\)](#)[Public Health Promotion](#)

[Section](#)

[\[D + C Online\]](#) [\[Databases\]](#) [\[Landesinfos\]](#) [\[Highlights\]](#) [\[News\]](#) [\[Links\]](#)

Copyright © 2002, DSE, April 17, 2002