

Sharing of global freshwater will be sticky

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back from Bonn

ANY agreement on the equitable development of freshwater resources may prove to be a sticky issue at come September's Earth Summit in Johannesburg. Ministers who attended close-door session on Equitable and Sustainable Use of Water Resources during the International Freshwater Conference in Bonn, Germany from December 3-8, 2001 debated the issue.

"Equitable sharing between water resources is a much tougher, technically more complex issue than providing drinking water," said Bernard Crabbe, the Belgium Advisor to the Secretary of State for Development Cooperation. He said that there is an ongoing debate over how to divide water resources between the agricultural, industrial and municipal sectors.

Ministers at the session, which was chaired by host German Minister for Environment Jurgen Trittin, also discussed making water an important element of any action plan used to tackle poverty.

"There is a general agreement that water resources should be a mainstream in poverty reduction strategies," said Crabbe, adding that some countries such as the United Kingdom and Sweden are willing to take concrete steps on the issue. He said that other countries are not quite ready to make a commitment at this time, but added that, "most countries are willing to take this (concrete step) at Rio plus 10."

Another issue that was touched upon briefly during the session was sanitation which has often taken a back seat to the politically more palatable issue of clean water.

"Several ministers brought up the issue of sanitation," said Crabbe. "They would like to see a concrete target for sanitation issues." Currently, there is no stated goal for increasing the percentage of people in the world who have access to sanitation facilities. There are close to 2.5 billion people with no access to sanitation, which is double the number of people who don't have access to clean water. Some ministers have suggested that the discrepancy in these figures can be attributed to the political viability of the issue. In other words, politicians don't want to campaign on a platform of waste. "It just isn't sexy."

Georgia's Deputy Minister for Environment Zaal Lomtadze summed up the discussion by saying that it was an attempt to endorse water and sustainable development on a political level.

"The international community is trying to strengthen its efforts at a crucial moment when there are acute problems which cannot be solved on the local level," said Lomtadze.

Monique de Vries, State Secretary of Water for The Netherlands, wants to make the dialogue on water and climate the main themes during the third World Water Forum (WWF) in Kyoto. She wants to motivate both the water and climate community to consider it.

The dialogue on water and climate represents an unprecedented international effort to bring together water management and climate experts from around the world in a process designed to identify different strategies to deal with the effects of climate change and increasing climate variability.

In the last decade both the Rhine

and Meuse rivers nearly overflowed twice. "In one instance we had to evacuate thousands of people as a precautionary measure," said de Vries. "We have also experienced a higher frequency in excessive rains, damaging the crops of the greenhouse farmers. All in all there will be an increasing pressure on our water system which, combined with the expected rise in sea level, will have major implications for water management in Netherlands. Two thirds of our country is below sea level. Therefore, we are very aware of the possible impact of climate change."

She, however, commented that Netherlands was in a fortunate position of having the financial resources to cope with climate change.



"An estimated 40 per cent of the world's population lives in internationally shared river basins and are dependent for their water security on effective Transboundary Water Management".

"Other hot spots are vulnerable to climate change, such as Bangladesh and small low-lying island states in the Pacific and the Caribbean," de Vries said.

For this reason, during the second WWF, Vries, who was also the Head of the Dutch Delegation, convinced the Dutch Department of Development Co-operation, to substantially enhance the budget for water related problems. She has recently agreed to sponsor a secretariat for the Kyoto dialogue on Water and Climate Change in Netherlands. The dialogue was chaired by World Water Council Vice President William J. Cosgrove.

Water is a common good with a social, economic, environmental and cultural value. Access to water for the poor is a major challenge to reduce poverty. However the Swiss delegation questions the approach of finding a solution to the water challenge.

"International water conferences are becoming more and more numerous, and they don't have much continuity as each time they are organised by different countries and organisations," said Sibylle Vermont, a member of the International Affairs Division of the Swiss Agency for the Environment,

"The issue of dams can arouse strong passions on both sides... What we are talking about here is the state and fate of the existing stock of dams and reservoirs on whose waters billions of people depend for not only irrigation and drinking water, but also for industry and the production of hydroelectricity."

Forests and Landscape. "Still, we realise that the implementation of Chapter 18 of Agenda 21 is disappointing."

Dora Rapold, Assistant Director General of Thematic and Technical Resources, adds: "We need a process rather than punctual meetings. In order to put water high on the global agenda, Switzerland proposes that the Bonn International Conference on Freshwater recommends to the World Summit on Sustainable

Transboundary Water Management as an International Public Good is one of the key initiatives of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The initiative seeks to "help increase awareness, knowledge and international commitment to a strong, effective and well-funded multilateral system of development in this area."

Speaking at a special session at the International Freshwater Conference, Ambassador Lars-Goran Engfeldt of Sweden, Vice

Kessler, Under Secretary in the Ministry of Environment for Water Management and Soil Protection. The Freshwater Conference is important in Kessler's mind as it raises the much needed world awareness on water issues.

"The largest wastage in water happens in irrigation. In Germany, for the last 30 years, we have reduced wastage in irrigation by 75 percent," said Kessler. "If we can somehow show the third world countries of Asia and Africa how to

save even half of that, there will be a tremendous saving of water and life."

Kessler says that his State of Hessen has partnerships with Israel and several Eastern European countries. One of the big issues in water, Kessler believes, is transboundary management and one of the success stories of this issue is the Rhine. Fifty million people live in the Rhine basin and 20 million get their water from it.

"We fought many wars over the Rhine with France, Switzerland, and Holland before World War II. But we co-operate very well now," commented Kessler. "Now we have an International Commission for the Rhine and we have improved the quality of the water and done a good job of cleaning it up. Now the salmon are back!"

Recently, the German Government invited the Nile Riparian countries, including Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Uganda, to follow the Rhine model of co-operation. "The key elements for the model to be successful are trust, political will and pressure from non-governmental environment groups,"

Meacher added that a more ambitious and radical programme of debt relief is needed, and he said that Britain is in favour of extending or enhancing debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries, although he stopped short of backing the outright forgiving of debt. Britain, he emphasized, recognizes the value of local projects, local innovation and local leadership and supports local, community-led initiatives, many of which have proven to be phenomenal successes.

Meacher said that water is likely to be the single most important sectoral issue at the Johannesburg summit. Britain is sending a large delegation that will be headed by Prime Minister Tony Blair and will include Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, Meacher and other

ministers and foreign office officials as well as private sector representatives. In preparation for the summit, Prime Minister Blair has, for some time now, been holding meetings with private sector representatives at 10 Downing Street in order to help inform them and address any potential concerns. As for Meacher, he is already looking ahead to Johannesburg, past the rhetoric and straight to the action.

The UN's International Conference on Freshwater got down to nitty gritty with accusations against privatization in water services and businessmen "just itching" to answer in the plenary and at later working sessions.

The Chairwoman of the plenary session, Uschi Eid, secretary of the German economic cooperation ministry, set the goal by saying that after opening general remarks delegates had to get down to business and set strategy.

"We all know the facts," she said. "What is needed now is action." Debate in the circular auditorium at the Bundeshaus, the former German federal parliament, packed with official government delegates and representatives of nongovernmental organizations, labour, women's groups, local authorities, and business and industry, centered on the roles of government and private industry.

Executive Director of The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) Klaus Töpfer announced that sustainable management of reservoirs would take a central role in its new project at the International Conference on Freshwater. The Dams and Development Project (DDP) intends to support and promote dialogue on a national and global level to achieve sustainable development in the water and energy sectors.

Addressing a press conference at Bonn, Töpfer said, "The issue of dams can arouse strong passions on both sides... What we are talking about here is the state and fate of the existing stock of dams and reservoirs on whose waters billions of people depend for not only irrigation and drinking water, but also for industry and the production of hydroelectricity." He stressed the importance of maintaining dams in a

sustainable way. If this is ignored he said that more pressure would be placed on natural areas with water, such as underground aquifers and wetlands, causing the deterioration of the environment. This would also lead to the endangering of wildlife and habitats.

Töpfer said his organization is acting to "reduce the loss of forests and to re-afforest cleared areas as a part of a comprehensive strategy of watershed management of the world's river systems." He acknowledged that there will always be a level of natural erosion which would lead to the loss of water storage capabilities. Hence he appealed to engineers to devise technical solutions to extending the lives of reservoirs.

The DDP was started following the World Commission on Dam's (WCD) final report last year. After the launch of its report in 2000, the WCD was disbanded and decisions were left up to individual societies and organizations.

Despite all good intentions DDP faces challenges. Even though the DDP estimates that 30 to 40 percent of irrigated land world-wide relies on dams and reservoirs to support 12 to 16 percent of global food production, it also estimates that between 40 and 80 million people were displaced by dam projects. Environmental impacts from dams are often irreversible. These are some of the reasons why opposition has grown towards dam projects.

Töpfer was however optimistic and enthusiastic about the DDP. He said if a stabilization mechanism is found then it would be a "win win situation." Shall Bangladesh be part of that win-win situation? That was the million-dollar question posed by eminent journalist Enayetullah Khan and Daily Star Managing Editor Syed Fahim Munaim after observing Bangladesh's poor presence at the so important conference. Shall issues like mass arsenic contamination in the groundwater of rural Bangladesh be addressed in the future negotiations?

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