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The Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development

Dublín, Ireland, January 31, 1992

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Introduction

Scarcity and misuse of fresh water pose a serious and growing threat to sustainable development and protection of the environment. Human health and welfare, food security, industrial development and the ecosystems on which they depend, are all at risk, unless water and land resources are managed more effectively in the present decade and beyond than they have been in the past.

Five hundred participants, including government-designated experts from a hundred countries and representatives of eighty international, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations attended the International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE) in Dublin, Ireland, on January 26-31, 1992. The experts saw the emerging global water resources picture as critical. At its closing session, the Conference adopted this Dublin Statement and the Conference Report. The problems highlighted are not speculative in nature; nor are they likely to

affect our planet only in the distant future. They are here and they affect humanity now. The future survival of many millions of people demands immediate and effective action.

The Conference participants call for fundamental new approaches to the assessment, development, and management of freshwater resources, which can only be brought about through political commitment and involvement from the highest levels of government to the smallest communities. Commitment will need to be backed by substantial and immediate investments, public awareness campaigns, legislative and institutional changes, technology development, and capacity building programmes. Underlying all these must be a greater recognition of the interdependence of all peoples, and of their place in the natural world.

In commending this Dublin Statement to the world leaders assembled at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, the Conference participants urge all governments to study carefully the specific activities and means of implementation recommended in the Conference Report, and to translate those recommendations into urgent action programmes for water and sustainable development.

Guiding Principles

Concerted action is needed to reverse the present trends of overconsumption, pollution, and rising threats from drought and floods. The Conference Report sets out recommendations for action at local, national, and international levels, based on four guiding principles.

Principle No. 1 - Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment

Since water sustains life, effective management of water resources demands a holistic approach, linking social and economic development with protection of natural ecosystems. Effective management links land and water uses across the whole of a catchment area or groundwater aquifer.

Principle No. 2 - Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels

The participatory approach involves raising awareness of the importance of water among policy-makers and the general public. It means that decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level, with full public consultation and involvement of users in the planning and implementation of water projects.

Principle No. 3 - Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water

This pivotal role of women as providers and users of water and guardians of the living environment has seldom been reflected in institutional arrangements for the development and management of water resources. Acceptance and implementation of this principle requires positive policies to address women's specific needs and to equip and empower women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes, including decision-making and implementation, in ways defined by them.

Principle No. 4 - Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good

Within this principle, it is vital to recognize first the basic right of all human beings to have access to clean water and sanitation at an affordable price. Past failure to recognize the economic value of water has led to wasteful and environmentally damaging uses of the resource. Managing water as an economic good is an important way of achieving efficient and equitable use, and of encouraging conservation and protection of water resources.

The Action Agenda

Based on these four guiding principles, the Conference participants developed recommendations which enable countries to tackle their water resources problems on a wide range of fronts. The major benefits to come from implementation of the Dublin recommendations will be:

Alleviation of poverty and disease

At the start of the 1990s, more than a quarter of the world's population still lack the basic human needs of enough food to eat, a clean water supply and hygienic means of sanitation. The Conference recommends that priority be given in water resources development and management to the accelerated provision of food, water and sanitation to these unserved millions.

Protection against natural disasters

Lack of preparedness, often aggravated by lack of data, means that droughts and floods take a huge toll in deaths, misery and economic loss. Economic losses from natural disasters, including floods and droughts, increased three-fold between the 1960s and the 1980s. Development is being set back for years in some developing countries, because investments have not been made in basic data collection and disaster preparedness. Projected climate change and rising sea-levels will intensify the risk for some, while also threatening the apparent security of existing water resources.

Damages and loss of life from floods and droughts can be drastically reduced by the disaster preparedness actions recommended in the Dublin Conference Report.

Water conservation and reuse

Current patterns of water use involve excessive waste. There is great scope for water savings in agriculture, in industry and in domestic water supplies.

Irrigated agriculture accounts for about 80% of water withdrawals in the world. In many irrigation schemes, up to 60% of this water is lost on its way from the source to the plant. More efficient irrigation practices will lead to substantial freshwater savings.

Recycling could reduce the consumption of many industrial consumers by 50% or more, with the additional benefit of reduced pollution. Application of the "polluter pays" principle and realistic water pricing will encourage conservation and reuse. On average, 36% of the water produced by urban water utilities in developing countries is "unaccounted for". Better management could reduce these costly losses.

Combined savings in agriculture, industry, and domestic water supplies could significantly defer investment in costly new water-resource development and have enormous impact on the sustainability of future supplies. More savings will come from multiple use of water. Compliance with effective discharge standards, based on new water protection objectives, will enable successive downstream consumers to reuse water which presently is too contaminated after the first use.

Sustainable urban development

The sustainability of urban growth is threatened by curtailment of the copious supplies of cheap water, as a result of the depletion and degradation caused by past profligacy. After a generation or more of excessive water use and reckless discharge of municipal and industrial wastes, the situation in the majority of the world's major cities is appalling and getting worse. As water scarcity and pollution force development of ever more distant sources, marginal costs of meeting fresh demands are growing rapidly. Future guaranteed supplies must be based on appropriate water charges and discharge controls. Residual contamination of land and water can no longer be seen as a reasonable trade-off for the jobs and prosperity brought by industrial growth.

Agricultural production and rural water supply

Achieving food security is a high priority in many countries, and agriculture must not only provide food for rising populations, but also save water for other uses. The challenge is to develop and apply water-saving technology and management methods, and, through capacity building, enable communities to introduce institutions and incentives for the rural population to adopt new approaches, for both rainfed and irrigated agriculture. The rural population must also have better access to a potable water supply and to sanitation services. It is an immense task, but not an impossible one, provided appropriate policies and programmes are adopted at all levels--local, national and international.

Protecting aquatic ecosystems

Water is a vital part of the environment and a home for many forms of life on which the well-being of humans ultimately depends. Disruption of flows has reduced the productivity of many such ecosystems, devastated fisheries, agriculture and grazing, and marginalized the rural communities which rely on these. Various kinds of pollution, including transboundary pollution, exacerbate these problems, degrade water supplies, require more expensive water treatment, destroy aquatic fauna, and deny recreation opportunities.

Integrated management of river basins provides the opportunity to safeguard aquatic ecosystems, and make their benefits available to society on a sustainable basis.

Resolving water conflicts

The most appropriate geographical entity for the planning and management of water resources is the river basin, including surface and groundwater. Ideally, the effective integrated planning and development of transboundary river or lake basins has similar institutional requirements to a basin entirely within one country. The essential function of existing international basin organizations is one of reconciling and harmonizing the interests of riparian countries, monitoring water quantity and quality, development of concerted action programmes, exchange of information, and enforcing agreements.

In the coming decades, management of international watersheds will greatly increase in importance. A high priority should therefore be given to the preparation and implementation of

integrated management plans, endorsed by all affected governments and backed by international agreements.

The enabling environment

Implementation of action programmes for water and sustainable development will require a substantial investment, not only in the capital projects concerned, but, crucially, in building the capacity of people and institutions to plan and implement those projects.

The knowledge base

Measurement of components of the water cycle, in quantity and quality, and of other characteristics of the environment affecting water are an essential basis for undertaking effective water management. Research and analysis techniques, applied on an interdisciplinary basis, permit the understanding of these data and their application to many uses.

With the threat of global warming due to increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere, the need for measurements and data exchange on the hydrological cycle on a global scale is evident. The data are required to understand both the world's climate system and the potential impacts on water resources of climate change and sea level rise. All countries must participate and, where necessary, be assisted to take part in the global monitoring, the study of the effects and the development of appropriate response strategies.

Capacity building

All actions identified in the Dublin Conference Report require well-trained and qualified personnel. Countries should identify, as part of national development plans, training needs for water-resources assessment and management, and take steps internally and, if necessary with technical co-operation agencies, to provide the required training, and working conditions which help to retain the trained personnel.

Governments must also assess their capacity to equip their water and other specialists to implement the full range of activities for integrated water-resources management. This requires provision of an enabling environment in terms of institutional and legal arrangements, including those for effective water-demand management.

Awareness raising is a vital part of a participatory approach to water resources management. Information, education and communication support programmes must be an integral part of the development process.

Follow-Up

Experience has shown that progress towards implementing the actions and achieving the goals of water programmes requires follow-up mechanisms for periodic assessments at national and international levels.

In the framework of the follow-up procedures developed by UNCED for Agenda 21, all Governments should initiate periodic assessments of progress. At the international level, United Nations institutions concerned with water should be strengthened to undertake the assessment and follow-up process. In addition, to involve private institutions, regional and non-governmental

organizations along with all interested governments in the assessment and follow-up, the Conference proposes, for consideration by UNCED, a world water forum or council to which all such groups could adhere.

It is proposed that the first full assessment on implementation of the recommended programme should be undertaken by the year 2000.

UNCED is urged to consider the financial requirements for water-related programmes, in accordance with the above principles, in the funding for implementation of Agenda 21. Such considerations must include realistic targets for the timeframe for implementation of the programmes, the internal and external resources needed, and the means of mobilizing these.

The International Conference on Water and the Environment began with a Water Ceremony in which children from all parts of the world made a moving plea to the assembled experts to play their part in preserving precious water resources for future generations.

In transmitting this Dublin Statement to a world audience, the Conference participants urge all those involved in the development and management of our water resources to allow the message of those children to direct their future actions.