Water challenges for the 21st century

René Coulomb
Vice President, World Water Council

Abstract The World Water Council was created in to act as the international water policy think-tank and can thus play a central role in defining the water challenges for the 21st century and the routes to their solution. This article outlines the origins of the Council and the major steps undertaken since its foundation in 1996, including contributions to the various World Water Forums, the World Water Vision and other agenda-setting international meetings.

Keywords Water policy; World Water Council; World Water Vision

The World Water Council

As is correctly stated in the Announcement of the Stockholm Water Symposium, “the water management profession and society at large face a challenge the magnitude and complexity of which no earlier generation has had to face”. This challenge has been recognised for some time. Discussions started in Mar del Plata in 1977, and continued through Dublin (1992), where the so-called “Dublin Principles” were established. Indeed, the awareness of the absolute necessity to build bridges between all the different actors in the field of water was the main reason for the creation of the World Water Council in 1996.

The Council became a legal entity in Marseilles, France, on 14 June 1996. Created with the financial and moral support of the City of Marseilles, and the participation of various UN agencies and international professional associations concerned by water problems, it was proposed from the beginning that the Council should act as the international water policy think-tank.

The Council’s mission is: “To promote awareness of critical water issues at all levels, including the highest decision-making level; to facilitate efficient conservation, protection, development, planning, management and use of water in all its dimensions on an environmentally sustainable basis for the benefit of all life on earth”. I believe that this mission is an accurate summary of the challenges that all of us, as world citizens, have to achieve in order for there to be a better world, where clean water is available to everyone.

To face such a large mission in a changing world, the Council is constantly evolving, making no distinction between its members on the grounds of their geographical location or stage of development, whether they be a member of the private or public sector, or what types of activities they are engaged in. The Council sets very few limitations on membership, providing a forum for everyone who takes an active interest in global water management issues. It is a driven organization, free from political influences and bias. All findings, deliberations, policies and decisions are freely available, the World Water Council striving to be as transparent as possible. This methodology is necessary for us as a think-tank to empower the people we work with, helping them to help themselves.

Steps since 1996

The timeline of the main steps undertaken since the creation of the WWC in 1996 is as follows.
The First World Water Forum in Marrakech in 1997, in cooperation with the Government of Morocco. This was the platform to launch the plan to develop the Vision for World Water, Life and the Environment for the Twenty-First Century.

By 1998, the Council emerged as a major player in world water policy. The International Conference on Water and Sustainable Development was held in Paris in March 1998, sponsored by the World Water Council with the support of the Government of France. It provided much-needed input to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development meeting, known as Rio +5, and thus began the trend of raising water to the highest possible priority on the world agenda.

From 1999 to 2000, the World Water Vision was developed, the single largest exercise of its kind ever organized by the non-governmental sector, outside of but still including most governmental agencies, United Nations agencies, all key international organizations, and professional and scientific associations.

The core message of the Vision is captured in its subtitle: “making water everybody’s business”. The crisis is not essentially about having too little water to satisfy our needs, even if there are serious problems in many regions. No, it is more, in fact, a crisis of badly managing water.

The year 2000 was a milestone in the annals of the Council. The Vision was presented and debated at the Second World Water Forum in The Hague, an event with over 5,000 participants, generously supported by the Government of the Netherlands. This event brought the world’s attention to the pending water crisis, which is unavoidable if no further action is undertaken: “Business as usual is not an option”.

The Ministerial Declaration made at The Hague identified seven challenges:

- Meeting basic needs: access to safe water and sanitation are basic human needs
- Securing the food supply through the more efficient mobilisation and the more equitable allocation of water
- Protecting ecosystems
- Sharing water resources to promote peaceful cooperation
- Managing risks to provide security from floods, droughts and pollution
- Valuing water, moving towards pricing water services to reflect the cost of their provision
- Governing water wisely, so that the involvement of the public and the interests of all stakeholders are included in the management of water resources.

As in all Ministerial Declarations, this list is essentially a list of vows and wishes, but what we really need is of course is action. The Report of the World Commission for Water in the 21st Century, entitled “A Water Secure World”, is, in my humble opinion, a better guideline for action. Composed of high-level and well known personalities, sanctioned by the World Water Council in August 1998, the Commission issued a report with clear messages. As the Chairman of the Report, Ismail Serageldin, wrote in the introduction to the Report, these messages are as follows:

“Promoting:
- Holistic, systemic approaches based on Integrated Water Resources Management
- Participatory institutional mechanisms
- Full-cost pricing of water services, with targeted subsidies for the poor
- Institutional, technological, and financial innovation
- Governments as enablers, providing effective and transparent regulatory frameworks for private action.”

These five recommendations could perhaps benefit from two additions:

- the mobilization of political will
- behavioural change by all.
As stated by Mr. Serageldin, and despite the efforts already undertaken, more needs to be done at the country and basin level to:

- get more precise figures for water quantity and quality
- identify financial resources and investment needs
- install the adequate incentives to make this investment happen.

I believe that these three points neatly summarize the main tasks we will have to face in order to shift from Vision to Action.

**Issues arising at The Hague Forum**
I shall now briefly develop two questions brought up at The Hague Forum.

**Widening participation and the Virtual Water Forum**
If the Second World Water Forum had a participatory approach to involving a large number of stakeholders, including women, associations and NGOs, the Third World Water Forum, to be held in Kyoto in 2003, as stated by the Japanese Secretariat of the Third Forum, will be:

- Open to all
- From being based on participation to being created through participation.

In the Kick-Off Meeting in Kyoto at the beginning of June, the Virtual Water Forum was effectively launched, aimed at initiating a completely new approach to gathering submissions as varied and as widespread as possible. The discussion through the Internet, and through “Water Voice Messengers” for those without access to the Internet, will go beyond the barriers of time, region and language, to involve everyone in helping solve the world’s water problems.

We are truly enthusiastic about this generous initiative and we support it wholeheartedly. But we are aware it needs permanent follow-up. The World Water Council strengthened its capacity to contribute to the Third World Water Forum preparation by establishing a Water Action Unit at the World Water Council headquarters in Marseilles. We decided in harmony with the Secretariat of the Third Forum, that this Water Action Unit will carry on the important and necessary task of following up Virtual Forum discussions so as to avoid paralysis in cases of contradictory suggestions, and to select the main issues for the success of the Third Forum, the purpose of the Forum being: “Translating Visions into Action”.

**Integrated Water Resources Management**
“Integrated Water Resources Management” – magic words used by the World Water Council, the Global Water Partnership, UN Agencies and many others, but do we all mean the same thing by these words?

We have to shift the analytical framework from the narrow views of sector users or the artificial boundaries of administrative and political units to the natural boundaries of the catchments, basins and aquifers, and we have to incorporate the environment of which water is a vital part, the hydrological cycle which governs the flow and regeneration of water, and the human socio-economic system of activities.

But we have also to be aware that action needs choices and arbitration of claims among users, that integration and the holistic approach do not just mean conservation and a refusal to change, even if we now know the importance of biological diversity and of wetlands, as underlined by the River Basin Initiative, in accordance with the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention and Agenda 21.

**Next step**
After The Hague, at the 2nd General Assembly in Marseilles, in October 2000, the World
Water Council set about refining the foundations provided by the Vision and the Framework of Action, and organized Technical Sessions on three themes:
1. Which issues were not sufficiently addressed at The Hague Forum?
2. What should be the way forward in regard to water resource management?
3. What should be the future role for the World Water Council in helping to address these problems?

The Report of these Technical Sessions: “Changing Course” summarizes some of the answers presented to these questions.

These deliberations were further developed in Turkey, in March 2001, during the last meeting of the Board of Governors of the World Water Council. The brainstorming session, involving Governors and invited guests, on the theme: “what do you think are two or three of the most important themes for water policy?” gave us the following themes, in order of priority:
1. Changing water policy. Who makes policy that affects water, where is water policy made and how can we and should we affect these policies?
2. Financing water management and delivery. What will meeting the world’s water needs cost and how will the world finance it?
3. Coping with global change and achieving water security. Dealing with cultural, social and natural changes that affect water availability. Decreasing the vulnerability of the poor, managing risks, sharing water and preventing water conflicts.
4. Balancing the multiple uses of water, managing conflict among users, pursuing human development while maintaining life support ecology.
5. Water and the poor; reducing poverty through water management.

The subgroup that brainstormed the first theme “changing water policy” developed ideas for an action plan, the main components of which were:
• initiation of and support of policy dialogues in the area of Integrated Water Resources Management
• creation of a WWC knowledge base on policies and policy change
• The advocacy by WWC of real and effective policy changes at the highest levels.

The second selected major theme, “financing water infrastructures” is the main tool for transforming the Vision for water into real Action, and we want to be ready at the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto in order to make precise proposals for immediate action. With this in mind, the World Water Council, the Global Water Partnership and the Secretariat of the Third World Water Forum have organized a panel of distinguished financial experts, presided over by Mr. Michel Camdessus, former general manager of the International Monetary Fund, aiming to deal with the problem of mobilizing public and private financing.

Involving the private sector in providing services for people, irrigation and electric power and in contributing to the financing of investments is in fact an absolute necessity for the future. The private sector can considerably improve the dismal technical and financial performance that has so often characterized public utilities in developing countries.

However, the participation of the private sector in the construction and operation of water infrastructures is only possible if there is a predictable, transparent regulatory framework that protects the interests of investors and consumers alike.

For that reason, the World Water Council will hold a side-event during the Bonn International Conference on Freshwater, in December, on the institutional, legal and practical problems for the participation of the private sector in the water field. This session will be organized with French, German and British experts and with the independent French Association, the “Institut de la Gestion Déléguée”.

René Coulomb
Future agenda items

Finally, I would like to emphasize three other important points.

Climate change

The timeline selected for the Vision was 2025, so we therefore neglected one of the biggest long-term drivers with respect to water resources management: climate change. Indeed, the latest reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirm that the process of climate change caused by human activities is well underway, even if we should be careful to avoid confusion between non-human climate variability and climate change.

The United Nations University in Tokyo, together with the Secretariat of the Third World Water Forum and the World Water Council, hosted a workshop in June 2001 to determine whether we might manage water resources better, given the increasing predictability of climate variation and climate change. There was a unanimous agreement that we can indeed manage water better using climate science and that a program should be developed to this end.

Urban water management

Many water-related problems originate from other problems, as yet unsolved by humanity. The problems of Urban Water Management are important in many regions of the globe because of the rapid growth of the urban population, and water-related problems are only one part of the problems created by rural exodus and uncontrolled development of mega cities. The UNESCO Symposium on “Frontiers in Water Management: Deadlock or Hope?”, organized in Marseilles in June with the participation of the World Water Council, has shown that water supply and sanitation, even in rapidly growing mega cities in arid or poor countries, can be solved.

Nonetheless, it would surely be better to have a land use policy in force in every country, for a more coherent development than what is possible with just economic-based decisions. If, for example, in France, a land use policy had not been in force for the last forty years, France’s population, which is in very light growth, would have been drawn to a very few major centres, the area around Paris in particular, while entire regions would have been emptied.

However, even with a “development as usual” scenario, and a fast-growing number of megacities with poor suburbs, we are sure that with a political will, the primary usage of water, which is water for drinking, domestic uses and sanitation, can be satisfied for all. There is a constant progress in water and wastewater treatment processes, allowing even polluted surface water to be used for drinking, and wastewater to be recycled for others uses. The desalination of brackish and seawater, which is more and more competitive, will allow a plentiful water supply to numerous megacities, which are not far from the sea.

Water quality

Finally, I would not like to neglect the importance of the problems in water quality. We have to treat used water, either after industrial use or after domestic use. It is necessary in order to maintain water resources for people downstream and for our environment. In Europe, the new Water Framework Directive is more focused on water quality than on water quantity, even if, as I have stated, the two are more and more related.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, I am confident that the experience gained from the sessions and workshops of
this 11th Stockholm Water Symposium will further contribute to improving the situation of the populations throughout the world, and that the discussions during this World Water Week will help us increase our mutual comprehension, so that we will be able to present a united front to face the Challenges of this Century.