Opening speech of the 12th Stockholm Water Symposium

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It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to the 12th Stockholm Water Symposium and to the World Water Week. This annual event has indeed developed dramatically from its beginning in 1991 until today. I doubt that any of the 200 participants in the first Symposium could then imagine the size of the event today, or the importance it has had over the years for the international policy debate on water-related issues. Today, we are very grateful to those involved, in the city of Stockholm and in the Stockholm Water Company and amongst the founding companies, for the far-sighted decision in 1990 to start the Stockholm Water Symposium and to establish the Stockholm Water Prize.

The World Water Week would not, however, be what it is today without the fruitful collaboration between SIWI and an increasing number of international and national organisations. This year we are co-operating with 27 different organisations who are organising their own meetings during the week, acting as co-convenors of workshops or chairing different parts of the symposium, etc. It is impossible for me to mention you all, but I would like to offer a special welcome to Global Water Partnership, Global International Waters Assessment, World Water Council, International Water Association, Water Environment Federation, International Water Resources Association, Water Associations World-wide, World Business Council for Sustainable Development, Stakeholder Forum and third World Water Forum.

In just a couple of days heads of state from governments all over the world will gather for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. We are happy to have as our guest the South African Minister for water, Mr. Ronnie Kasrils. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has rightfully identified water as one of the top five priorities for the Summit.

Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, however, the water situation in many countries of the world has worsened markedly. I do not need to repeat all the figures regarding the water crisis to you, you know them all too well.

While the international community continues to argue about the effects of climate change on our planet in the decades to come, the effects of the current water crisis are already today devastating for billions of people in developing countries, as well as for ecosystems all over the world.

Many international conferences in recent years have drawn attention to water’s fundamental importance for human health, food production, poverty alleviation, protection of ecosystems, and for peace and stability. The relationships between water, poverty alleviation and sustainable development are becoming increasingly evident. People suffering from a lack of water or sickened from water and sanitation related diseases are unable to sustain their own livelihoods, so they are not able to contribute to the social and economic development of their society. The road towards sustainable development is thus narrowing.

Pollution of water resources and destruction of ecosystems reduces the possibilities for
future generations to make their own choices. The environmental debt increases and our children and grandchildren have to pay.

The draft Plan of Implementation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, that hopefully will be finalised in Johannesburg, contains certain elements that are encouraging. The commitment to develop integrated water resources management plans and water efficiency plans by 2005 is one such example. Other texts regarding the efficiency of use of water in food production are not so precise. The goal to halve the proportion of the population lacking adequate sanitation is not agreed, and references to transboundary waters have been taken out. Finally, when it comes to implementation, improved governance, increased capacity and adequate financial resources are critical. The World Summit will help, but it is not the solution. In coming years we have to continue to meet, discuss, and push the policy debate into concrete action and binding commitments. The third World Water Forum in Kyoto is next, and future Stockholm Water Symposia and World Water Weeks await us with new challenges.

SIWI, together with other Swedish organisations, will arrange a Swedish Pavilion in the Water Dome in Johannesburg. Together with other organisations in the Dome we will make sure that water is given its rightly deserved high priority at the Summit. I would like to thank the governments of South Africa and the Netherlands and the African Water Task Force for taking this initiative. I believe it will be effective.

Over the last five years the overarching theme of the Stockholm Water Symposia has been, “Water is the key to socio-economic development and quality of life”. It was indeed encouraging to see that message carried over in the International Freshwater Conference in Bonn last December as reflected in its theme “Water – a key to Sustainable Development”. I believe the Symposia over the years have contributed to the fact that water is now higher on the agenda for the World Summit than it was for the 1992 Earth Summit.

It has also been very encouraging to follow through the years how other key concepts, which originally were launched during Stockholm Water Symposia or vividly discussed here, have been carried over in other international fora such as the second World Water Forum in The Hague, the Bonn conference and now in the preparations for Johannesburg:

- a land use decision is also a water decision
- hydrosolidarity
- think regionally, act locally
- water security
- the gender perspective.

These, amongst others, are concepts that are very familiar to participants in the Symposia, and which have found their way into the agreed texts coming out of these other meetings.

I believe that all of you, who have participated here over the years, should be proud of the influence your contributions have had on the international policy debate. For us working with the Symposium, for the staff as well as for our international committees, it is indeed an encouraging challenge for the future.

The 12th Stockholm Water Symposium will continue this forward-looking tradition by examining what’s next on the agenda: “Balancing Competing Water Uses – Present Status and New Prospects”. This year we will discuss how our finite water resources are used for different purposes in different parts of the world, what will be needed to perform future balancing and to improve water use performance, and what the new prospects are in places where water balancing is already practiced or planned.

Achieving water security is essential for sustainable development but is not achievable without a radical shift in thinking and radically improved governance. Decision makers in different sectors of society and policy makers still tend to keep compartmentalised thinking
and behaviour despite having preached the advantages of integrated water resources management approaches for a long time. This makes the building of bridges through dialogue between interdependent societal sectors particularly urgent. We anticipate your contribution to that end during this symposium.

This year, as I hope you already might have recognised, we are planning to produce a Stockholm Statement, summarising the conclusions of the last five years of Symposia with the overarching theme “Water is the key to socio-economic development and quality of life”. A similar statement was produced after the first five years of Symposia. The International Scientific Programme Committee has produced a draft version, which you already have received in your Symposium documentation. They have identified the following five key principles that summarise the conclusions:

- precipitation is the ultimate freshwater resource
- water users are the ultimate governors of this resource
- there is an urgent need to break the link between economic growth and water degradation
- secure urban water services since they are crucial for urban stability and security
- abandon water management compartmentalisation.

You are invited to comment on the draft version and discuss it with the Committee members in the margins of this meeting. On Thursday morning we will have a new draft, and very limited possibilities for discussion in a plenary session. We hope that acceptance of the meeting with acclamation will send a strong message.

Let me at last express a very warm welcome to this year’s recipient of the Stockholm Water Prize, Professor Ignacio Rodriguez-Iturbe, from Princeton University, USA and from Caracas in Venezuela. Your excellent scientific achievements over the years are becoming increasingly relevant to the millions of people throughout the world currently affected by floods and droughts. We are very happy to see you here, and highly appreciate your active involvement in different activities during this week.

Let me also express a warm welcome to all earlier Laureates of the Stockholm Water Prize present here today. We are grateful that you have taken the time and effort to join us.

I would finally also like to take this opportunity to express, on behalf of all of us, our great appreciation for the work of my predecessor, the previous Chief Director of SIWI, Mr Sven Erik Skogsfors. Sven Erik has been one of the driving forces behind the Stockholm Symposia from the very beginning in 1991 and has been one of the key players in the development of this event into what it is today, a truly global annual meeting for everyone caring for water. On behalf of all of us, Sven Erik, thank you.

Once more, welcome to Stockholm. Your competence, ideas and engagement, dear colleagues, are the true value of the Symposia, your proposals are vital in our important continuing work together and the energy that keeps us warm during the long, dark and cold Swedish winter months. Welcome.