Drainage basin security – a key to reaching the water-related Millennium Development Goals

H.E. Børge Brende
Minister of the Environment, Norway
Chairman of the 12th Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)
(E-mail: postmottak@md.dep.no)

“We don’t realize the value of water until the well is dry”, Benjamin Franklin once said. This statement captures in many ways the water development and management challenges we are faced with. The value of water to humans and nature is not properly recognized. The role of water as an engine for growth and the macro-economic impacts of poor water management and water resources degradation are largely unknown.

Even though water is probably the most important resource and commodity we have, we are not doing a good job in managing and protecting the resource. You all know the grim figures and the daunting challenges we are faced with. Let me not dwell on these. Time has come for action – not talk! It is time for us to start walking the talk. I will therefore challenge you all here today.

“Eradicating poverty is the greatest challenge facing the global community as we move into the 21st Century”. This was the assessment by 188 heads of states meeting at the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York, September 2000. At the meeting eight Millennium Development Goals – the MDGs – and a call for action were formulated under the overarching goal to: “Reduce by half the proportion of people living in poverty by 2015”.

The MDGs were reconfirmed at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg 2002 and new specific targets were included. I was particularly pleased to see that we managed to set a specific target for sanitation.

My challenge to you is that during our deliberations here in Stockholm over the course of this week we should focus on actions and implementation and, specifically, ask what we can do to implement the MDGs and the targets set at the Johannesburg Summit. We share a common responsibility – this is everybody’s business.

Targets have been set – you all know them by heart! Now we must mobilize political will to solve the issue of water availability and poverty eradication. The global freshwater crisis can only be solved by political will.

We must mobilize political will to keep water and sanitation high on the political agenda, to make the case for the need for investments, to solve the issue of provision of sustainable water services to people, to protect water quality, and to stop environmental degradation.

Decision-makers must now make up for the political inertia of the past and take steps forward to reach these ambitious goals. The UN must take a leading role and the international community must mobilize political will and financial resources. National governments must recognize that participation, transparency and eliminating corruption is the only way forward to ensure access to clean water and basic sanitation for all.

We have to get our colleagues to accept that good water politics is good politics!
I have been given a specific task and responsibility to coordinate and spearhead our efforts to achieve the MDGs and WSSD-targets as Chairman of the 12th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development – CSD – and it is in this capacity I am addressing you today.

As Chairman for CSD12, I see the transformation of words into action and focusing on implementation as our main challenge. The international water community convened here today in Stockholm has a key role to play in this. I am pleased to note your interest in making your contribution to this and welcome the efforts by the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) to organize this important symposium.

We must deliver on our commitments from Johannesburg. We must demonstrate results in the fight against poverty and environmental degradation. Collective efforts are needed and we all have a shared responsibility to do our utmost to help the world achieve the targets to provide the poor people with required sustainable services.

This issue will also be debated at the “Water for the Poorest” conference to be held in Stavanger, Norway, 4–5 November 2003. This conference aims to develop a set of recommendations on how the targets should be met – serving as a valuable input to the CSD12.

The overarching theme of this year’s Stockholm Water Symposium is how drainage basin security can contribute to sustainable development through combining livelihood security through access to safe water and adequate food supply with economic security through employment and income generation.

A key mechanism for ensuring that all human beings have access to sufficient clean water and thereby achieving the MDGs is through peaceful co-operation, both in the local community and between states and countries. We could also turn this around and say that co-operation on shared water resources is an excellent way of making peace.

A few weeks ago I visited Central Asia and discussed issues related to cooperation on transboundary waters with my colleagues in the region. The situation there captures in many respects the key topic of this symposium – the issue of basin security – and the need to consider the whole catchment based on an ecosystem approach and to resolve conflicts over water resources peacefully.

The EU’s Water Initiative has a specific component for the NIS countries and serves as a key political commitment to the implementation of the targets. This initiative will assist in addressing key water-related problems in the region and ensure integration of water – poverty links in key development strategies. The importance of this was also underscored at the Environment for Europe Conference held in Kiev in May 2003.

There is a strong link between the state of environment of freshwater resources in a country and its capacity for poverty eradication and development. Conserving freshwater habitats such as lakes, rivers, springs, marshes and ponds is one of the most efficient and cost-effective means of guaranteeing supply services for safe drinking water. If these ecosystems are not looked after, basic human needs cannot be met and further social and economic development will be retarded.

I am also pleased to note that the issue of virtual water and trade is on the agenda for this symposium as a mean of addressing food security. Agriculture is the largest water consumer and in areas with scarcity we need to consider re-allocation of water to other users. Therefore I am happy to see this complex issue is being debated here, set in the overall context of environmental sustainability and service delivery.

The key to good solutions within a basin context is to deal with the underlying problems – poor governance, lack of access, poorly performing utilities, inequitable distribution of water, and pollution of water resources. Solving these problems needs our attention at local, national, regional and global level.

This brings me to the issue of governance. There is general agreement that the problems
facing the water sector arise partly from weaknesses in governance. Governments unfortunately do not give water sector issues high priority. Often there is political interference, the legal and administrative framework is inadequate, utilities are under-performing and there is lack of transparency and accountability. Part of the explanation is that water and sanitation primarily are a local responsibility, and local and national priorities often differ.

Through the excellent work of the Global Water Partnership and other organizations the governance agenda is now being addressed seriously in many fora. I welcome these efforts and would like to call upon countries to seriously address the governance challenges, especially governance and water sector reform at sub-national levels. Reforms in the water sector are fundamental to reaching the targets.

However, we in the international community should be cognizant of the fact that there are many ways of organizing the water sector, reflecting local political, cultural and administrative traditions. There is no size that fits all!

It should be entirely up to the countries themselves to decide how they will organize their water sector. However, water service providers and other actors need to be held accountable for their performance.

We marketed the World Summit as a time-shift from words to action. We committed ourselves at the World Summit to deliver safe water for another 274,000 people and basic sanitation for another 342,000 people every day for the next 12 years. Achieving this will require long-term concerted actions and commitment by all stakeholders.

However, we have another short-term target – preparation of water resources management and efficiency plans by 2005. This target is important to reach since it will set the tone for our collective efforts. If we miss the 2005 target this might be used as an excuse for not committing fully to the 2015 targets. During my meeting with the Secretary-General of the UN, Mr Kofi Annan, we discussed this issue specifically and agreed that nothing attract success like success!

Therefore we must mobilize resources to meet the 2005 target. This will be our first test and a main priority for me. In this work we need to focus on the planning process, ensuring transparency and active stakeholder involvement and less on the actual plan itself.

We have some serious work ahead of us – let’s not hide that!

Another key challenge will be how to reach the sanitation target. How can we move sanitation up on the political agenda, how to mobilize financing for sanitation and to develop the appropriate low-cost technology? Nelson Mandela highlighted the importance of sanitation at the WSSD – he encouraged us all to talk about this important issue.

The bulk of the investment needs in the water sector is related to sanitation and the scale of our efforts will to a large extent be determined whether we can use existing technology efficiently, develop new where needed and create the necessary institutional setting for sanitation. Personally I am encouraged to note the advances of ecological sanitation methods.

The Stockholm Water Prize for 2003 will be given to Professor Peter A. Wilderer from the Technical University of Munich in Germany for the development and demonstration of integrative approaches to water and wastewater management. I welcome his work and will encourage him and his colleagues to continue the work and especially focus on developing appropriate technology meeting the needs of the poor.

Reaching the targets will require financial resources. The primary source will be domestic resources – ODA can only complement. I am confident that the world has the financial resources needed to implement the Johannesburg targets if the will to do so is mobilized.

Countries need growth – but it has to be sustainable.

Growth is needed to eradicate poverty, the most important threat to human wellbeing.
Unhealthy growth makes it impossible to sustain nature, the most important source of life.

The challenge is to achieve more growth with less use of land, resources, energy, harmful chemicals and waste. To de-link economic growth and environmental damage is essential to protect nature. It is also essential in order to eradicate poverty. In short it is essential to sustainable development.

We have the means – if we choose to use them.

Building, maintaining, and operating infrastructure to get water to households – pipes, treatment works, and connections – costs money. There are only two sources of paying for investments – payments by users or payments by taxpayers. Only by charging those who are served can services be extended to the unconnected. Tariff setting must include subsidies to the poor. Subsidies are not free; they come from state budgets.

To conclude: we have the means, and we have made progress and lots of good policies are being implemented both nationally and internationally. Still, the remaining challenges are formidable. We as ministers acknowledged this in Johannesburg and made commitments to action both at a national and international level.

The CSD has the potential to play a crucial role in maintaining the momentum of Johannesburg and giving a strong political impetus to the implementation of the WSSD targets. The CSD is the best institution we have for dealing with both development and environment at the global level. I will make full use of it.

The CSD12 will focus on the short-term targets and pave the way for implementing the longer-term targets, and it will uphold the political pressure on us to deliver. It will be a scorekeeper, identify obstacles, present good examples and provide clear and concise recommendations for further action. We will present good practice to ensure that experiences gained are transferred. We have to encourage the best performers to demonstrate and lead by examples.

We need to forge alliances that can attack poverty and to provide water services. And we must bring business, NGOs and other major groups on board to drive the process forward. In Johannesburg it was an alliance of business, NGOs and decision-makers that made it possible to agree on the sanitation target.

I believe that the CSD will be able to fulfil its mandate. That it will be able to keep up the momentum from Johannesburg and monitor whether we are delivering the promised results.

My job now is to make the CSD a relevant and effective organisation and ensure that the world community is set on the right track towards achieving basin security, preparing water resources management plans by 2005 and providing sustainable water and sanitation services by 2015.

In doing so we need all your help. Thank you in advance.