

WATER AND THE POOR - VISIONS AND ACTIONS FOR 2025

Draft speech by Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development

The Second World Water Forum at The Hague provides us all with an important opportunity to concentrate on the growing crises in the water sector. There is far too much unnecessary death and disease caused by lack of water and sanitation. There is the likelihood of growing conflict over water resources if we fail to make faster progress. We are also acutely aware of the suffering caused by floods and droughts. I am grateful to ODI and SOAS for organising this series of seminars in preparation for the Hague Forum, and for inviting me to speak on this important subject.

DFID is most concerned with two fundamental points about water.

First, water and sanitation are necessary to enable poor people to overcome their poverty. Lack of access to adequate safe water and sanitation are fundamental components of human poverty. Within our overall goal to eliminate poverty, we all share the moral duty to help poor people to improve their water, sanitation and hygiene.

Secondly, water is one of our most precious natural resources. Increasing demands on this finite resource, coupled with the effects of global warming, are leading to a water crisis in many developing countries. Water resources are becoming increasingly contested locally, nationally and internationally. Unless water resources are better managed and more rationally and fairly allocated, these problems will blight many countries' sustainable development. Inevitably it will be the poor in those countries who will suffer most as a result.

For both of these issues, increased commitment is essential – continuing business as usual is not an acceptable option.

Let me mention some of the most significant features of the water sector, starting with those two points.

Despite the sustained improvement in drinking water coverage over the last 20 years, more than 1 billion poor people still lack adequate and safe water. The situation in sanitation is even worse. Although the latest statistics indicate some improvement, 2.4 billion people (representing 40% of the world's population), still lack access to proper sanitation. The health consequences are clear. An unacceptable number of people's lives are disrupted or prematurely ended by preventable illnesses. Around 10 thousand children are estimated to die each day from diarrhoeal diseases; much of this death and disease could be eliminated through improved water and sanitation and associated better hygiene practices. We know from our own history in the UK the big gains in public health that can come from investments in sanitation, clean water supply and better living conditions.

Disputes over trans-boundary water allocation are gaining in political significance, notably in the Middle East, Central Asia and Sub Saharan Africa. Within countries too, there is increasing tension between different users of water. Agriculture is by far the biggest user, with over 70% of water allocated to irrigation in many developing countries. As populations increase, the competition for water between agriculture and other demands such as industry

and supplies to cities intensifies. Current institutional arrangements cannot deal with these conflicts, either internationally or within countries.

As to water and sanitation services, traditional approaches concentrate on building new infrastructure, rather than delivering sustainable services. The utilities do not collect enough revenue to maintain their services, and the deteriorating quality of those services makes the customers even less inclined to pay the charges, resulting in a downward spiral of poor provision.

Both groundwater and surface water resources, especially those within and downstream of cities, are becoming increasingly degraded and polluted.

There are a large number of international organisations involved in the water sector. This demands increased levels of co-operation and collaboration to avoid duplication of work and institutional rivalry.

And what are the main lessons that we have learned in the last twenty years?

The most important lesson to emerge is the need to put people, and particularly women, at the centre of planning water supply and sanitation services, and of managing and allocating water resources.

We recognise that water is an economic, as well as a social, good. This recognition should be central to decision-making, and water should be priced accordingly. But we must put mechanisms in place to ensure that poor people can afford the water and sanitation to meet their basic needs and to support their livelihoods. That in turn means that governments must recognise and uphold people's right to access. Too often poor people are excluded because the water resources and supplies are captured by others.

Top-down, supply-driven, solutions imposed on families and communities do not work. Governments and other agencies have recognised that services are more sustainable if they respond to people's demand and balance their desired levels of service against their willingness and ability to pay.

Finally, all the different uses of water need to be recognised and planned coherently and equitably through integrated water resource management policies. These policies are not yet widespread (for example in considering environmental uses of water alongside the various forms of human consumption), but they will prove vital for long-term sustainability.

Based on our analysis of the water sector and the lessons learned, which I have just briefly highlighted, DFID has been working with other international partners to confirm responsibilities and agree on priorities:

The Governments of the developing countries will remain the most important players: they will set national policies and targets, improve their management and knowledge of water,

allocate water rationally and protect people's rights to it, improve public sector institutions, and facilitate involvement of the private sector as appropriate and regulate it transparently.

Civil society will need to be further mobilized to help poor people to express their demands, disseminate information, provide services, and try new ideas and ways of working.

The private sector will need to be encouraged to invest in water and sanitation and, in so doing, seek ways to serve poor people, share its knowledge, and collaborate with both the public sector and civil society.

The whole international community will need to work to re-establish credible yet challenging targets towards which we can all work.

The donors and other international organisations will need to co-ordinate better, reduce duplication, plan jointly, and help to resolve conflicts and disputes.

As to DFID, we are setting out in a series of papers our analysis of the actions needed to achieve the International Development Targets – actions of the type that I have just described. These papers will guide our own work and we intend that they will also influence the international effort. In drafting these papers, we are consulting widely. Here is the consultation draft of the water paper, which is entitled 'Addressing the Water Crisis - Healthier and More Productive Lives for Poor People'. Copies are available here today and it is on the DFID website. I encourage you to take a copy and to draw the attention of your colleagues to the consultation process. We welcome your comments, for which the closing date is the end of April.

As the draft paper sets out, DFID's goal in the water sector is to improve poor people's access to water resources and their use of environmental sanitation in order to help eliminate poverty.

To achieve that goal DFID will:

- participate actively in establishing realistic, but challenging internationally accepted targets for water and sanitation;
- participate in international initiatives to achieve the targets;
- support countries to develop and implement national water policies and to achieve national targets;
- support national-level projects that contribute to broader development and, in particular, support institutional change and improve best practice;
- help people to express their demands through civil society organisations, and support local governments to respond to those demands;
- support local-level projects that inform policy debates and decisions.

In taking this work forward, DFID has particular interests. We want to encourage processes that will target and serve poor people better. We want to help to improve the working of institutions both internationally and nationally. We are keen to promote best practice in the areas of sanitation and hygiene promotion, gender aspects of water, integrated water resources management, disaster (floods and droughts in particular) and conflict preparedness, and sustainability. And we want to generate knowledge on these issues, and to share it with

the people who need it. To these ends, all our work will be undertaken in partnership with governments, civil society organisations and other like-minded donors.

Next week I will go to The Hague to participate in the Ministerial Conference of the World Water Forum. DFID has contributed significantly to the process leading to this important conference. For example, we and our Dutch colleagues have funded the preparation of the Framework for Action which sets out priorities for water in the 21st Century, which has at its centre the theme of water security. Water security can be considered at any level from the household to the global. It means that every person has affordable access to enough safe water and sanitation to lead a healthy and productive life. It means that water is managed and allocated equitably and efficiently. It means that the natural environment, which both relies on and contributes to our stock of water, is protected and enhanced, so that our children's children will also have water security.

In the Hague I will be chairing a session of the Ministerial Conference on the issue of water and basic needs. I will be pushing hard some of the key issues that I have set out for you today. In particular I will be encouraging more coherence in what we are all doing. I will be advocating persistence and dedication to resolve the unacceptable plight of the world's poorest and ensure that they have access to clean safe water for drinking, to hygienic sanitation, and equitable and efficient allocation of water to ensure secure access to food and enhanced livelihoods. I will be pressing to start a UN process to agree a set of realistic but challenging targets for water and sanitation.

I want to say a little more about specific targets. We at DFID consider that water and sanitation for all by 2025 is a realistic objective, towards which we should all work. In order to take forward the process of agreement, we will propose at The Hague a set of intermediate targets consistent with that final objective. They are to reduce the percentage of people unserved with water by half by 2015; to reduce the percentage of people unserved with sanitation by half by 2015 (which we recognise as a tougher target than that for water, but we believe is achievable); and for all countries to have integrated water management plans in place and in process of adoption by 2005, as part of their national strategies for sustainable development.

We have a significant challenge before us if we are to achieve these targets. Some people are gloomy about the prospects for water in the 21st Century. Others are sceptical about setting new targets for water. We do not share those views. We believe that if we focus our efforts and work together, those targets are achievable.