



MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES

6th World Water Forum

Marseille, 12th of March 2012

HENRI DE RAINCOURT
French Minister in charge of Cooperation

Niger Basin Speech

Mr President of the Republic of Niger,
Ministers,
Your Excellencies the Ambassadors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to meet with you once again here in Marseille at this 6th World Water Forum, a gathering to which I invited you at Bamako, at the forum on “Solidarity for Water in Niger basin countries”, held there on 17-18 October last.

That event was a great success, attended as it was by a thousand or so participants from around the world, four Heads of State, very many ministers and prominent figures representing donors and international organisations.



MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES

Why should the Niger Basin arouse such interest?

The first reason relates to the challenges, which are still vast. The nine countries of the Niger Basin have a population of 275 million, a figure that is rising very rapidly. The needs for access not only to drinking water and sanitation, but also, let us never forget this, access to food security, will continue to intensify, reaching exponential proportions in the coming years, with existing needs that are already very substantial.

In this region, the ground lost by the African continent with regard to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals is not simply a matter of statistics, but a painful daily reality for the population on the ground. Without access to clean water, how can public health be improved? Without easy access to water, how can women and young girls be freed of a task which is no less unbearable for having existed since time immemorial? Such challenges, which affect West Africa particularly acutely, necessitate the mobilisation of the international community, and naturally of Africans themselves.

This is also a region where the relationship between environment, development and security is a tangible reality. The conflicts around water use have rapidly aggravated tensions



MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES

between certain population groups, of which extremists are quick to take advantage. Furthermore, here as elsewhere on the African continent, the damaging effects of climate change are a burden on local populations, who have the feeling that growth in some countries is being achieved at their expense.

But the Niger Basin also attracts attention due to the successes now under way. In the forefront of those successes is the Niger Basin Authority, which I wish to salute as a regional cooperation body that has demonstrated the essential nature of its role. France has supported the NBA from the outset. That is so because we believe that while water is in some cases a factor for conflict, it can also be a powerful factor for peace and cooperation.

France chose early to go down the road of water management based on catchment areas and became convinced after experimenting with a range of solutions that political and administrative boundaries are not the best basis for the joint management of water. Moreover, over time we also came to understand the necessity of bringing all actors on board in managing this public good.



MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES

Indeed, what is valid within a country is also valid for a world region. Water knows no frontiers and, as Blaise Pascal once said “rivers are roads which move”, they have no need of maps drawn by men to know where to go. That is why regional cooperation around cross-border watercourses is the focus of so many goals and issues. It is for countries a matter of peace, and for their populations one of development. It is for those reasons that the entry into force of the United Nations Convention of 1997 must be a priority shared by as many countries as possible.

I am not forgetting here the key role played by watercourses in the production of electricity, at a time when the G20 is focusing on the infrastructure projects of which the continent has so great a need.

The Bamako meeting organised by the Chirac Foundation and hosted by President Amadou Toumani Touré led to significant progress on all these questions. I shall not go over all the accomplishments of that conference, but I would like to highlight certain of them.

First and foremost, I was struck by the clarity of the statements on finance made by the Africans present. There was



MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES

broad consensus around the idea that countries receiving international aid should provide the initial funding for projects they themselves had conceived after listening to the views of local populations and associating international donors with practical action integrated into realities on the ground. Such an approach is very much in line with the principles underlying the Paris Declaration, and I salute the commitment of African countries which are devoting a growing proportion of their national budgets to access to water and sanitation. That does not mean that international aid must retreat; quite the contrary. As you know, France, despite the difficulty of present circumstances, has maintained the entirety of its official development aid budget. Each year, we devote very substantial amounts, over €600 million, to access to water and sanitation. In addition, all here will be aware of our efforts to promote innovative financing for development and we are proud to have been joined in that fight by our African partners, Mali in particular, which is playing a driving role on these issues.

Water is an area in which I believe we can make rapid progress on the basis of innovative schemes that exist already in France under the 2005 statute allowing local authorities and water agencies to devote 1% of their budgets to water-related cooperation projects, in addition to other equally useful



MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES

mechanisms that some of our European neighbours have put in place.

The importance of decentralised cooperation was also highlighted at the Bamako conference. As a local elected representative myself, I am very open to this form of cooperation, which is particularly attentive to the realities and practical needs of local people.

The issue of food security was also discussed at length. Unfortunately, since October the outlook on this subject has continued to be very worrying in several regions of the African continent, especially in the Sahel. France directs its energies at responding to urgent crises, but we are convinced that far-reaching efforts need to be made by the States in the region and international partners in order to push back the intolerable scourge of starvation and malnutrition. Progress once thought impossible was achieved under our presidency of the G20, notably on the building of food stocks. But in the long run it is clear that the linkage not only between water and agriculture but also with energy will be crucial in meeting the needs of the two billion people who will be living on the African continent by 2050. These are important subjects that must be addressed at the “Rio +20” summit.



MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES

In the face of these challenges, you can have confidence that France will stand alongside its friends in the Niger Basin. We shall assist you, we shall provide you with the benefit of our experience and our expertise in certain domains. But in addition we shall listen to you and learn from you, because the success of regional cooperation in your countries as you implement it before our very eyes in order to manage and share water, that precious resource, is a great lesson for the whole of Africa and, I believe, for the world.

I thank you./.