



Opening speech by Keith Whitmore,
President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Strasbourg, 10 June 2011

Mr Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Water is a basic human need, an inseparable part of the triad “shelter, food and water”. The way we treat water – the way we use it, consume it, supply it to the citizens, clean it and save it – shows the maturity of society. Consequently, access to safe, drinkable water – which is a major issue for far too many in the world today – is a matter of human dignity and part of the broader question of respect for basic human rights.

This is one of the premises of our approach towards water management – that water is part and parcel of a healthy environment to which our citizens are entitled. In the past, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities welcomed and supported the bid of the Parliamentary Assembly that the right to a healthy environment must be recognised and included as an additional protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, and we maintain this position today. As a key component of a healthy environment, the right to water in particular must be as much a reality as the right to life which is upheld to a great extent through access to water.

However, it is the second premise of our approach that brought us here today – namely, that water management is a matter for all levels of governance – international and national, parliamentary and local/regional, but also for civil society and the private sector. We are all stakeholders in regulating the uses of water, and it can hardly be otherwise in a system of multi-level governance in Europe which we are building today.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address you, our partners in governance, on this critical matter, and I welcome your commitment to the parliamentary political process in the run-up to the 6th World Water Forum next year.



In 2006, I had the honour to represent the local and regional dimension of this process during the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico City, as part of the Congress delegation and Chair of the Committee on Sustainable Development at the time. That Forum was the first to allow for interaction between the different tiers of governance, by introducing a segment called the High-level dialogue between Local Authorities, Ministers and Parliamentarians.

Back then, we have already called for a greater decentralisation in water management. In fact, “Local actions for a global challenge was the main topic of the Forum, which formally recognised for the first time, in its Mexico Declaration, the key role played by local and regional elected representatives in water management.

This process continued at the 5th World Water Forum in Istanbul in 2009, where the Congress delegation took part in a triologue meeting between government ministers, parliamentarians and territorial authorities. We also joined the Istanbul Water Consensus for Local and Regional Authorities – an agreement among cities around the globe to step up action on urban water and sanitation issues.

Our contribution to that Forum was a policy recommendation on public water and sewer services, which called for strengthening the specific responsibilities of local authorities in providing these services, improved governance and the decentralisation of decision-making processes in water matters. This would be in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity laid down in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the UN-Habitat guidelines on decentralisation and strengthening of local authorities.

All along this path, we have toiled side by side with the Parliamentary Assembly, pushing for the recognition of our role and our inclusion in the process as fully-fledged stakeholders and partners, on a par with national governments. This is why I am particularly pleased to be here today, which is in the spirit of the good tradition of co-operation developed between our two elected assemblies of the Council of Europe in the preparation of the previous World Water Forums.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over just a few decades, we have seen how water has come to the forefront of our concerns as a social and political issue. Today, Europe is not immune to the problems related to water, and the stakes are high, for example, with some European regions experiencing high pressure on their water resources. An



ever-increasing amount of water is required not only for individual consumption in towns and cities but also to produce food, energy and for industrial uses due to our unsustainable consumption patterns.

Today in Europe, the value of water continues to be underestimated while the challenges we are facing are enormous, if we take into account climate change and the need to adapt to its consequences, aging infrastructures, need for appropriate legislation or the proper sharing of responsibilities and devolution of powers for a more effective management of water.

Much of the crisis we are facing today is the result of human activities and the manner in which water is used and managed. This is why the water crisis is also a crisis of governance, and needs to be addressed from the good governance perspective. Today, this global water management crisis is also aggravated by the international financial and economic crisis. Against this background, the role of municipalities and regions and their authorities has become more evident. In water management, much as in economic and financial management, thanks to their proximity, they are best placed to be aware of the needs of their communities, capable of ensuring optimal use of local resources and be held more accountable before the citizens than at national level.

This was our message to both the 4th and the 5th World Water Forums. However, after much hope following the formal recognition in Mexico, Istanbul was a significant retreat. We in particular deplored the fact that the Istanbul Ministerial Declaration failed to take into account the responsibilities of elected representatives and those of civil society, lacked ambition and did not rise to the crucial challenges that water management poses.

We certainly hope that the 6th World Water Forum will do better. In the run-up to the Forum, we continue to insist on several key issues.

First, that the role of elected representatives in water management must be reaffirmed. Second, that in a system of multi-level governance, we need a new water culture – a culture of sharing responsibilities and working together to reverse the negative trends, an integrated water and sanitation management. In this regard, as I have just mentioned, local and regional authorities are best placed to assess the needs of their communities and decide on the optimal use of water resources and the management method. As such, they are major stakeholders in national and international policy-making on water management.



Therefore, third, as part of this integrated management, we need a clear separation of competences, including both public and private sectors, and we need to back up coherent water policies with competent elected representatives and their staff, as well as competent educators in civil society.

We must develop initiatives that will reinforce the collaboration between stakeholders, and that will seek and find ways to inform and involve the people whom we represent. A change in their attitude can and will make a big difference.

For their part, national parliaments should adopt an appropriate legislation giving specific powers in water management to local authorities, based on the existing international instruments such as the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the UN decentralisation guidelines. Both these instruments should be included in the help desk data base, which is under construction and which you will be discussing during this conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to underline that the task of all of us here today is to work together, to coordinate and strengthen the efforts of all actors involved at local, regional and national levels to preserve and restore the planet's water resources. We hope that the cause of water will receive a new boost at the 6th World Water Forum where greater progress will be made in this direction.

I wish you very fruitful discussions and exchanges over these two days, and hope that we will send a strong message to the 6th World Water Forum in Marseille next year.

Thank you