



Opening Ceremony
6th World Water Forum
12 March 2012

Prince of Orange, UNSGAB

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends,

It is an honour to join the water community here in Marseille in my role as Chair of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation.

I served as Chair of the 2000 World Water Forum in The Hague and I've taken part in every Forum since then. I always make time for the World Water Forums. They are important events, where water managers, water policy experts, financial strategists, politicians, water advocates and many more people from all around the world gather. We usually take stock of progress made and look ahead to what we hope to achieve in the future. Our French hosts have urged us to find solutions this year. And they are right to do so. It is indeed 'time for solutions', and I thank the French Government and the World Water Forum for challenging us to shift our dialogue to where we hope to go, instead of focusing on how we hope to get there.

When the Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation first met in 2004, the members made a tactical decision: to focus on how to meet existing water and sanitation targets, rather than coming up with new objectives and goals. And they wanted to place emphasis on the Millennium Development Goal target of halving the number of people with no access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Clearly this target and the MDGs as a whole are a potent combination for development. They identify common objectives, harness global enthusiasm and, ultimately, galvanise action.

The MDGs represent history in the making and just a few days ago the Secretary-General made a momentous announcement: the MDG drinking water target has been met. Officially, this is the first MDG target to be achieved by the international community. We should be extremely encouraged by this news. Since 1990, two billion people have gained access to drinking water, and worldwide drinking water coverage has increased from 76% in 1990 to 89% in 2010. Let's step back and consider these numbers. In the last 20 years, the global population has grown by 1.6 billion. Virtually all of this growth has taken place in developing countries. That means drinking water coverage has not only kept pace with this population explosion but has exceeded it by 25%. This is a testament to the dedication, perseverance and sheer will of countries and their leaders, working with individuals, utilities and communities. The biggest shift in the use of drinking water sources in the developing world has been the number of people using piped water connections - from 32 % in 1990 to 46% in 2010. This is the 'time for solutions', and it is clear that utilities delivering piped supplies probably play the biggest role in solving our drinking water challenge. A good investment for the future is increasing both the human capacity and financial solvency of utilities. It could yield huge gains, especially for children, who are dying at the rate of almost 4,000 a day from waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea.

So can we declare victory? There are many reasons why we can't. For example, it is abundantly clear that any global target will mask certain regional disparities and social inequities. We know that half the people gaining access to drinking water live in either China or India. We also know that only 11 of the 50 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have met the MDG drinking water target. Should we be pessimistic? I don't think so. The MDG targets are particularly challenging to countries starting from a low 1990 baseline, especially if this is coupled with high population growth. Both apply in sub-Saharan Africa. We did the maths and found that an astonishing 275 million people there had gained access to drinking water. That means that in sub-Saharan Africa an average of 37,000 people a day have gained access in the past 20 years. We have good reason to congratulate African leaders for their enormous efforts in bringing this essential service to their people. I know many of our African colleagues are with us today, and on Wednesday they will focus on the solutions for their continent, and renewed efforts to achieve them. Let's also congratulate the governments of China and India for prioritising drinking water. That takes both political will and a lot of hard work.

But how equitable is the increased access to drinking water? When we tease out the numbers on the basis of wealth quintiles, a dramatic story of inequity is revealed. In many developing countries the richest 20% enjoy almost universal coverage, while for the poorest 20% coverage is pitiful. In rural Sierra Leone only one in ten of the poorest people uses an improved drinking water source. And we know that it is women and girls who bear the brunt of this inequity, because they have to fetch water when it is not available in or near their homes. This was one of the reasons for the UN to adopt a resolution recognising access to clean water and sanitation as a human right essential to the full enjoyment of life - by rich and poor alike.

We have another reason to be cautious. It hasn't been possible to measure water quality all over the world. So the indicator 'use of improved sources' is now being used instead of 'access to safe sources.' And so, while we basically know how many people have access to drinking water, we do not know if that water is actually safe to drink. In fact, studies have shown that water from a significant number of 'improved sources' is not safe for human consumption, due to poor maintenance or construction. Like water from unimproved sources it carries unsafe levels of microbes or chemicals. Rather than sustaining life, this water is making people sick. Drinking contaminated water triggers a downward spiral of ill health and further impoverishment, at serious personal and financial cost, threatening health and development.

So there are reasons for us to have reservations about the achievement of the MDG drinking water target. We are learning by doing, and many of these lessons, experiences and insights will be absorbed by the women and men who are already working on the post-2015 framework. But let's not be distracted from the fact that the water community has cause for celebration. We can congratulate everyone who saw the MDG target not as a dream, but as a vital step in improving millions of lives. The next logical step will be for the international community to commit to universal

access, which is why our Board made this one of our main messages for the Rio+20 dialogue. Political support from all levels, including from the United Nations, will also be needed. In January, the Secretary-General released his five-year action agenda in which he committed to launching a UN-wide initiative to provide universal access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. As his Advisory Board, we stand by him to deliver on this pledge!

Ladies and gentlemen,

We must now take a hard look at sanitation. It is truly ironic that the first MDG target to be met is combined with the sanitation target, which is arguably most off track. We continue to live in a world where 2.5 billion people do not have a proper toilet. It is wrong. It is inexcusable. It is immoral. At current rates of progress, the MDG sanitation target won't be met until 2026. Why aren't we seeing better progress? Different experts will offer different explanations, but this much is clear. Politicians, leaders and people in general simply don't like to be associated with toilets. This stigma influences international and national development agendas. We have to fight continually to keep sanitation at the centre of development discussions. Though often coupled with water issues, sanitation receives significantly less attention and fewer resources.

Having said that, I am happy to say that we are seeing a move in the right direction. We now have better empirical evidence of the economic benefits of sanitation coverage. The World Bank assessed the annual economic cost of poor sanitation at 53.8 billion US dollars in India and 6.3 billion US dollars in Indonesia. This evidence makes it hard for politicians and policymakers to ignore the value of sanitation. Increasingly, governments are acknowledging the fact that basic sanitation is a key component of any development strategy. UN member states recently adopted a resolution calling for an end to open defecation along with a commitment to supporting the Sanitation Drive to 2015. The Sanitation Drive was launched last year by the Secretary-General, demonstrating his willingness to act as a champion for toilets. The Sanitation Drive to 2015 is also a solution. By keeping sanitation at the centre of the development dialogue, it will encourage political commitment and financial investment and boost education.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I've talked about drinking water and sanitation. These two issues converge in wastewater. This is a challenge for which we need multiple solutions from all sectors and at all levels. Right now more than 90% of the world's wastewater is discharged untreated into oceans, rivers or wherever else it can go. Given demographic trends, coupled with climate change impacts, this is a disaster in slow motion that will grow in proportion and impact. We need solutions for wastewater management, not only of human sewage, but also of industrial, agricultural and urban wastewater. Wastewater management

can help meet multiple objectives and offers huge potential for a green economy. After treatment, urban wastewater can be reused for peri-urban agriculture. We know that in many parts of the world, wastewater is already used for agriculture. This practice should be encouraged, but it must be done safely, with the use of guidelines, such as the globally accepted World Health Organisation guidelines for wastewater reuse. Safe water reuse is a solution, since it promotes food security in the future. This should be a key issue addressed in this year's World Water Day theme, water and food security. Our Board is not suggesting massive trunk and branch wastewater systems that are prohibitively expensive and prone to failure. Instead, we need a wastewater revolution, which promotes innovation and smaller modular systems that capture energy and clean water for the next appropriate use. We believe a collective vision of wastewater management is needed, and should be agreed inRio. Such a vision will help point countries in the right direction, just as the MDGs have done for poverty reduction, maternal health and universal education. We are encouraged to see that wastewater is playing a prominent role in this Forum, which will hopefully pave the way for an intergovernmental decision inRio.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The World Water Forum represents a huge investment of time, energy and money. Over 30, 000 people have travelled to Marseille to focus on water. So let us commit to formulating an outcome that will have a real impact onRio+20. I think we can all agree that it is 'time for solutions'. The real challenge is to muster the political will, financial resources and policy frameworks needed to make the solutions work. Often this means challenging the status quo, which is both difficult and, at times, risky. But we all need to take the risk. Because the future we want demands it.

Thank you.