

AFRICITES 2006

Political days

**REPOSITIONING WATER AT THE
CENTER OF THE POLITICAL DEBATE**

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Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen Mayors and National and Local Elected Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

First of all I would like to thank the organisers of Africités for inviting the World Water Council to participate in these Political Days of Africités.

We would like to express our appreciation for the outstanding quality of the organisation of this summit and for the hospitality of Kenya, of its elected representatives and of all its people.

The fact of bringing together water and politics is by itself an ambitious programme and in a certain way it also provides a partial answer to the question.

Obviously, the issue of water, of access to water, of securing the resource as well as guarantying proper distribution, all these issues are eminently and truly political.

And accordingly, the answers are of the political order before being of the financial, administrative or technical order.

Water, as you very well know, is our common future. Water is at the source of all things. Water is life. “Aman Imam” is something we hear throughout the Great Sahara.

Not only water in the singular form since the word Aman embraces a lot more: waters, all the waters are life. Our fathers, our elders know better and they tell us: “Never waste water, any water”.

Yes, dear friends, you know this as well as I do, water is in danger and hence, so are we. All over the world and more particularly in Africa, the

situation with water is more concerning than ever. And this is unacceptable.

On the one hand, the depletion of natural resources is threatening progress. And not only does Man's well-being suffer from this but it is often degraded sometimes severely. The land of Africa, this immense and generous territory is not spared. Humans, yes humans are often, here like anywhere else, the enemies of water.

The climate changes which are often due to deregulations, to our excessive behaviours, now seem to lead to extremes, materialised here and there by increased rainfalls and prolonged droughts. All this causes disasters and calls for additional investments since in some cases, dikes will have to be strengthened and, in others, we will need to increase the number of wells and dams.

But pollution, deforestation, the degradation of soils and their salinization, the eutrophication of lakes or their silting up, the drying out of the underground water reserves are also responsible for the depletion of natural resources. They all threaten the balance and sometimes the survival of land, river and marine ecosystems.

Uncontrolled demography essentially results in the anarchic increase in the number of large cities on the continent. And there, more than anywhere else, the overpopulation of these fragile cities fosters ignorance, diseases, malnutrition and poverty. 10 times more people die from the lack or poor quality of water than from all the wars on our planet. At this going pace, one inhabitant out of two on earth will soon be suffering from hydric stress.

And for Africa, the situation is appalling: 24% of the planet's emerged surface areas and only 9% of resources in water, two thirds of the urban population lives in shanty towns and close to 300 million city dwellers still do not have access to truly potable water.

Yes, on the one hand, natural resources are becoming scarce or shall we say, we are making them scarce, and on the other, human development is a continuously asserted priority even though we often tend to forget it.

Yes, it's true; all the objectives of the millennium send us back, directly or indirectly, to the issue of water.

Food, education, health, as well as economic activities or environmental protection; all this constantly reminds us that there cannot be any development without water.

It is no longer a question of priority, my friends, but rather of urgency, extreme urgency. And in Africa, more than anywhere else, men, women and children are not born with equal rights, when it comes to access to water.

We must take immediate action; first of all to state clearly that regardless of the lack of money, concrete steps must be taken to ensure respect for the right to water, effective decentralisation of competencies, and true sharing of knowledge.

And first of all, let's stop trying to solve the issue of access to water for all – an essential right, a vital component of human dignity – with macro-economic reasoning and inhuman restructuring plans. Water management certainly requires intelligence and reason, but above all it requires solidarity and generosity.

It's true we must implement intelligent balanced pricing, but we must no longer let people believe or say that the billions necessary to satisfy essential needs must only be paid by Africans.

This is not possible. We must say this with great strength and frankness.

This is the role of the World Water Council, and the role of its three hundred member organisations and eighty states that belong to it, to declare more loudly and more clearly what everybody is thinking and whispering.

Allow me today to place before you, on your tables, concrete, precise proposals that can be easily understood and accepted by all.

The first proposal is that each of us, each of you, as national representatives or local elected representatives should agree to become

water militants. Every day, every month, every year, you will speak out and take action in favour of “PRIORITY FOR WATER”.

Your decisions and commitments will comply with this objective. You will bring to life the saying about taps before guns, and even, the most daring of all, drinking water before the mobile phone.

Let’s dream a little, dear friends. In 2005, purchases of mobile phones in Africa increased by 40%. Let’s dream that only half of that is for water and sanitation and we would be on the right track.

The second proposal is aimed at all the sponsors, the co-operation managers, whether bi or multinational, the great organisations that control the supply of money. To them we say that money is needed for water, a lot more money. Today only five per cent of public development aid is dedicated to water. This is a pittance. Hardly more than 6.5% of amounts invested are devoted to water. This is a major economic mistake.

The international community must accept in the next few years that it will be necessary to finance the infrastructures of the twenty poorest countries and of as many of the largest African cities, through a larger scale but better managed, amplified and generalised policy of donations and solidarity transfers. And it must bring an end to the “loan – debt - debt cancellation” spiral, replacing it with intelligent, balanced pricing arrangements promoting social solidarity.

The third proposal consists in imposing, mark my words, imposing that the greater part of financial and technical means implemented be allocated to the works and network operations aid. We’ve had more than enough of sanded up wells, “spoiled” pumps and clogged up networks due to a lack of money for their maintenance and of trained men and women to ensure their management.

This also imposes that we facilitate the rapid creation of maintenance schools in different locations in Africa. Africa has engineers. But it lacks workers, qualified supervisors especially trained to the maintenance of water and sanitation works.

It is necessary to build but it is essential to manage.

Accordingly, a fourth proposal would aim at demanding a fairer distribution of progress, of all progress. And notably of the progress made in technology which today benefits to a minority of people.

Desalination and brackish water treatment, water pumping from increasingly deep ground water tables, the capacity to transfer water over increasingly large distances, in short, everything that makes the human genius, need to be shared

Let's take the example of ponds, the "lungs" of Africa, or of reservoirs needed to store water for extra months following rainfalls by reducing seepage and evaporation losses.

The technological progress achieved in the North with lighter and less costly materials must be associated to the experience of the populations who are confronted to this problem on a daily basis. We want these specifically African research and development programmes to be implemented not only in Paris or London but chiefly in Bamako or Nairobi so that they are really adapted to the continent's specificities and moreover, to the notion of solidarity funding, we wish to add solidarity transfers.

The fifth proposal stems from the increase in the price of oil. Any increase in the barrel's price means that women have to walk a little more, that children will die because there's simply not enough money to operate a pump or drill a well. And that's why we now have to establish systematic programmes to use renewable energies at a large scale. It's more than a necessity, it's a simple fact that the sun's rays and the strength of the wind form an integral part of the African's continent energy future.

The sixth proposal concerns the decentralisation of water competencies, an issue that is at the heart of the discussions of the Sixth summit. What does this mean exactly?

It means that water is, before all, a matter concerning citizens, communities in the field, in the places they live in. Today, we are well

aware that water competencies lie chiefly at the local level where the will to benefit from a transparent and efficient public service to make water accessible is clearly expressed.

Today we need to strive to achieve a better decentralisation of water in due respect of the necessary balance between the state's regulatory role and a greater empowerment of local capacities.

But this is only possible if the financial means are provided within a clear and sustainable legislative framework. The World Water Council proposes that the notion of allocated revenue be widespread so that the water and sanitation budgets are independent and funded by all the available resources.

The seventh proposal just serves to assert that the right to water must obviously be expressed without any ambiguity. And this results from the fact that in Mexico, a few months ago, the International Water Community was unanimous on this point and expressed the will that this right be included in the Constitution of the States but also in our children's books, in each school where they learn about their rights and duties as citizens.

Our eighth proposal addresses the land planning policy issues. Only the development of networks of medium size cities can allow fighting efficiently against the growth of mega cities. These medium size cities are an essential element between the countryside that people leave and the over crowded mega poles. Our future water access programmes must give them full priority.

The ninth proposal relates to the management of disasters whether they result from climate change with the drought and flood events it carries in its wake, or from the earth's wrath or from the madness of humans with their endless and deadly wars.

The World Water Council has suggested for several months now, that an African Task Force for Water be set up, based on competencies that already exist within African countries. There's progress to be made to

assess the nature of the aid and coordinate its deployment through the launching of emergency programmes.

And lastly, as the tenth proposal, I would like to say that during the 4th Forum in Mexico, we launched an initiative called « Water for Schools ». Can there still be, in this 21st century we live in, schools left without water?

A first experience aimed at bringing water to one thousand schools in 10 countries is under preparation, clearly showing the will to act rapidly but also sustainably.

These are, Ladies and gentlemen, dear Friends, a few proposals or suggestions that illustrate the work carried out by the World Water Council to which I would like to ask you to adhere.

However, nor the Council or its President can express, on your behalf, the needs Africa has in terms of water.

We need to fight to reach our goal; we need to engage in a long and difficult battle. But be reassured, this battle does not lead to war. On the contrary, it is a battle for peace, a battle to foster solidarity, a battle to strengthen cooperation. And a battle to ensure that, year after year, billions of men and women can live where they were born and where they grew up. We must be well aware that without access to water, without electricity, healthcare and education, these men and women will continue to embark on frail boats to sail across the straights, climb on board makeshift trucks to cross the desert and end up at the foot of fences and walls that the richer erect in haste and shame.

What we want is walls of water rather than walls of indifference and contempt.

To the rich people's quest to achieve sustainable development, we want to associate the hope of the poor for a truly fair development and the expression of an effective and durable solidarity.

Water, Ladies and Gentlemen, deserves that we bring together capacity and intelligence. It deserves that people unite and join hands. And as nomadic people like to say: “ move the tents away and let our hearts get closer ».

I thank you all, dear friends, for everything that you do, for what you will undertake to take part in this great endeavour that is the access to water for all.

I thank you Dear Friends of Africités to bring your hearts together to better contribute, all together, to provide access to water for all.

I thank you for your attention.