

**5th Arab Water Forum
Arab Water Security for Peace &**

Sustainable Development

21 September 2021

Dubai

OPENING CEREMONY



Speech of Mr. Loïc Fauchon

President of the World Water Council

Check Against Delivery

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends of water,

It is a special honor and a great pleasure to be with you today on the occasion of this opening ceremony of 5th Arab Water Forum.

First of all, I would like to greet Dr Mahmoud Abu-Zeid, President of the Arab Water Council and my predecessor at the head of the World Water Council. I would like to extend to him my friendly greetings and my feelings of respect and consideration as to all excellencies participating to this meeting.

The Arab countries have participated in the adventure of the World Water Council from the very beginning. It was Egypt, together with the World Bank and UNESCO, which initiated the creation of our Council. They gave birth to it, with the active participation of Morocco, where the first World Water Forum was held in 1997. And together we have worked on its development. And I would like to thank you here, on behalf of our 400 member organizations from 70 countries, for the active and permanent support of the community of Arab countries.

Dear friends of water,

As you all know here, water has become one of the main concerns for the future of our planet.

Water is often scarce, its quality is often poor. But above all, it is not always available where humans would like it to be. And also, where it is essential for the good condition of the natural environment.

Water and air, their availability and quality, are essential issues for the years and decades to come.

And from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Sultanate of Oman, from Jordan to Sudan, from the West to the East and from the North to the South, the Arab countries are facing a shortage of resources and frequent water stress which is slowing down their development and creating unbearable tensions.

This is why the subject of water security is now at the center of our concerns, at the center of all our work. And it is to the credit of the Arab Water Council that it has placed this subject at the heart of this 5th Arab Water Forum.

So, how can we guarantee water security for more than half a billion people in this region? How do we ensure water security to promote sustainable peace and equitable development?

The solutions cannot be found without a shared understanding of the causes of the tensions over water resources and their use.

Firstly, there is the aridity of the soil common to almost all Arab countries. This age-old aridity comes from ancient times. If the Koran praises the

sweetness of the flowing spring, it also speaks of the severity of the drought and the need to share.

Over the centuries the aridity, the scarcity of water, has led to tensions, even conflicts over a well, or over the control of a river or an oasis.

In addition to this thirsty land, there is now a large and uncontrolled population growth. Many Arab countries have seen their populations double or even triple since the middle of the 20th century. The growth first affected the countryside, then gave way, as in the rest of the world, to a disorderly, uncontrolled urbanization. The urban concentration, most often by the sea or along the major rivers, is highly water consuming. In addition, there is a rise in the standard of living, and the changes in diet or the demand for manufactured products and public services call for ever-increasing water consumption.

And when water consumption is high, more effluents have to be treated. Cities and megacities in particular, all over the world, have created intense land and sea pollution which is one of the poisons of modern times. This pollution carries waterborne diseases and disrupts agricultural and food production and the sanitary quality of domestic water.

Finally, there are the future effects of climate evolution. In some cases, there will be a decrease in resources, and in others, more abundant rainfall. These effects are still unclear, but it is certain that they will disrupt our desire to achieve water security.

In the Arab countries as in the rest of the world, the future of water depends on the balance between supply and demand. We know that we need to "produce" more water and consume less. Producing more means increasing the availability of water in time and space. Pumping deeper, transferring over greater and greater distances. This is what we have been doing for a long time.

But this is no longer sufficient, the aquifers are running out and large-scale transfers are increasingly costly and fragile from a security point of view.

New solutions have appeared more recently to deal with the scarcity of the resource. Desalination of sea water: the Arab countries were pioneers in this field. Can you imagine that today, around 20 000 desalination treatment plants are functioning all over the world, 30 % of which are in the Arabic countries? And most of them are using it, both to generate energy and for domestic and industrial uses. Thanks to the reverse osmosis process, costs have been step by step reduced. The only major drawback is that saline and brine discharges create problems for biodiversity when they deposit on land or on shallow coasts.

Reusing wastewater offers more interesting prospects for the future. Firstly, because large cities and small towns are gradually equipping themselves with modern wastewater treatment plants that ultimately discharge water that is suitable for human consumption and, at least, for agricultural production.

Little by little, an exceptional potential is being discovered which, with the progressive improvement of technological processes, will be the real water and energy revolution of the 21st century.

But a new element has emerged in public debate over the last 20 years, namely the need for water for nature and not just for mankind.

Today, we understand that we also need water for nature. Why? Because nature is the best way to protect water. Nature preserves water, nature filters water, nature maintains the quality and quantity of water. So, we must understand the need to share between human beings, but also between human beings and nature. There is also a specific question upon which I insist, which is a sensitive question: water reserves, or water storage systems.

Today, on every continent, and in nearly every country, there are places where humans and nature lack water at some point in time. Scarcity today, as we just said, is a problem in Africa, but also in the USA, in India, in Australia and even in France. We don't always have water from winter which can be used during the summer season, or from one year to the next one.

We must re-think the concept of dams and reservoirs. Ecologists criticize dams, which are sometimes too powerful, too violent, move populations and 'assault' nature. They are partly right. But we need dams otherwise men are thirsty and nature as well. We think – and I have been advocating for this for several years - that there is a need to evolve from the concept of dams to the concept of aquatic biodiversity reserves, which are above all a means to protect biodiversity.

We must also voluntarily but progressively shift towards adopting farming methods that are acceptable to humankind, but at the same time, we must make sure that humankind is not deprived of the water and food we need in order to survive. This will be one of the main challenges of this century.

More generally, we want everyone in the world to have access to basic services, which are water, electricity, food, health and education – at the very least. We cannot continue to separate these basic services from one another.

That is the reason why, for years, our Council has advocated for a horizontal approach, the Five Fingers alliance. Why? Because we must consider solutions for water at the same time as we consider solutions for electricity. And what is the use of feeding people, if they die because of health issues?

Just a few words concerning transboundary basins which are today the heart of a new geopolitical order.

Forty to fifty percent of the world's population live across 250 transboundary river basins, flowing across several countries.

Successful examples of basin governance exist, such as the Senegal River, the Rhine River or the Parana River, established through treaties and operated dedicated organizations where dialogue and sharing are the rule.

There are other more complex examples where tensions continue due to strong political sensitivities and permanent media pressure.

This is the case of the Nile River, where the construction of the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia had triggered major tensions with downstream States, such as Sudan and especially Egypt.

But there are no reasons today of speaking about water wars.

Dialogue, a full but discrete dialogue and nothing else than technical dialogue is the only recommendation issued by our Council to deal with this type of situation.

And finally, I would like to end this overview of the future of water with an essential subject, a sensitive subject, an ethical subject but also an economic and social and therefore political subject. This subject is that of the right to water. The right to water so easily proclaimed but so difficult to enforce and concretely implement.

The right to water is first and foremost the possibility for those who are deprived of it to have access to water, in quality and quantity, at a price acceptable to all. It is a right insufficiently guaranteed by the UN system, which has never been able to impose this obligation on States. Only about fifty States have really included the right to water in their Constitutions or founding texts. An international campaign must once again be led by our World Water Council to convince Heads of State, Head of governments and parliamentarians.

It is the role of all of us - the Arab Water Council, the World Water Council and many others - to bring together all those who think about the future of water and to promote concrete solutions and responses to put an end to the suffering of water.

But let's be very clear, achieving water security requires a political response first.

Water is Politics!

The priority to be given to water is first and foremost a decision of the States. It is also a universal awareness that requires the adoption of laws and regulations, as well as budgets, that will translate this priority into concrete actions and immediate responses.

To conclude, I would like to thank you for having placed your work in line with that of the Dakar World Water Forum that the World Water Council is organizing with the Republic of Senegal and the City of Dakar. This forum, the

ninth, will be the forum of solutions and responses as populations demand to give real expression to access to water for all.

In this way, we will be able to give back dignity and confidence to billions of children, women and men for a better future.

Join us to win this peaceful battle, join us and become member of the World Water Council.

Thank you for your contribution, thank you for your support and I wish you full success in the work of this fifth Arab Water Forum.