

Global Climate Change and the Polluter Pays Principle

**Notes for speech for Day on Water, Energy and Climate, co-ordinated by WMO
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Water Dome, World Summit on Sustainable Development
1 September 2002**

A few months ago the African water ministers met in Accra to discuss water issues on the Continent. This meeting gave rise to a statement that amongst other things, stated that:

“Water can make an immense difference to Africa’s development if it is managed well and used wisely. Given clear policies and strategies and real commitments to action, we can use water to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development in Africa by:

- Improving access to safe water supply and sanitation to reduce the proportion of Africans without access to basic water supply and sanitation by 50% by 2015 and 75% by 2025.
- Promoting efficient and sustainable use of water to address food security and income generation, helping to halve the number of malnourished people by 2015 through investment in irrigated agriculture focusing on economic development as well as on food self-sufficiency, enhancing access to markets and building partnerships for funding and learning.
- Using integrated water resource management (IWRM) to promote cooperation in national and shared water basins for the mutual benefit of all water users and their communities and to increase public awareness and strengthen the political will.
- Acting to prevent, mitigate and manage water-related disasters by developing a prevention based culture, strengthening capacity to monitor and mitigate climate variability and to manage disasters.
- Focusing empowerment and capacity on improving equity and gender and promoting pro-poor water governance and water policies.

All these praiseworthy aims are dependent on technical understanding, political commitment and appropriate funding flows. But they are also strongly influenced by the physical constraints within which we must all operate.

Large areas of Southern Africa, and indeed of Africa as a whole, are prone to droughts. Many areas are equally susceptible to floods. Such physical characteristics greatly influence our ability to translate water policy into practice, but also influence the cost of doing so.

In the South African context, the skill and ingenuity of our engineers has already linked the Orange river mouth on the Atlantic with the fresh water lakes of Northern KwaZulu Natal on the Indian Ocean, more than 3000 kilometres away. A tunnel of monumental proportions takes water from the westward flowing Orange River to our port and industrial complex of Port Elizabeth, while a portion of its waters diverted by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project is discharged, after use, towards the Limpopo, thus linking our northern border with the southern coast.

This exercise has not been without cost – financial and environmental. But it has brought great social and economic benefits, bringing water to the economic centres of the country. The storage capacity of our dams has enabled us to survive through a series of droughts, of growing intensity. This is the point that I must stress. Rainfall trends in South Africa have shown, in the Vaal River catchment area, for example, increasing intensity of droughts over the past 80 years. Taken in conjunction with the international work being done on the impacts of global climate change, such a picture is worrying. If the predictions are correct, we can expect, in Southern Africa, that many of the already arid areas will become drier over the next decades, due to global climate change.

Such changes, in countries such as ours that are already vulnerable to climatic variation, will require considerable adaptation. We will have to enhance our water use efficiency – to make the same amount of water go further. We will have to reduce our pollution impacts – to keep the same water cleaner for further use. But we may also have to make significant infrastructural and technical changes in order to ensure that we increase our ability to store water, and our ability to hold back flood waters. This is going to cost money – money that developing countries should rather be spending on providing safe drinking water and adequate sanitation to their people.

There are two widely accepted environmental principles that I would like to refer to at this point. The first is the internalisation of externalities – that is, the principle that external costs of an action, such as pollution from a factory, should be factored into the costs of production and not borne by society as a whole or by a particular community.

The second is the polluter pays principle. This simply means that where pollution occurs, the polluter should be responsible for the costs of dealing with the pollution and its impacts on others.

Both principles apply in the case of global climate change. Developing countries, which have contributed very little to global climate change are going to be faced with increasing costs in coping with its impacts. It is our contention, from South Africa, that the polluter pays principle should apply in this case, as, ideally, should the issue of internalisation of externalities. Those countries that have driven global climate change should be bound by the notion of polluter-pays. They must contribute to the costs of adaptation and mitigation that will be borne otherwise by developing countries.

One of the key elements that we are arguing for as part of this World Summit on Sustainable Development is the leveling of the playing fields between north and south. We are arguing that eradication of poverty is a key element of sustainable development. We are arguing that we are one world, albeit a world of huge inequalities. We must work together to remove those inequalities, and we must recognise our different responsibilities in this regard. I am gravely concerned that, without the appropriate apportionment of responsibility for global climate change we in the developing countries will be faced with increasing costs – to mitigate against actions over which we have no control.

Without such mitigatory actions, global climate change brings a scenario of worsening plight for developing countries; brings a scenario of increasing poverty; brings a scenario of famine, desertification and suffering.

I am not suggesting that the governments of developing countries are absolved of responsibility in this regard. There is much that must be done internally to eradicate poverty, to remove the dependency of our people on a wayward rainfall regime. But the international community cannot be absolved of its responsibility in this regard.

Drought risks in Africa without global climate change.

