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INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF BASIN ORGANIZATIONS
RED INTERNACIONAL DE ORGANISMOS DE CUENCA**

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« DECLARATION OF DEBRECEN »

FINAL VERSION

From 7 to 9 June 2007, 217 delegates coming from 46 Countries, representatives of governmental administrations in charge of water management, of Basin Organizations, already existing or being created, and from interested bi and multilateral cooperation agencies, met in Debrecen in Hungary, during the seventh General Assembly of the International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO), to define, all together, the most suitable actions needed for achieving the objectives of integrated and participatory management of inland surface and ground water resources and of related coastal zones.

The delegates reaffirmed that freshwater resources are limited and threatened all over the world and that their better governance, respectful of the environment, is one of the main keys to sustainable development: freshwater is essential to sustain life on our planet and ensure the health and socioeconomic progress of our societies.

However, findings are alarming over the world:

- 1.3 billion human beings have no access to safe water,
- 2.6 billion human beings have no basic sanitation.

Climate change, pollution, wastage, destruction of ecosystems: the seriousness of the situation in many countries requires that comprehensive, integrated and consistent management of water resources, respecting the aquatic ecosystems and territories is implemented to preserve the future and the human heritage.

The Millennium Goals for drinking water supply and sanitation can only be achieved with significant and simultaneous progress made to introduce Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), organized on the relevant scale of basins of rivers, lakes and aquifers, either local, national or transboundary.

Integrated and sound water resources management at the level of river basins is obviously essential worldwide!

The basins of rivers, lakes and aquifers are the relevant natural geographical territories in which to organize this integrated and sound management.

Indeed, river basins are the natural territories in which water runs on the soil or in the sub soil, whatever are the national or administrative boundaries or limits crossed.

Significant progress has already been made since the 1990s:

River basin management experienced a quick development in many countries, which made it the basis of their national legislation on water or experimented it in national or transboundary pilot basins.

The Helsinki Convention of 17 March 1992 gives a European cooperation framework in this field.

Although the United Nations Convention of 21 May 1997, on the uses other than navigation on the international rivers, did not come into effect, its principles are now more and more recognized as a basis for relations among the riparian States concerned.

In addition, the European Water Framework Directive of 2000 (WFD) lays down an objective of good status in the national or international river basin districts of the 27 current Member States and the Countries applying for accession to the European Union.

The gained experience allows now to say that integrated water resources management at the level of river basins is a real advantage for governance.

It is now widely recognized that water resources management should be organized and the subject matter of debates and decisions at the level of the geographical area where the problems occur, i.e.:

- 1) on the scale of local, national or transboundary basins of rivers, lakes and aquifers;
- 2) based on integrated information systems, allowing knowledge on resources and their uses, polluting pressures, ecosystems and their functioning, the follow-up of their evolutions and risk assessment. These information systems will have to be used as an objective basis for dialogue, negotiation, decision-making and evaluation of undertaken actions, as well as coordination of financing from the various donors;
- 3) based on management plans or master plans that define the medium and long-term objectives to be achieved;
- 4) through the development of Programs of Measures and successive multiyear priority investments;
- 5) with the mobilization of specific financial resources, based on the « polluter-pays » principle and « user-pays » systems;

6) with the participation in decision-making of the concerned Governmental Administrations and local Authorities, the representatives of different categories of users and associations for environmental protection or of public interest. Indeed, this concerted participation will ensure the social and economic acceptability of decisions taking into account the real needs, the provisions to be acted upon and the contribution capabilities of the stakeholders in social and economic life. Decentralization is the basis for effectiveness in water policies.

Legal and institutional frameworks should allow the application of these six principles.

It is especially necessary to take into account the particular situation of the 263 rivers or lakes and hundreds of aquifers, the basins of which are shared by at least two riparian countries or sometimes more (up to 18).

Water has no national or administrative boundary: jointly managing the resources shared between several bordering States of the 263 rivers and lakes and hundreds of transboundary aquifers over the world is strategic and a priority. This reality should be taken into account and organization should be on the scale of the basins of these transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers.

For several centuries, many agreements have certainly been signed between riparian countries to ensure freedom of navigation or sometimes the sharing of flows or the prevention of floods, and, since the end of the 19th century, for the building of hydropower dams. But, today, there are still not enough agreements, conventions or treaties on pollution control, environmental protection and integrated management of these shared basins.

The G8 Heads of State and Government, who met in Evian in 2003, retained the stakes of better governance of transboundary basins, among their priorities for future actions in the water sector.

Cooperation agreements need to be initiated or signed between the riparian countries of transboundary river basins to achieve indispensable common cause at the basin level.

It seems necessary to support the creation of International Commissions or similar organizations and to strengthen those already existing.

Such international commissions, authorities or organizations allow better dialogue, the exchange of useful information, the solving of possible conflicts and the sharing of benefits from better joint management and the strengthening of transboundary cooperation.

Agreements for transboundary aquifer management should be developed in particular, taking into account their fragility, especially that of trapped groundwater, and the time needed for restoring degraded situations, from the quantitative and qualitative viewpoint.

It is also necessary to take adequate measures to prevent the introduction and dissemination of invasive aquatic species.

To this institutional system should be added the richness of the personal and informal exchanges maintained by international and regional networks such as those of « INBO family ».

Adaptation of water management to climate change is needed

Global warming cannot now be avoided. Fresh water resources will be directly affected in the coming years, with announced consequences:

- increase of extreme hydrological phenomena, such as droughts and floods, with the risk of human losses, destructions and catastrophic economic damage,
- melting of glaciers, reduction of the snow cover in mountains, which then will not be able to play their irreplaceable part of « water towers of the planet », by ensuring flow regulation in the large rivers which are born there,
- modification of the plant species and soil cover, which will result in increased erosion,
- increase of sea and ocean level, which is likely to drown not only the coral islands of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, but also coastal lowlands, especially the polders areas, as well as river deltas and mouths, the flow of which will be modified. Very wide areas of human and economic life will be seriously threatened,
- inland salt water intrusion, such as salted water wedge in coastal aquifers,
- significant move of populations.

The demographic, economic and ecological consequences are likely to be very significant.

It is thus essential to adapt water resources management policies, by taking into account the new elements of the climate change. It is especially necessary to quickly evaluate the hydrological consequences of this change, according to various scenarios.

In this respect, anticipation measures for these changes should be planned at the level of each river basin for the coming years, by developing adapted research programs, within the framework, in particular, of basin management plans or master plans recommended above and of programs of measures for the practical implementation of their objectives.

A priority: to make up for lost time as regards urban sanitation!

85% of the anthropogenic pollution is discharged into inland, coastal and marine natural environments, without any treatment. The telluric discharges are the main causes of ocean and marine pollution.

The discharges are often made upstream of water intakes for human or animal consumption, making more difficult the efforts to ensure the populations' access to safe water...

If, of course, rural sanitation is essential, it should be reminded that more than half of the world population now lives in cities, in larger and larger cities, and in particular in their underprivileged suburban districts. 320 cities have already more than one million inhabitants, and, within one century, 2/3 of the human population will live in cities.

The effects on human health and hygiene, on economic development and degradation of natural environments are very significant and will worsen with the lack of sufficient measures.

Eutrophication of the environments and the disappearance of aquatic life are the direct consequences, as well as the reduction of fishing activities, the first resource for food of many populations.

The time lost with sanitation is extremely alarming and will require urgent reforms, several decades of constant effort and huge financial resources. It is necessary to orientate research towards the development of new techniques, with an acceptable economic and social cost.

It should be reminded (and convince the people in charge) that the economic benefits of sanitation are indeed higher than the costs of the necessary investments and maintenance.

The renewal, maintenance, operation and management of installations are also a challenge to meet to ensure full effectiveness of the existing or planned investments. Their costs will be higher and higher and recurring. Vocational training of the employees of the sector is still almost non-existent and will have to be organized on a large scale.

The United Nations have declared 2008 « International Year for Sanitation ». Indeed, it is necessary to start a long-term mobilization over several decades for an essential and practical implementation of sustainable development.

The reduction of non-point pollution is a prerequisite to maintain or recover good water status.

For this reason, INBO recommends that agricultural practices be adapted to limit pollution risks, either at the level of fertilizers or of pesticides.

INBO also recommends a better control of the marketing and use of substances dangerous for human health and the aquatic environments.

Users' participation should be organized for a real mobilization of partners.

INBO recommends that this participation be organized in Basin Committees or Councils.

These Basin Committees should be involved in the decision-making related to water policy in the basin, within procedures that clearly define their role in preparing the decisions to be made by the relevant public Authorities. In particular, they should be associated to the formulation of long-term objectives and to the preparation of Management Plans or master plans, to the selection of development and equipment priorities and to the implementation of Programs of Measures and multiyear priority investment programs, as well as to the setting of financing principles and to the calculation of water taxes that concern them.

Their role should be facilitated by the setting-up of integrated water information systems as objective basis for dialogue, negotiation and decision-making.

The transfers of research findings to water managers and decision makers, as regards socioeconomics in particular and prospective analyses, must be improved and be the basis for decision-making.

Finally, significant means should be devoted to raise awareness among the public, and especially women and young people, and enable their participation, and to the training of their representatives regarding decision-making.

Funding by the users is the logical consequence of their participation.

The investments necessary for the sustainable management, conservation and control of water resources and ecosystems and for the exploitation, maintenance and rehabilitation of public utilities require huge financial resources.

Therefore, it is necessary to set up everywhere complementary financing systems that are based on the users' participation and common cause.

It is thus necessary to consider specific financial resources complementary to each other by combining national or local administrative taxes, the pricing of community services and taxes specific to objectives retained through dialogue.

This arrangement should be an incentive to limiting wastage, to controlling pollution and to reducing discharges, to change the users' behavior.

INBO recommends the progressive and wide use of the cost recovery principle, through the establishment of basin water taxes, which have shown their efficiency everywhere they have been applied.

Such arrangements enable improving resources and environments, favoring access of everyone to water supply and sanitation, while ensuring common cause between the categories of water users, between upstream and downstream, and between generations and have an interactive effect on consumption reduction and pollution control.

These water taxes enable the use of the « polluter-pays » and « user-pays » principles.

Improving knowledge of water resources, aquatic environments and of their uses is essential to allow decision-making.

It is recommended to the Public Authorities concerned and to the bi- and multilateral cooperation organizations which support projects related to the management and use of water resources to consider the setting-up of comprehensive information systems, as a preliminary obligation, and to promote the creation of observatories of water resources and of their uses at the level of each basin, either national or transboundary, and the organization of national information systems, consistent with these basin observatories.

Systems for warning against floods, droughts and pollution should be developed and coordinated for better facing the natural disasters caused by water and for protecting human lives and properties.

It is essential to specify the institutions responsible for the organization and the permanent operation of such systems and to guarantee not only sufficient means for the corresponding investments, but also, and in an imperative way, financial mechanisms allowing their continuous operation on the long term.

It is necessary to promote the emergence in this field of means and competences for specific engineering and to support any work aiming at defining common standards and nomenclatures for data administration in order to allow exchanges, comparisons and syntheses of information between partners at all the relevant levels of observation.

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The islands are systems which offer a wide range of biodiversity. The island ecosystems and socioeconomic entities are usually fragile; management of freshwater and coastal areas is a complex issue which requires special attention, a specific legal framework and adapted means.

INBO recommends that the concerned multilateral institutions and national Authorities take into account the specificity of water and environmental management in insular environments.

Cooperation between the islands in relation to this matter should be strengthened.

It is necessary to support the creation and strengthening of Basin Organizations over the world!

Therefore, the delegates of the General Assembly of the International Network of Basin Organizations requested that Official bi or multilateral Development Aid and the water-related programs of International Cooperation Organizations should be refocused to support projects aiming at implementing real concerted actions which meet the above principles, and experimentations, evaluations and exchanges of know-how in these areas.

They also underlined the advantages of twinning agreements between basin organizations as a means for disseminating gained field experience and transferring practical knowledge of management.

Conclusion;

Integrated and sound water resources management is more than ever a priority if we do not want this scarce resource to become one of the limiting factors for sustainable development in many countries of the world.

Organizing this management on the basin scale seems efficient.

However, the time lost becomes worrying and unprecedented mobilization becomes essential so that humanity wins the water battle and prepares the future.

Approved on 8 June 2007 in Debrecen in Hungary.