

Closing Statement for the FAO/Netherlands International Conference on Water for Food and Ecosystems, 4 February 2005

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE...

Louise O. Fresco
Assistant Director-General
FAO Agriculture Department

*Your Royal Highness,
Your Excellency Minister Veerman,
Your Excellencies the Ministers,
Conference Participants and Colleagues,*

You may know the English expression “It is all water under the bridge”, meaning that there is no point in talking about something or that something has been talked about enough. And how much have we not talked about water in the last decade alone! Words, unlike water, seem an unlimited resource...

Indeed through talking we have gained quite a few things since the Rio Summit in 1992: at that time agriculture and environment were still opposing forces. Today, nobody will negate the importance of agriculture and environment working together, or that water is an integral part of sustainable development. In the eye of the public as well as politicians water is probably one of the top three challenges of this current decade.

And this is not all. As you may know, FAO’s member countries have successfully concluded the negotiations on the right to food last year, and I would not be surprised if in the implementation of the right to food, the right to water for productive, environmental as well as consumptive purposes would loom large. At the level of basic human needs, surely access to water should be guaranteed, but at the same time we cannot continue using and wasting water as if it is a resource without a price.

In many quarters progress is being made and this Conference is a testimony to how productive and inspiring it can be to exchange experiences with people from many different backgrounds. The outcome of the last few days demonstrates that many elements are now available for an integrated approach to water for food and ecosystems. Obviously, this Conference is more than a drop in the river of thoughts flowing under the bridge.

However, all is not well and much remains to be done beyond talking. Before I come to some concrete actions that we should aim for, let me raise a more fundamental issue. As you are well aware, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the common framework in which international and many national development efforts will be cast. It is very encouraging to have such broadly shared, all encompassing goals – yet, a closer look should also leave us puzzled. Many facets of water, food and ecosystems – the focus of our conference – are hidden or even conspicuously absent from the MDGs.

When we trace the evolution of the MDGs, we note a drift towards more social goals such as education and health, away from emphasis on the environment and direct productivity. MDG-1, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, does not mention food production or agriculture

explicitly. Water figures in the MDGs, but the main concern is drinking water and sanitation, as was noted at the opening of the Conference. MDG-7, to ensure environmental sustainability, does not do justice to the complex ecological interrelationships between water, food and ecosystems that we have discussed here.

While fully respecting the way the MDGs were negotiated, we must be concerned by such unnecessary narrowing of the MDGs. The tragic paradox of water is that it is a truly valuable resource of which the true value is often invisible. It is a priceless resource without a price... We do need to solve this paradox of the invisibility of this priceless resource in the MDGs and I hope this will come up in your preparations for the General Assembly session in New York later this year. We need to move towards a true valuation of water, through a mechanism that goes beyond its economic value to include social, equity and environmental values.

Now let me turn to this Conference. This Conference does not stop after Minister Veerman has pronounced the last word this morning or after the report has been printed. Its success depends to a very large extent on what we do now, each of us, to 'make it happen'. And for this, the personal commitment of each of us is essential. So allow me to present each of you with some challenges:

1. Your Excellencies the Ministers,

Ensuring water for food and ecosystems is first and foremost a public responsibility. The political will to make this happen is a necessary condition. It is here that we must ask ourselves why we have not made more progress in this area up till now. What has hampered countries and institutions in applying the knowledge that, to a large extent, was already available? The answer to this question may differ from country to country, but surely in many countries several of the following reasons apply to explain the lack of political will:

- the lack of a both public and political awareness on the value of water, and a lack of public pressure on the government to come up with adequate measures;
- the fragmentation of the responsibility for water issues across institutions and the resulting lack of cooperation between them;
- the perception that moving towards water for food and ecosystems is costly and that funds are not available.

While all of this may be true, the challenge, Honourable Ministers, is now with you: to get your Cabinet colleagues together, including and especially the Ministers of Economics, Finance and Trade, to raise this matter to the highest political attention and to promote the creation of legal and institutional frameworks to implement the concrete measures presented at this Conference. Often this implies harmonization of national policies, adequate decentralization measures and appropriate legislation at various levels. And more than that, the real number one challenge for you and the senior civil servants represented here is the immediate formulation of national water for food and ecosystem action plans with subsidiary plans for each theme. By their very nature these plans will be long term, but there are many actions that must be taken immediately, as seen from the concrete lists produced under themes one, two and three of this Conference.

2. Dear representatives from civil society, NGOs and the private sector,

Your role too is essential in creating political will. You will need to assist in raising awareness, as well as in translating the results of the Conference to the specific situation of

the countries and communities concerned. You have to make your voices heard in the formulation of the national plans I mentioned above.

Many delegations have drawn attention to the need for location specific solutions and the fact that blue prints are unworkable. Effective organization of the representatives from local communities should ensure the diversity of options based on the inclusion of local knowledge. Your role as NGOs is especially important when it comes to the issue of water valuation. One important outcome of this conference is that true water valuation requires a stakeholder dialogue and participation to come to acceptable values for water to different users.

3. Dear representatives from the donors,

Your sectoral and decentralized structures often do not make it easy to fund cross-sectoral and transboundary projects, even less so when they extend over many years to meet long-term needs. Many delegations from developing countries have stressed the importance of funding issues to make things work. We look toward you, not only to focus your development assistance more explicitly on water for food and ecosystems, but also to assist governments, within the process of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, to express the water and agriculture issues more clearly. Much of this will be done through your bilateral embassies or offices in developing countries, and it would be an essential first step to inform them of the outcome of this Conference and to encourage them to assist governments with the development of national water for food and ecosystem plans.

4. Dear colleagues in the Netherlands,

I would like to express FAO's gratitude to you for the very close collaboration we have had all through the process of preparing for the Conferences in Addis Ababa and The Hague. The Netherlands has been a consistent and generous supporter of innovation in FAO. But things do not end here: we will be looking to you to provide the financial and institutional support to implement the outcome of this conference, including the proposal of a new Clearing House. We trust upon your support to see how we can reflect the priority of water for food and ecosystems in the FAO-Netherlands Partnership Programme. In particular, we encourage you to strengthen the agenda of water for food and ecosystems bilaterally, with countries in the EU and the OECD. Also in the context of the UN, the issue needs to be given greater visibility: in the CSD, the environmental conventions, in the UN's specialized agencies and last but not least in the UN Millennium Development Session.

5. Last but not least let me say a few words on FAO,

We commit ourselves to assist actively in the implementation of the outcome of this Conference, in an approach that combines FAO's normative work on policy and methodology development with national implementation to address issues of valuation of water resources and the need for national capacity building. We will strengthen FAO's transboundary and regional work on river basins and integrated watershed management, and extend our field work, especially by using the successful Farmer Field Schools to raise awareness of water scarcity and to work towards a participatory method for water valuation. But let me note here that FAO can only act at country level on the basis of concrete requests from governments. We will enhance our already extensive database system to include best practices which may evolve into a Clearing House and we will assist in mobilizing resources for water for food and ecosystems, for instance by highlighting it in the EU Water Initiative.

As you have seen, there are specific challenges for each of us. But obviously, all of us need to give ourselves a timetable in order to 'make it happen'. We must review what has been achieved in the near future, within perhaps two or three years, at country and international level. This means that we must agree to meet again to assess the lessons learned and to cater for new needs arising from this Conference. Hopefully, when we meet again, we may look back at this Conference and say: "It's all water under the bridge", because we have truly moved ahead towards integrating water for food and ecosystems.

Thank you.