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KEY ISSUES CONCERNING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
MAR DEL PLATA ACTION PLAN IN AFRICA

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In March 1977, the United Nations Water Conference was held in Mar del Plata, Argentina. A series of recommendations covering the entire spectrum of the management and development of water resources was made, and this became known as the Mar del Plata Action Plan (MPAP). 1/

2. The Plan was approved by the General Assembly in resolution 32/158 of 3 March 1978 and, two years later, the recommendation in paragraph 15 of the Mar del Plata Action Plan, that the decade 1981-1990 be designated as the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD), was endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 34/191 of 13 February 1980.

3. Subsequently, periodic reports have been made to the Committee on Natural Resources and to the Economic and Social Council on progress in the implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan and on the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. 2/, 3/ The reports made in 1985 were based on a questionnaire transmitted to governments by the Secretary-General.

4. These reports conclude that, although significant progress had been made in many fields, much remained to be done and, in particular, progress had been slow in the African region where many of the problems and constraints were particularly acute.

5. The importance of the Plan and the Decade to developing countries in Africa lies not so much in the attainment of the goals and targets (given that the present economic climate does not allow the release of funds on the scale necessary to achieve them by 1990) but in the increased awareness among decision-makers of the importance of water resources development for socio-economic development. Achievements can also be measured in the improved co-ordination among the 90 or more external support agencies involved in the Decade; in the increased attention to low-cost technology and problems of maintenance and cost recovery; and in the restructuring and refocusing of national efforts to develop integrated programmes involving community participation and women and women's groups.

II. PRESENT SITUATION

A. Mar del Plata Action Plan

6. In 1985, an analysis was made of the 20 replies to the Secretary-General's questionnaire which were received from ECA member States. A report was made to the ECA Conference of Ministers and a series of recommendations were made for action by the external support agencies and by the national governments themselves to speed up the implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations Water Conference. 4/

7. Chief among the constraints identified were the low level of funding for the water sector which reflected a generally low percentage of development budgets devoted to water activities, a lack of so-called "bankable" projects and a low absorptive capacity of many developing countries for increased lending due to institutional and manpower weaknesses.

8. Since that time, the position has not changed significantly although there are signs of increased priority being given to water and water-related activities in the wake of the disastrous drought of 1984/1985 and following the preparation of Africa's Priority Programme for Economic Recovery (APPER) as embodied in the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development (UN-PAAERD). 5/

9. The latter gives priority to agricultural development, drought and desertification and other sectors which support agricultural recovery. For most African countries, these priority areas implicitly include many water-related activities, particularly in the countries subject to unreliable seasonal rainfall or frequent drought.

10. The latest reports to the tenth session of the Committee on Natural Resources note that although some progress on a global basis had been made in water supply and sanitation, many developing countries could face a severe and growing problem in both the poor urban fringe and rural areas. 2/, 6/ Yet changes in perceptions concerning the role of local communities (and especially women) towards planning, financing and managing facilities and with regard to low-cost technologies were hopeful signs for future progress. The under-utilization of water for agriculture and the incomplete assessment of water resources were still matters of serious concern, since both were crucial to development. The lack of integration of institutions dealing with water and inadequate human resources development also formed serious constraints.

11. With regard to the financing of water resources development, funding remained at a fraction of the estimated amounts needed to achieve the objectives stated at the time of the Water Conference. While continued efforts by the international community were necessary, governments urgently needed to increase their capacity to generate their own financial resources and to use more efficiently those available to them. Cost recovery and operational and maintenance were among the most critical issues in water resources development and utilization.

12. In January 1987, an Interregional Symposium on Improved Efficiency in the Management of Water Resources was convened by the Department of Technical Co-operation for Development as a follow-up to the United Nations Water Conference. 7/ It dealt with five areas of water resources management: financial resources, human resources, technology, water quality and natural hazards (floods and drought).

13. With respect to financial resources, it was reiterated that existing levels of funding were only a small fraction of the estimated requirements. Participants considered that well-prepared, soundly designed water resources projects were more likely to receive financial and technical support. As for the management of human resources, it would be better to establish or strengthen training structures at the national level. Training women in technical and managerial skills and training high-level engineers at regional centres was also considered desirable.

14. The importance of using technology appropriate to a given situation was stressed together with the need to avoid "tied aid". Countries were encouraged to move towards standardization particularly for the low-cost options.

15. Regarding water quality, it was suggested that laws should be amended and made enforceable to control pollution. At the international level, management of water quality was necessary to avoid transboundary pollution. Increased resources were required to expand water quality monitoring, and funding agencies should require environment impact statements for proposed projects.

16. On the question of natural hazards, particularly droughts, it was suggested that contingency plans for emergency supplies be instigated together with comprehensive soil and water conservation programmes. Measures for flood mitigation should be executed within a long-term, integrated land and water development plan. Close co-operation between States should be actively promoted in relation to the use, management and development of shared water resources.

17. The key issues faced by African countries undoubtedly concern planning and management since there is a lack of recognition by the decision-makers of the importance of water development programmes, a lack of feasible strategies which take into account the existing financial resources, and a failure to communicate the consequences in the 1990s of the current trends. Previous reports to the ECA Conference of Ministers have dealt with the constraints affecting sub-Saharan African countries. 4/, 8/, 9/, 10/ There are severe problems in many areas and these are aggravated by drought, desertification, disease, economic stagnation, food deficiency and the debt crisis. Lack of finance is the most serious constraint and there is a critical need for countries to develop phased programmes to address specific priorities and to remove those constraints which are impeding the flow of external and internal resources.

18. As an indication of trends in international financing of water supply and sewerage projects, table 1 shows World Bank lending to the sector during 1985 to 1987. 11/ Several important features are illustrated by the figures. In the first place, sub-Saharan Africa fares worse than any other region, having had less than 10 per cent of total loans during the period despite the obvious need. Secondly, although there is an encouraging upward trend in total lending, most of the loans are for urban water supply and sewerage with only a very small percentage going for rural water supply and sanitation. This reflects the lack of bankable projects (in terms of cost/benefit analysis) found in the rural areas, and the general low level of funding is due to lack of absorptive capacity.

19. World Bank funding is only a part of the source of external assistance to the sector but it represented over 35 per cent of the total sector funding during 1970-1979 and is generally regarded as a good indicator of funding levels even though it is now overtaken in amount by total bilateral assistance.

Table 1. World Bank lending - water supply and sewerage 1985-1987 (in million \$US)

Region	1985 %	1986 %	1987 %	1985-1987 %
Eastern and Southern Africa	49.0 (6.3%)	9.5 (1.6%)	54.8 (5.6%)	113.3 (4.8%)
Western Africa	101.0 (12.9%)	10.0 (1.7%)	7.0 (0.7%)	118.0 (5.0%)
East Asia and the Pacific	175.0 (22.4%)	212.3 (35.1%)		387.3 (16.4%)
South Asia		78.0 (12.9%)	284.0 (29.3%)	362.0 (15.4%)
Europe, Middle East and North Africa	292.0 (37.4%)	120.0 (19.8%)	559.0 (57.7%)	971.6 (41.3%)
Latin America and the Caribbean	163.8 (21.0%)	175.0 (28.9%)	64.0 (6.6%)	402.8 (17.1%)
Total	780.8	604.8	969.4	2,355

20. The World Health Organization prepares global analyses of progress in the attainment of the goals of the Decade on the basis of country reports. Such analyses are hampered by the lack of data from many countries and the difficulty in interpreting some of the statistics provided.

21. In September 1987, WHO published a review of mid-Decade progress (as of December 1985) which indicates the status of water supply and sanitation services nationally, regionally and globally as well as the developments that have taken place during the first five years of the Decade. 12/

22. The service levels at the end of 1985 show that, globally, the number of rural dwellers with access to safe and adequate water supplies had increased from 33 to 42 per cent, representing an additional 183 million people served. In the urban areas, the proportion of people served remained substantially the same (about 75 per cent) in spite of the rapidly increasing urban populations (168 million) but the number with access to house connections rose significantly during the period (two-thirds of town dwellers in 1980, three-quarters in 1985).

23. On the sanitation side, there was a 9 per cent increase in sanitation facilities in urban areas bringing the global figure to 59 per cent. The figure in rural areas is disappointingly low (3 per cent), meaning that only 16 per cent have sanitation facilities in spite of the major importance this programme has on the health of the rural populations.

24. In Africa, from the 36 countries which provided data, the 1985 levels of service can be estimated as shown in table 2. It can be seen that, whereas the situation in urban areas is similar to the global picture with 75 per cent of the urban dwellers having access to safe drinking water and 73 per cent with some sanitation facilities; in the rural areas the position is exactly the reverse with three-quarters of the rural population still having no access to either safe and adequate drinking water or sanitation.

Table 2. 1985 levels of service in Africa (population in thousands)
(36 countries)

			Africa %	Global %
Population	Total	376 569		
	Urban	98 032	26	34
	Rural	278 537	74	66
Water supply				
<u>Urban</u>	Total	74 336	78	75
	House connections	17 351	33	65
	Public standposts	17 686	33	15
<u>Rural</u>	Total	68 096	25	42
Sanitation				
<u>Urban</u>	Total	37 305	73	59
	Sewers	4 614	12	34
	Other	21 461	59	46
<u>Rural</u>	Total	33 855	25	16

25. The urban picture is also too optimistic, in spite of the impressive achievements, if the exceptionally high rates of growth of urban populations are taken into account. Table 3 gives a breakdown of average urban growth rates in Africa from 1980-1985 by subregion and a frequency distribution of individual country figures. Of the 50 countries, 40 have urban growth rates in excess of 4 per cent per annum which means that they will increase their urban populations by more than 25 per cent by the end of the Decade and double them by the year 2000. 13/

26. The implication on levels of service can be seen in table 4 which gives projected urban population growth rates for the 26 countries which provided data in both 1983 and 1985. Also shown are the projected service levels assuming that all those countries can achieve their Decade targets and continue the same rate of provision of urban water supplies until the year 2000. It can be seen that, even if the Decade targets are achieved, the percentage of service coverage will decrease in 1995 and 2000 as the compound rates of population growth begin to diverge from the linearly projected water supply service target rates over the same period.

Table 3. Urban population growth rates

Africa		1980-1985					1985-1990	
Total population growth rates		2.8					3.6	
Urban population growth rates								
North Africa		3.7						
West Africa		5.5						
Central Africa		5.1						
East and Southern Africa		7.5						
Total		5.2						
Urban population growth rates		0-1.9	2.0-3.9	4.0-5.9	6.0-7.9	8.0-9.9	>10	Total
Number of countries		3	7	18	13	2	3	50
Projected % increase in urban population								
1990		5.1	15.9	27.6	40.3	53.9	61.1	
2000		16.1	55.8	107.9	175.9	264.2	317.7	

27. In fact, to achieve the Decade targets implies an increase in coverage from 69 to 84 per cent between 1985 and 1990 in the 26 countries used in the analysis. Actual figures from 19 countries for which data are available for 1980 and 1985 showed an increase from 65 to 76 per cent - a very much lower rate of progress.

28. The cost implication for the 26 countries are that between \$US 1 billion to \$US 2 billion is required for urban water supplies alone (depending on whether stand posts or house connections are supplied). It is extremely doubtful whether the targets can be reached both from the indications of current financing (see table 1) and from a consideration of the fact that population growth and urban migration affect the poorer urban areas most and these will be the most difficult to serve in the years to come.

29. WHO have estimated the total sector investment required including rural water supply, urban sanitation and rural sanitation to be \$US 12,908 million over the period 1985 to 1990. Of this, indications are that 75 per cent will need to come from external sources if the trends of the first five years are continued.

30. With internal financial resources remaining scarce, and the prospects of recovering sector investment remote except for some of the urban water supply schemes, funding limitations will continue to be the single most serious constraint to Decade activities.

Table 4. Urban water supply projections (26 countries)**

Country	1985	1990	1995	2000
Urban population* (thousands)	57 441	73 458	93 740	118 622
Coverage	39 790	58 556**	77 322	96 088
%	69.3	84.0**	82.5	81

* Urban population as given in World Population Prospects, United Nations, 1986.

** Decade targets as given by the following 26 countries: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Swaziland, Togo, Uganda, Zaire, Zambia.

31. Since the United Nations Water Conference, water resources activities have been co-ordinated within the United Nations system by the ACC Inter-secretariat Group for Water. In April 1987, the Group addressed the problem of the continuing low priority given to water resources development in many developing countries and the consequent low rate of implementation of the recommendations of the Mar del Plata Action Plan.

32. In some cases, members of this inter-agency group reported significant declines in their subsectors. For example, it is well known that the collection, processing, analysis and publication of hydrological and meteorological data have declined in many African countries. Similarly, in spite of many institutional developments both at national and subregional levels, many countries have been unable to cut across the subsectoral boundaries and co-ordinate their different water activities into integrated programmes. At the international level, the river and lake basin organizations have only recently recovered from a long period of inaction (with some notable exceptions like the Senegal River Basin Development Organization). Irrigation development has largely been a failure in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of cheaper and more efficient production except for commercially operated schemes growing high value cash crops. 14/

33. Although the Mar del Plata Action Plan recognizes that the key to self-sufficiency in food production and to economic recovery lies in the proper planning of water resources development, in the efficient utilization, management and conservation of water resources, and in the integration of water development with agricultural and industrial production, it does not offer a strategy - a phased programme of national development.

34. Taking into account that water is not only the most basic resource for human survival but also a key factor in development, the effective formulation and promotion of such a strategy is seen as a major necessity. Consequently, the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1987/8 has called upon the Secretary-General, in consultation with regional commissions and organizations of the United Nations system, to report to the Committee on Natural Resources at its eleventh session on progress in formulating proposals for a comprehensive strategy to implement the Mar del Plata Action Plan during the decade 1991-2000 and to include an assessment of these proposals as they relate to the activities of the United Nations system. 15/

35. Similarly, the Steering Committee for Co-operative Action on the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, at its fifteenth meeting in November 1987, recognized that even if programmes are implemented successfully and targets are reached by the end of the Decade, there will still be an estimated 800 million people in developing countries of the world (excluding China) without access to an adequate and safe water supply and about 1,200 million people without access to an appropriate, hygienic and safe means of excreta disposal.

36. It is clear that few countries will attain the Decade goals by 1990 and the efforts to provide adequate and safe water supply and appropriate sanitation facilities must continue into the 1990s. The Steering Committee concluded that planning for the 1990s must start now taking into account the lessons learnt during the Decade and the political and social realities which divert attention from the plight of the rural and urban poor.

37. These two initiatives by global bodies are dependent on comprehensive analyses of the individual regional situations and the strategies for the 1990s will undoubtedly reflect regional perspectives and priorities. In this context, the regional commissions are called upon to play their role in research and analysis of regional policy issues concerned with water resources development. It is also recognized that water is pre-eminently a regional activity and, in spite of the intensive efforts to co-ordinate the widely dispersed water-related activities of the United Nations system at global level, the same degree of co-ordination has been difficult to achieve at the regional level, particularly in Africa, because of the lack of resources and slow implementation of General Assembly resolution 32/197 on the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations system. 16/

38. It will be recalled that the above resolution endorsed the recommendation of an ad hoc committee which stated, inter alia, that "in order to enable the regional commissions effectively to discharge the responsibilities (indicated in the preceding paragraphs), the necessary authority should be delegated to them and, to the same end, adequate budgetary and financial provision should be made for their activities".

39. Whereas the provision of resources is always adequate for the execution of programmes approved by the General Assembly, there is no provision for enlarging programmes to fit the needs of a particular priority region such as Africa where an expansion of activities would clearly be in line with promoting social and economic development.

40. For the above reasons, the ECA Conference of Ministers may wish to consider whether the critical situation in Africa warrants an expansion of water resources activities, particularly related to the current situation and the development of a water resources strategy for the 1990s. In this context, the following recommendations are outlined for consideration with a view to the ECA secretariat fulfilling its role in water resources development as envisaged by resolution 32/197.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

41. Recognizing the important role of water resources development in improving the social and economic situation in Africa, and taking into account the noteworthy achievements of the member States in implementing the recommendations of the United Nations Water Conference, including the objectives of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, note must nevertheless be taken of the unfavourable prospects of serving the urban and rural poor with safe and adequate drinking water and sanitation facilities by 1990 and of utilizing the water resources of the continent to accelerate economic development and food production in the face of growing populations, rural-urban migration and the state of the economies of most African countries.

42. Resolution 1987/8 of the Economic and Social Council calls for the preparation of strategies to implement the Mar del Plata Action Plan during the 1990s and the regional commissions should play their role fully in the formulation of such strategies, in their implementation, and in the monitoring and evaluation of water resources development activities during the period.

43. In order to fulfil this objective, water resources development must be given a high priority within the regular budget programme of the Economic Commission for Africa and, bearing in mind the critical economic situation within the United Nations, every effort should be made to strengthen the Water Resources Unit of the secretariat to allow it to exert team leadership within the region and to assist in co-ordinating the activities of the United Nations system and other national and international bodies in accelerating water resources development within the region.

44. Such strengthening could be achieved by the provision of additional resources, by redeployment of existing resources, by the provision of extrabudgetary resources or through bilateral assistance. The current co-operation between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and ECA in preparatory assistance for the Fourth Regional Programming Cycle in relation to project preparation for the river and lake basin organizations is a good example of the recognition by other United Nations bodies of the important role ECA can play. In order to reinforce this initiative, however, and to strengthen the secretariat, a strong recommendation would need to be made to the appropriate policy-making organs.

45. A renewed effort at the national, international, regional and global levels is required to implement the Mar del Plata Action Plan during the 1990s. The initiatives of the ACC Inter-secretariat Group for Water and the Steering Committee for Co-operative Action for the Decade are welcomed, but the regional commissions should be called upon to play a major role in keeping member States fully informed of the new initiatives, in publicizing and encouraging the implementation of national and inter-country programmes, and in reporting periodically to the ECA Conference of Ministers on progress and constraints during the 1990s.

46. The operational activities of the ECA secretariat should be intensified, particularly in relation to inter-country programmes and projects of the river and lake basin organizations. This can only be achieved by the strengthening of the secretariat in its water resources activities mentioned above and in the recognition by the ECA Conference of Ministers of the importance and relevance of such activities in the present social and economic climate.

Footnotes

1/ United Nations, "Committee on Natural Resources; Report on the tenth session" (6-15 April 1987).

2/ United Nations, "Progress achieved and prospects in the implementation by governments of the Mar del Plata Action Plan; Report of the Secretary-General", Economic and Social Council, Committee on natural resources (E/C.7/1985/5, E/C.7/1987/4).

3/ United Nations, "Progress in the attainment of the goals of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade: Report of the Secretary-General" (A/40/108).

4/ Economic Commission for Africa, "Progress report on the implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan in Africa (1978-1984)" (E/ECA/CM.12/9).

5/ United Nations, "Consideration of the critical economic situation in Africa to focus, in a comprehensive and integrated manner, on the rehabilitation and medium- and long-term development problems and challenges facing African countries with a view to promoting and adopting action-oriented and concerted measures", General Assembly, thirteenth special session (A/S-13/15).

6/ United Nations, "Financing of water resources development: Report of the Secretary-General", Economic and Social Council, Committee on Natural Resources (E/C.7/1987/5).

7/ United Nations, "Report of the Interregional Symposium on Improved Efficiency in the Management of Water Resources, Follow-up to the Mar del Plata Action Plan", 5-9 January 1987, Department of Technical Co-operation for Development.

8/ Economic Commission for Africa, "Crisis and water development, preservation and utilization" (E/ECA/CM.11/30).

9/ Economic Commission for Africa, "River basin development in Africa" (E.ECA/CM.13/14).

10/ United Nations, "Review of the situation with regard to the development of water resources in the drought-stricken countries of the African region", Economic and Social Council, Committee on Natural Resources (E/C.7/1987/6).

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16/ United Nations, Official Records of the General Assembly, thirty-second session, Supplement no. 34 (A/32/34 and Corr.1) and Supplement no. 34A (A/32/34/Add.1).