

5th Annual Conference of UN Water Africa

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 18 July 2007

Opening Statement by Abdoulie Janneh, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ECA

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to welcome you to Addis Ababa, the seat of both the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa for this Fifth Annual Session of UN Water Africa.

I am particularly glad to be here as this Inter-Agency Group on Water, which was started in 1992, is a pioneering example of how the UN can “deliver as one”. The pivotal efforts of this Group are quite remarkable and the setting up of the African Ministers’ Council on Water (AMCOW) is but one of your many notable achievements to date.

As you discuss ways and means of addressing Africa’s water challenges at this meeting, I would urge that you place the whole issue of water in the context of its importance for the security of human lives and livelihoods. To quote from the keynote speech of the 4th World Water Forum last year by Mr. Fauchon, Chairman of the World Water Council:

“Water is endangered and with it, so are we. The situation is unacceptable. Unacceptable is the lack of water or its poor quality, which last year, caused ten times more deaths than all the wars waged on the planet together.”

Security of water should therefore be seen to encompass its role as an instrument for social investment, a factor of production, and for mitigating economic and human losses. It is against this background that this group should be commended for its role in the development and advocacy of the African Water Vision 2025. This Vision and its Framework for Action underscore the need to accord priority to water in our socioeconomic planning and in the allocation of resources for development.

While it is important to address water related issues in a holistic manner, I should stress that a critical element that needs to be addressed when deliberating on Africa’s water challenges relates to its role in Regional Cooperation and Economic Integration. After all, rivers, lakes and aquifers know no boundaries; and, rains and droughts do not carry passports. Indeed, if any one resource demonstrates the need for regional integration in Africa, it is water.

Where a river cuts through several countries and regional groups, and there is no coherent plan for its management, this may pose threats and dangers. It is perhaps no accident therefore that the best managed water resources in Africa are within functioning regional groups. The Zambezi River Protocol of the Southern African Development Community is one such example. The launching of the Nile Basin Initiative another. With the agreement on a shared vision for the development of this important Basin, what was once an area of potential conflict is on it’s way to becoming a model of regional cooperation and integration.

This model of transformation from a situation of potential conflict to the implementation of concrete and joint integration projects must be replicated in the many river/lake/and aquifer basins, which form the lifeblood circulatory systems of our dear continent. The urgency of intensifying such cooperative efforts becomes even more pressing when we consider the anticipated impacts of climate change on the already high spatial and temporal variations in our climate.

Indeed, Africa’s collective capacity to cope, and more importantly, adapt to the challenges in these areas will depend almost entirely on how we cooperate as sub-regions, countries, communities and individuals to manage our water resources at all levels to attain water security in all its ramifications.

The way forward for the UN Water/Africa must reflect the fundamental policy changes taking place both within our region and the United Nations.

These include:

- The International Decade of Action “Water for Life“ 2005-2015.
- MDG 7
- The African Water Vision and Framework for Action
- NEPAD; and
- The Sirte Declaration of the Extraordinary Summit of the African Union on Water and Agriculture.

Within this policy environment it is imperative to undertake the following basic actions to enable Africa to meet its development challenges:

- We must develop and promote water resources through support for infrastructure projects such as storage dams, water harvesting, irrigation and hydropower structures
- We must effectively develop our water resources to meet the basic needs of drinking and sanitation, which impact directly on the health, well-being and productivity of our people;
- We must effectively harness the potential of water to generate energy through hydropower, which offers best chance for Africa to meet its current and future energy needs for all purposes. This is especially true if we are to significantly advance the continent's industrialization process; and,
- We must develop water for agricultural development and food security in most parts of the continent and increase the irrigated hectares especially in the Sahelian and Southern regions.

This all requires the expeditious and timely implementation of the African Water vision and its Framework for Action. At the same time, there is a need for a collective recognition of the cross cutting nature of water as a natural resource which should not only be exploited but also preserved for the use of future generations.

Within the United Nations family, there is a collective commitment to support Africa in attaining its objectives in this area. In this context, we should now work hard to ensure that every effort is made to deliver a coordinated response, utilizing existing resources and voluntary funds to make "Water for Life" a decade for ACTION.

In recognition of the role water can play in Africa's economic integration, your Secretariat is now situated within ECA's NEPAD, Regional Integration and Infrastructure Division. It is therefore quite fitting that you have assigned ECA the leadership role in Transboundary Water Resources Development and Management within your Task Manager system, currently under development.

I pledge ECA's continued support to enable your group to succeed in the pioneering role as a model of Inter-Agency Coherence and Synergy.

Thank you for your kind attention.
