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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CSD INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP MONDAY, 23 FEBRUARY 1998

Delegates to the Commission on Sustainable Development's *Ad Hoc* Intersessional Working Group (ISWG) on Strategic Approaches to Freshwater Management gathered in the Trusteeship Council room for the first day of their week-long meeting. They elected the Co-Chairs, adopted the agenda and began to exchange views on the subject of freshwater management and CSD responses.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

Delegates elected Rogatien Biaou (Benin) and JoAnne DiSano (Australia) as Co-Chairs for the Working Group. They also adopted the agenda and other organizational matters (E/CN.17/ISWG.I/1998/1) and invited the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) to attend as an intergovernmental organization (E/CN.17/ISWG.I/1998/L.1).

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTATION

The Secretariat introduced relevant documentation prepared by the Secretary-General (E/CN.17/1998/2 and 3) and the report of the Expert Group Meeting on Strategic Approaches to Freshwater Management (E/CN.17/1998/11 and 2/Add.1). He also called attention to the Report of the High-level Advisory Board on Sustainable Development regarding energy, transport and water (E/CN.17/1997/17/Add.1).

He highlighted the contents of the Secretary-General's report on strategic approaches to freshwater management (E/CN.17/1998/2), which identifies six major problem areas, discusses implications for policy and management, and presents proposals for strategic actions. It stresses the need for integrated management, sufficient information for decision making, and the need for decisions to be taken at a high-level and supported by all levels. Document E/CN.17/1998/3 reports on related activities of the UN system and, among others, notes the need for future system-wide efforts on information gathering, dissemination and analysis and to monitor problems world-wide.

OPENING REMARKS

Co-Chair Rogatien Biaou (Benin) said delegates are in an excellent position to recognize the importance of freshwater, particularly in developing countries and especially in Africa. He said the UN has a comparative advantage in ensuring better overall management of freshwater and outlined priorities to be addressed.

Co-Chair JoAnne DiSano (Australia) recounted recent intergovernmental processes that addressed the basic principles of freshwater management. She said the present task is to identify processes for taking forward these principles, identify problems in implementation and analyze difficulties.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

INDONESIA, on behalf of the G-77/CHINA, said the CSD should take stock of progress in implementing existing plans of action and identify constraints, such as finance and technology. He stated that water resources development and management should be planned in an integrated manner, taking into account short- and long-term needs, and should incorporate the need to increase international cooperation and to renew commitments made in Agenda 21. He expressed concern about elevating the economic function of water over other important functions, including food security and poverty alleviation. He stated that the concept of adopting pricing policies geared toward cost recovery may be premature and requires further study. He emphasized that governments should continue to play a major role in freshwater management in the future and called on the international community to intensify efforts in providing technical and financial cooperation to developing countries for freshwater management.

The UK, on behalf of the EU, said the ISWG should build consensus on a strategic approach to the sustainable use of freshwater. Such an approach should include: a common appreciation of the importance of water and desired goals, such as the provision of safe drinking water and sanitation, promotion of food security, elimination of poverty, and reduction of water-related disease; agreement on key elements of necessary local, national and international action programmes; recognition that the main efforts for developing sustainable uses of water must occur at the local and national levels; international collaboration and support for capacity building, exchange of information and know-how and mobilization of financial resources; and follow-up to CSD recommendations.

COLOMBIA called for a recognition and fundamental understanding of the social dimensions of freshwater issues, warned against the error of adopting an economic or merely environmental approach, and called for an integrated approach. Expressing concern about a Secretariat proposal to use market approaches to reflect water use, he noted that in certain circumstances the indiscriminate nature of market mechanisms could create tension and conflict by failing to reflect needs. He also called for: recognition of state sovereignty over management of freshwater resources; effective mechanisms for coop-

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eration with developing countries; a special fund to promote the efforts of developing countries; and for local group participation in defining and solving problems related to freshwater management.

SAMOA, for the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), noted that freshwater issues are critical for all small island states. He highlighted issues of poor design, lack of maintenance, technical incapacity and a lack of community ownership of facilities. He underlined the impact of climate change and noted that island communities had already experienced water shortage and saline intrusion. He noted fears about the consequences of future sea level rises and that this problem would not be adequately addressed by the CSD or the UNFCCC process.

JAPAN recalled his Prime Minister's statement to UNGASS regarding Japan's plans to promote the creation of water and sewage systems. He called for analysis of conditions in each country and region, sharing of hydrological information, and emphasis on such areas as cooperation among riparian countries, transfer of technology and know-how and close cooperation with international organizations that have experience in water aid. CANADA stressed partnerships, using best practices based on ecosystems, and integrating scientific and social knowledge into projects. He said key areas for an integrated approach include institutional and legal capacity building, improved international cooperation, and enhancing the role of women. He called on the CSD to address gaps and barriers and use innovative means. INDIA noted that considerable work has been done at all levels and suggested that delegates identify constraints to implementing existing plans. He highlighted the UNGASS decision that considered water a social and economic good. Regarding the EU's proposed objectives, he said it is difficult to lay down one single solution because solutions need to be found for each country.

MEXICO noted that the Secretary-General's report does not appear to differ from a report submitted four years ago and gives the impression that questions of freshwater management are being raised for the first time. He expressed concern about some simplistic assertions regarding the involvement of the private sector. He recommended: systematization of information provided by governments to the Secretariat to ensure direct and consistent freshwater management; follow-through on progress already made, including the need to take advantage of existing infrastructure such as the Committee on Natural Resources; strengthening of the concept of integrated management to include long-term planning; strengthened water centers and a network of users and operators; information centers to clearly determine, qualitatively and quantitatively, available water resources; access for marginalized social groups; increased institutional capacity for operators and users; diversification of financing and public investment; strengthening of the management role of women; and transfer of environmentally sound technologies (ESTs). FINLAND called on CSD-6 to contribute substantially to the implementation of existing recommendations. He said the Secretary-General's report does not adequately reflect the need for an integrated strategy and institutional development. He said water is both an economic and a social good.

AUSTRALIA noted that the document's use of "must" raises problems, noting that no country would willingly cede control over its water sources. He questioned the need for a new freshwater fund. He described ongoing initiatives and called for better efforts to draw on those experiences. He supported the use of economic instruments and encouraged an examination of public-private partnerships. SYRIA said assigning an economic value to water would increase the number of individuals lacking access to water. He said this approach would contravene principles of international law.

The US underscored that the CSD must not rewrite Agenda 21 but find ways to implement it. He supported the use of an integrated approach to freshwater management and called on all governments to redouble efforts to address water issues. He emphasized the need to: forge partnerships across sectors and between the public and private sectors to mobilize resources to meet water needs; better coordinate existing efforts and strengthen institutions addressing freshwater; redouble efforts in sanitation; foster greater public participation in decision making, emphasizing the key role of women; and recognize all the values of water -- economic, social and environmental. He called on the ISWG and the CSD to formulate key recommendations for freshwater management. DENMARK highlighted the need for balance in addressing water issues. He stressed that the need for quantity should not overshadow the need for quality of water; the need for all stakeholders to participate in and benefit from water management must be balanced with the need to implement a catchment area approach; and pricing policies and cost recovery must be balanced with issues of equity.

The FAO stressed the important role that irrigation plays and noted that it can be sustainable, given the right technology and sufficient financial resources. He proposed investing in water-saving technology and improved project management, among others. The RAMSAR CONVENTION said the only issue is to define the concepts of integrated water resource management. The dialogue has gone on long enough, and those with expertise should be connected to those in the donor community that can mobilize for action. EGYPT highlighted the need for increased technical efficiency by agriculture and industry, noting that these sectors could cut their use of water without sacrifice. He said water pricing and cost recovery were difficult concepts to accept because every country has its own technical and political considerations. The cost recovery approach could be introduced once countries reach a certain level of development.

IN THE CORRIDORS

Ideas on strategic approaches to freshwater seemed to dry up during the morning and afternoon sessions of the first day of the CSD Intersessional. Some delegates put the early adjournments down to the fact that virtually everything has been said about strategy and the time has come for action and implementation. Mindful of this leveraging opportunity, some developing countries have seized the moment to float proposals for new resources. A developed country participant signaled the likely response to that idea when he confided that the demand is likely to end up in a "very deep hole."

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP: The Group is expected to continue with general statements during the morning. It will consider issues related to technology transfer during the afternoon. Both meetings will be held in the Trusteeship Council room.

BRIEFING ON THE CBD: Calestous Juma, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity, will hold a briefing from 2:00 - 3:00 pm in Conference Room 5 to discuss the upcoming Fourth Conference of the Parties, biodiversity of inland waterways, intersessional activities and the results of recent meetings.