

4.12 Evolution and milestones of global freshwater policy

BENNO PILARDEAUX

SUMMARY: *The conservation and sustainable use of global freshwater resources is to a large extent a non regulated issue of global environmental governance. However, the raising political efforts in the last 25 years show that problem awareness has raised and there are first indications of an upraising global consensus. A possible frame in order to support a common understanding for a sustainable global freshwater policy could be the development of a water strategy, a water charter or a water declaration. This contribution highlights the milestones in international water policy and is discussing possible future steps.*

International consensus emerging

The conservation and sustainable use of freshwater resources is thus far a poorly regulated field of global environmental governance. The considerable number of efforts by policy makers within the last 35 years shows that problem awareness is rising. However, there is still no internationally agreed regulatory instrument for a sustainable global freshwater policy. The degradation of freshwater resources is in contrast to global climate change a problem that is generated at the level of catchment areas. It can, therefore, be dealt with most efficiently at the regional level. From this point of view national and sub-national solutions are most promising. Co-operation, however, among neighbouring states is necessary in cases where a water catchment belongs to two or more countries. In these cases regional agreements are required. The lack of access to safe drinking water and the overuse of water resources or water scarcity are problems many countries are facing, and thus can be considered as a global risk potential. This is the reason why there is also a need for regulatory instruments above the national state level.

The first 20 years: A new agenda item

In 1972 at the International Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm the degradation of freshwater resources was discussed for the first time as a global policy issue. It took another five years until the UN conference on water in Mar del Plata established an international forum exclusively for global freshwater policy. The conference pointed out that the risk to freshwater supplies is a global challenge which lacks a comprehensive understanding of the different dimensions and major driving forces. Therefore, the action plan adopted focused primarily on improving the knowledge base, particularly the assessment of the overuse and pollution of global freshwater resources. The improvement of freshwater use efficiency has been addressed as a major management challenge. The conference proved to be the precursor of the »International Decade for Water and Sanitation« from 1981–90, declared by the United Nations. The goal was to secure access to safe drinking water for all people by 1990. By the end of

bpilardeaux@wbgu.de

the decade it became obvious that more time was needed to achieve these goals.

Sustainable freshwater use: Dublin Statement and Agenda 21

1992 was an important year for global freshwater policy. At the »International Conference for Water and Development« in Dublin, a preparatory meeting to UNCED, participants adopted the »Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development«. The statement contains four guiding principles for sustainable freshwater use: 1) Freshwater is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment. 2) Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels. 3) Woman play a pivotal role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water. 4) Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognised as an economic good.

In the aftermath of the Dublin conference these guiding principles largely influenced the international debate. The statement had a strong impact on chapter 18 of Agenda 21, adopted 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit and was entitled »Protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources: application of integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources«. The overall objective of the measures proposed in this chapter is to satisfy the freshwater needs of all countries for their sustainable development (18.7). Water is perceived as an integral part of the ecosystem, a natural resource and a social and economic good: »To this end, water resources have to be protected, taking into account the functioning of aquatic ecosystems and the perennality of the resource, in order to satisfy and reconcile needs for water in human activities. In developing and using water resources, priority has to be given to the satisfaction of basic needs and the safeguarding of ecosystems. Beyond these requirements, however, water users should be charged appropriately« (18.8). Although water issues have been addressed in a separate chapter in Agenda 21, water played a minor role during the Earth Summit. Strengthening implementation:

The Global Water Partnership

The increasing awareness of the importance of freshwater in sustainable development resulted in 1996 in the foundation of the Global Water Partnership (www.gwp-forum.org) by UNDP, the World Bank and the Swedish development agency Sida. The mission of the Global Water Partnership is to support countries in the sustainable management of their water resources. The GWP's objectives are to clearly establish the principles of sustainable water resources management, identify gaps, to meet critical needs, support action that follows principles of sustainable water resources management, and help match needs to available resources. In collaboration with UNDP, the Stockholm International Water Institute started the Water Governance Facility in 2005 to support developing countries to improve water governance (<http://www.water-governance.org/>).

Water dialogue in the Commission on Sustainable Development

During the following years the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) dealt with freshwater issues several times (www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/). Freshwater thus far was considered by an institution whose strength is promoting the dialogue between the international community. So far the CSD considered freshwater at its second (1994), sixth (1998), eighth (2000), and twelfth/thirteenth (2004–5) session. CSD-2 set the tone. The meeting emphasised that, if existing trends continued, 35% of the world's population would be living in conditions of water scarcity or stress by the year 2025, up from 6% in 1990. Problems with water quality, the threat of water-related disasters, and water-related health, food security and environmental deterioration were identified as deepening this acute situation. The CSD-2 report also drew out the strong link between water resources and poverty (UNESCO/WWAP 2003). The CSD-6 was of particular importance in the development of international approaches to water policies. The need for fundamental changes in the dominant approaches to water management was recognised, with a move away from technical towards sectoral approaches and integrated approaches in which the social dimension of water management was central. The CSD-6 report emphasises that »it is important that consideration of equitable and responsible use of water becomes an integral part in the formulation of strategic approaches to integrated water management at all levels, in particular addressing the problems of people living in poverty«. The goal of most developing countries during CSD-12/13 to reach an agreement for a strong mandate for implementing the water related Johannesburg goals (see below) failed (MAYER 2005).

Integration in the Millennium Development Goals

In 2000, at the UN General Assembly meeting, the international community adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (www.un.org/millenniumgoals.org/). Thanks to the international debate in previous years the issue became imperative. The respective goal is to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015. In order to achieve this MDG, access to safe drinking water must be arranged for about 1.5 billion people world-wide, while also taking into account the population growth until 2025. Access to safe drinking water is linked to food security and poverty alleviation objectives also. Accordingly, water crises can have far-reaching impacts if people affected have low coping capacities. The key message of the UN General Assembly was that there will be no chance to reach water related MDGs without fighting poverty.

Towards the World Summit on Sustainable Development

As a preparatory contribution to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) the German government hosted the »International Conference on Freshwater – a Key to Sustainable Development« in 2001 (www.water-2001.de). The conference focused on the urgent need for action, with an aim toward lowering the gap between political declaration and implementation. The conference recommended priority actions under the headings governance, mobilisation of financial resources, capacity building and sharing knowledge. The recommendations were addressed to the international preparatory process of the WSSD for consideration. At the WSSD the goal to reduce by half the proportion of people who do not have access to basic sanitation by 2015 has been added to the catalogue of agreed development goals. Participants agreed further to develop by 2005 integrated water management plans. This goal, however, has not been achieved.

Institutionalising regular global consultations: The World Water Forum

A big step forward in terms of institutionalising regular global consultations was the foundation of the World Water Council (WWC) in 1996. The WWC is an international water policy think tank with an head office in Marseille. The WWC brings together 294 members from about 40 countries (www.worldwatercouncil.org/). Its mission is to promote awareness of critical water issues, to facilitate efficient conservation, protection, development, planning, management, and use of water on an environmentally sustainable basis. By providing a platform to encourage

debates and an exchange of experiences, the WWC aims to reach a common strategic vision about water resources and water services management amongst all stakeholders in the water community. Every three years the WWC organises a World Water Forum, largely involving international stakeholders, including a forum for ministers. The World Water Forum is the largest international event in the field of water and became the major platform for dialogue. It serves four main purposes: to raise the importance of water in the political agenda, to develop solutions, to formulate proposals, and to bring the importance of sustainable water use to the world's attention in order to generate political commitment. So far the World Water Forum has been held in Marrakech 1997, The Hague 2000, Kyoto 2003 and Mexico 2006.

A major achievement of the forum was the preparation of the World Water Vision launched in The Hague. The vision's subtitle »making water everybody's business« sums up the intention and need to build a consensus on the importance of water and ways forward. The vision defined a sustainable scenario in which the key needs of all people were met and ecological integrity was maintained. The recommendations were developed in a participatory process, involving stakeholders from civil society, decision makers, and institutions at all levels. The authors identified as the »most important recommendation« the pricing of water services (see also the critique of STADTLER & HOERING 2003). They underline as well that this approach should account for the need for equity and the basic needs of the poor and vulnerable. Sustainable water policies should, according to the vision, remove the financial burden from public budgets. The vision also calls for more financial means for improved data management. Action programmes should always include a follow-up and be supported by a fund. The estimated necessary annual investment needed by 2020 is 180 billion US-\$ (Table 4.12-1).

The Hague Ministerial declaration on »Water Security in the 21st Century« represented the political response to the vision. The declaration identified seven global challenges (UNESCO/WWAP 2003) (see Box).

These crucial points are now part of most declarations on water policy adopted since then. At the third World Water Forum 2003 the World Water Council launched the

World Water Actions report, an inventory of over 3,000 local water actions. This Forum was the largest water conference in history, gathering 24,000 participants. A Ministerial Conference was held in parallel. Participants made hundreds of commitments to action, and each session organiser was asked to state what concrete output would follow his or her respective session. The 4th World Water Forum 2006 in Mexico (about 20,000 participants) was a step further along the way to achieving the water-related Millennium Development Goals. It has been widely recognised that local action is a prerequisite to reaching the water-related MDGs. Therefore, under the overarching theme »Local Actions for a Global Challenge«, the forum focused on analysis of experiences and knowledge sharing.

Regular assessments: The UN World Water Development Reports

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the year 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater. The resolution encouraged Governments, the United Nations system and other actors to take advantage of the year to increase awareness of the importance of sustainable freshwater use, management and protection. As a contribution to the International Year of Freshwater, the UN published the first World Water Development Report (WWDR) entitled »Water for People – Water for Life«. The WWDR offered wide-ranging recommendations for meeting future water demand and marked the start of regular assessment reports on global freshwater degradation. The report aims to provide decision-makers with the tools for sustainable use of water by providing a regular, comprehensive review of the state of the world's freshwater resources. The triennial WWDR is a joint undertaking of 24 UN agencies, co-ordinated by the World Water Assessment Programme.

The second United Nations World Water Development Report »Water – a shared responsibility«, published in 2006, presents a comprehensive picture of global freshwater resources as it tracks progress towards the water-related targets of the UN Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO/WWAP 2006). The report examines key issues like population growth and increasing urbanisation, changing ecosystems, food production, health, industry

Table 4.12-1: Annual investment requirements for water resources (in billions of US-\$).

<i>Use</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2025 Vision</i>
Agriculture	30–35	30
Environment and industry	10–15	75
Water supply and sanitation	30	75
Total	70–80	180

Source: COSGROVE & RUSBERMAN (2000)

Box: Global challenges identified by the Hague Ministerial declaration (Source: UNESCO-WWAP 2003).

1. Meeting basic needs,
2. Securing food supply,
3. Protecting ecosystems,
4. Managing risks (security from floods, droughts etc),
5. Sharing water resources and peaceful co-operation,
6. Valuing the economic, social, environmental and cultural aspects of water,
7. Governing water wisely. Meanwhile four challenges have been added: Water and cities (rapid urbanization and distinctive challenges), Water and industry, Water and energy, Ensuring the knowledge base.

and energy, as well as risk management, valuing and paying for water, and increasing knowledge and capacity. Sixteen case studies look at typical water resource challenges and provide valuable insights into different facets of the water crisis and management responses. The report outlines a set of conclusions and recommendations to guide future action.

Perspectives of global freshwater policy

Today global water policy is on the agenda of major stakeholders and decision makers at the international level. The publication since 2003 of regular assessment reports on the degradation of freshwater resources provides a valuable basis to tackle the challenges ahead. These challenges are twofold:

First, the tremendous progress achieved in global water policy needs a common frame in the sense of a multilaterally agreed international instrument. It might be advisable, if the work done in the last decade is taken into account, to develop an international water charter, as proposed and drafted by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU 1998). Such a soft law solution would have the advantage of receiving the support of many countries. A water charter could also be negotiated much faster than a convention. UNESCO's World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP), in its capacity as focal point of the World Water Development Reports could serve as a catalyst. A first step towards developing a multilaterally

supported World Water Charter could be the further elaboration of a common strategic vision; this could include the World Water Vision published in 2000. Another element could be the »Bonn Charter for Safe Drinking Water«, published in 2004 by water regulatory authorities, the water industry and research institutions (<http://www.iwahq.org.uk>) (INTERNATIONAL WATER ASSOCIATION 2004). The charter is directed to all those responsible for the provision of good, safe drinking water and aims to provide a framework describing the operational and institutional arrangements that are basic requirements for managing water supplies from catchment to consumer.

Second, there is a need to close the gap between progress made in the international debate and the implementation of measurements for sustainable water use (NEUBERT 2002). This is especially true for the development of coherent strategies in development co-operation, e.g. by connecting country strategies with EU and World Bank development policy. There is as well a need for water sector reforms, cross sectoral water use concepts, and strategies for sustainable rural water use systems. Strategies to be developed should take into account that the poor in rural areas of developing countries are most affected by the lack of access to safe drinking water. The International Decade for Action »Water for Life«, started in 2005, could serve as a promoter for such implementation activities. The primary goal of the decade is to promote efforts to fulfill international commitments made on water and water-related issues by 2015, the target year of the Millennium Development Goals ♦