

Global Water Partnership  
Annual Lecture  
by  
Ambassador Robert F. Van Lierop  
Vice Chair Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI)  
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Today, I have the honor of addressing you in my personal capacity. I do not speak for the SBI or for the UNFCCC. I do not speak as an Ambassador, or even as an attorney. I speak personally today. Every word comes from the depth of my heart, with gratitude for what all of you do, and for why you are here today.

Dr. Schaefer-Preuss, I am pleased to join in congratulating you on your assumption of the Chair of this important body, and on presiding over the Network Meeting and Consulting Partners Meeting for 2013. As this is the International Year of Water Cooperation, you have assumed the Chair at a most opportune time for all of us to benefit from your skills, your long experience in development policy, and your very obvious leadership abilities.

I also applaud our tireless friend and colleague, Dr. Ania Grobicki, Executive Secretary of the Global Water Partnership, and her very effective team, as well as Dr. Mohamed Ait-Kadi, Chair of the GWP Technical Committee. All have our appreciation for the way they carry the torch on this important issue, for as we well know, water is life.

This morning, I listened with great interest to the enlightening words of Mr. Kenzo Hiroki. I am now grateful to be allowed to follow in the distinguished footsteps of Dr. Ismail Serageldin, founding Chair of the GWP; the Prince of Orange; and Mrs. Margaret Catley-Carlson, all of whom delivered lectures that stimulated and provoked innovative thinking on global water issues.

Dear friends and colleagues, in the human experience every generation faces its own moral dilemmas, policy quandaries, and defining moments of truth. Are we today at such point in history? I believe we are.

Henry David Thoreau, the renowned 19th Century humanist, philosopher, writer, poet, naturalist, and highly principled proponent of civil disobedience in the face of government that does not stand on the side of justice, was imprisoned shortly before the American Civil War for his steadfast refusal to pay taxes to a government that recognized slavery as legal. While in prison, Thoreau was visited by his very close friend and fellow writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who upon seeing his friend behind bars exclaimed to him, “Henry David, what are you doing in there?” To which Thoreau looked at his friend from behind the bars and calmly replied, “Ralph Waldo, what are **you** doing out there?” Thoreau’s question to Emerson could just as easily be asked today to those who question the science of climate change, erect obstacles to efforts to adapt to climate change, and do not yet understand the urgency of global water security.

In its long evolution, humankind has faced many moral imperatives and defining moments at various stages of its history. The moral dilemma of what to do about slavery and the slave trade was in its time one of the most troubling. Colonialism, which was basically another form of people, or what are now nations, being “owned” by others, was simply a cloak of slavery in another guise. Genocide, gender inequality, violence against women and children also present moral and social dilemmas for societies throughout the world. The indifference of some to the scarcity of safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene for hundreds of millions of people across the globe is also

a moral dilemma of significant magnitude that Thoreau would have recognized, confronted, and made one of today's defining moments.

I have no doubt that the abolitionists of the 19th Century would be here, seated with us, exchanging ideas and strategies to help bring about a world where access to water and water security are universally recognized as fundamental human rights for all, regardless of their incomes, regardless of their gender, regardless of their country of origin or current residence, and regardless of their perceived social status. They would certainly join us in acknowledging that water is life, and there is no necessity for nearly 800 million people to live without clean and safe water for their daily consumption.

Some may find it harsh and disturbing to equate the moral dilemmas of Thoreau's time with the moral dilemma of today posed by a lack of water security for so many hundreds of millions of people. Let those who find those words harsh and disturbing try to explain why to a woman or young girl in Darfur left vulnerable, physically abused, and violated when she went in search of water for her family. Let them try to explain to those who live without water for even rudimentary sanitation. Let them try to explain to parents who tearfully bury their children after they die from dysentery and other easily preventable diseases. Which is harsher or more disturbing, my words today, or the every day realities of water insecurity faced by almost one billion people ?

Barely ten days ago I had the honor of joining a small number of United Nations Ambassadors from developing countries in attending a Special Session on Water and Disaster Cooperation at the High-Level International Conference on Water Cooperation in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. In a

concept note for that session, it was most appropriately observed that, “Water is life but water can also be a threat to life. During the past decade, water related disasters have not only struck more frequently but have also been more severe, hampering sustainable development by causing political, social and economic shocks in many countries. Over 90% of disasters in the world are water-related in terms of number of affected people.”

Those disasters do not respect boundaries, income or gender. They do not care what religion their victims may observe, what the color of their skin, or even the color of their hair might be. Water disasters may take years to develop, or they may strike suddenly and ferociously, without warning, sweeping away all within their path. Not a single nation in the world can claim immunity from water disasters, not a single nation, town or village should be indifferent to the causes or consequences of water disasters. This is a global problem that requires a unified global response. Those who think their wealth will protect them are living a fantasy. Poor people and less developed nations are certainly more vulnerable, but their vulnerability awaits all people who live on this planet. The balance of life is very delicate and finally tuned. One catastrophic event could conceivably propel us all into the great unknown. It could be the melting of the Arctic Circle. It could be the melting of the glaciers, in the Andes, the Himalayas or the Alps. It could be the melting of permafrost. Who among us is prepared to roll the dice and gamble on the future of life on this planet?

The Ambassadors, and other officials who were with us in Dushanbe were in unanimous agreement that it is long overdue and we, the international community, raise our voices in unison and bring to life the promises that had been made, but not yet realized. Some of us are even wondering if a

comprehensive international agreement on water would be appropriate, and if appropriate, also practical.

International water cooperation is essential. Last year, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the political declaration adopted by the Heads of State and Government at Rio+20 recognized water as central to sustainable development. The leaders committed themselves and their countries to, “...the progressive realization of access to safe and affordable drinking water and basic sanitation for all, as necessary for poverty eradication, women’s empowerment and to protect human health, and to significantly improve the implementation of integrated water resource management at all levels as appropriate”.

The President-elect of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Ambassador John Ashe, who many of you know from his long and distinguished career in working on these issues, has selected as the theme of his Presidency, “The Post 2015 Development Agenda: Setting the Stage!” To further this theme, he has identified a number of thematic debates, which will occur in the course of the General Assembly. In less than one month, the special debate on, “Water, Sanitation and Sustainable Energy in the Post 2015 Development Agenda”, will be held. World Water Week is one of the events helping to propel the necessary momentum on this subject. The 2013 Budapest Water Summit is another.

The questions we will be grappling with at these various meetings are already known to you. They include:

How international cooperation can significantly reduce water pollution and improve water quality?

How can we significantly improve waste water treatment?

What measures are needed to respond to floods, draughts, and water scarcity?

How can we integrate and enhance a gender perspective in water issues?

How can we improve transboundary integrated water resource management?

What practical measures can be implemented to sustainable water practices in agriculture and food security?

The urgency and importance of international cooperation on water issues were illustrated by the words of Professor and Dean of Law Alexandra Dapolito Dunn who said earlier this year at the World Justice Forum that, “The flow of water does not observe modern political boundaries”. Professor Anders Jägerskog, Director of Knowledge Services, Stockholm International Water Institute, at the same meeting noted the prevalence of governance issues surrounding transboundary waters, with his observation on the almost 300 shared rivers, and also more than 300 shared aquifers, and many shared lakes around the world. He made a very pointed observation that sharing is not difficult as long as there is abundant water. It is the scarcity of water that causes and exacerbates conflict. From my own experience, Darfur is a dramatic example. The Middle East is the scene of many conflicts that are more rooted in contradictions over water more than over oil. The Nile River, a source of life for many, is also a potential source of growing social and political contradictions. We can expect to see an increase of such conflicts unless we substantially improve on, and increase the level of international cooperation on water. In order to do this Governments must avoid corruption and not rush to blindly embrace the privatization of water resources, and assure that the poor have access to water.

Governments might also wish to look to the numerous transboundary water agreements that do work, the ones that promote sustainable economic development and the sharing of the finite water resources so vital to the survival of their respective countries. We might all be wise to remember that no nation can go it alone in facing the challenges and vulnerabilities of today's world. Adaptation to the adverse consequences of human induced climate change compels us to seek ways we can cooperate and help each other.

In multilateral negotiations, such as those of the UNFCCC, we do not always accentuate the common challenges and vulnerabilities we face. Generally speaking, we do a decent job of recognizing those commonalities, but at certain critical moments narrower economic interests often intrude. These are not always national economic interests, for as we know, the economic interests with the greatest impact are no longer confined within any one nation, or group of nations. These economic interests know no boundaries and accept no limits on their ability to influence the dynamic of humankind's future. In some instances, this may be a good thing. In other instances, however, it is not.

An astute observer once remarked that, "man's mad vanity is often mocked by life". Thus, while some race recklessly to build, deploy, and even use newer and more powerful weapons of mass destruction, nature demonstrates, with increasing and repeated regularity that it can outdo mankind by increasing hurricanes, cyclones, earthquakes, floods, drought and other catastrophes that give us more than enough death and devastation if that is what we want. Similarly, we have the phenomenon of those who continue to build luxury homes on beaches or other water fronts, sometimes even on the edges of precarious cliffs with spectacular views, because they choose to



do so, not because their economic conditions force them to do so. Often Government and insurers are called upon to rescue the owners of those structures, which leaves fewer resources to rescue others who are in dire need of help.

Building temples of excess, and engaging in unsustainable development defies logic and what we know with certainty is bound to occur. Humankind sometimes seems to welcome challenging the strength of nature, sometimes even daring nature to unleash its fury.

From its inception, the Global Water Partnership has been well grounded in local and regional experiences addressing the various crises in water security and water disasters. Its vision and strong voice in advancing the cause of integrated water resource management represents what is needed for mankind to adapt to survive.

The world is changing rapidly, so rapidly that the pages of history can barely be written before they must be amended. Never before have affected populations had such an opportunity to work with others to help build water security. No one can dispute that water is a public good, with its own social and economic value. As a very strong advocate for integrated water resources management, the GWP is helping to implement the commitments set out in the Rio+20 Declaration, those many of us believe are a part of the broader implications of the climate change negotiations. It has taken too long for us to get to this stage, but the GWP Network of Partnerships has turned away from doom-laden scenarios of inevitability, to instead embrace policies and actions that underscore the connectivity of the multiple dimensions of water security, and offer hope and enthusiasm for countries where previously there was very little hope.

There is much more that can be said, more examples of what we have done in the past that is not wise, and more examples of what we are doing today that is wiser. Our time today is short, however, and it is better for us to dialogue than it would be for me to recite things that you know as well, if not better, than I.

Let me close by expressing the wish that as the United Nations climate change negotiations move forward, (and I hope that it is not an expression of wishful thinking of my part), more delegations will see the need for functional synergy on biodiversity, desertification, various agreements on water and energy, and the UNFCCC negotiations. Hopefully, water and energy will play more prominent roles in the negotiations, particularly when it comes to adaptation and implementation of what we have already agreed to. Mitigation may, at this stage, be a more difficult task. It is still vital, but we must accelerate our efforts on adaptation. Far too many people are already in imminent danger for us to falter on adaptation.

We can achieve a great deal if we work together in this respect. We can achieve nothing if any of us think they can be winners, and others can be losers. This is a moment of truth for us. We either face the future together or none of us have a future at all.