

International Conference on Freshwater, 4 December 2001 Multistakeholder Dialogue 2 Strategies for sustainable and equitable management of water resources

I am speaking here today as a delegate from Business.

Businesses have widely differing approaches to water - depending on water's relevance to their operations. In the company I represent, Unilever, we acknowledge openly the scale of our dependence on water, whether it's raw materials sourced from agriculture, making products in our factories or moreover, enabling our consumers to use our products to meet their everyday needs for hygiene and food. Our interests and those of our consumers are therefore intimately bound up with successful strategies for sustainable and equitable management of water, right around the world.

Business as a whole, alongside individuals and households, farmers and natural eco-systems, is one of the 4 primary groups using water. The future of business is to a large measure dependent on finding solutions to the shared challenge of delivering sustainable and equitable water management. Business therefore joins this dialogue as a stakeholder with a strong motivation to help find and deliver solutions that meet everyone's needs.

Regardless of how we may view the implications of recognising water as a public good, when it comes to considering how to supply and allocate water to competing uses, society must address it as an economic good with an economic value. This should not prevent people from meeting their basic needs at affordable prices, but effective pricing that recognises economic value encourages conservation and wise use.

Broadly speaking, business is willing and able to pay an appropriate price for water to ensure availability. Business also recognises its own responsibility to systematically reduce its use of water and minimise the impact its operations on water quality. Such initiatives serve to increase availability of water for other users and uses.

Business looks to governments to find a sustainable balance between ensuring affordable water services, particularly for the poor, and promoting mechanisms for effective management of water resources through public/private partnerships, tariff systems, guarantee facilities and economic and fiscal measures.

Effective governance is vital. Business supports a holistic, integrated and inclusive approach to water management. Companies know they can not solve these complex issues on their own. Progress will only be made in partnership with other stakeholders. Business' own contribution will generally be most effective where engagement is local and relevant to a company's own interests, where its input is commensurate to the scale of its local operations and where its involvement forms a logical extension of its core competencies and expertise.

It is timely to acknowledge concerns about trade related aspects of water. Continuing work is needed to map this dimension and build understanding of the impact trade may have on the achievement of sustainable and equitable management of water. However, it is also important to keep open minds, to allow opportunities to find creative solutions to meeting water.

Sharing know how through IWRM processes can be one of the most effective ways business can contribute to building capacity, from the local level upwards. Partnerships and engagement between business and other stakeholders play a vital part in promoting transparency and open access to information. My own company has made an integrated catchment management approach the core principle for our water partnerships with non-profit organisations and local authorities. Our SWIM guidelines now provide a framework for effective action wherever we engage with others on initiatives to conserve and protect water resources.

Business investment in technology development and product innovation provides increasing scope to reduce rates of water consumption, minimise impact on water quality and foster water re-use. Further, it extends the choices available to society and communities; decisions on appropriate

technology use will be taken through the mechanisms of a holistic, integrated approach.

It is therefore in the interests of all stakeholders that we work to mobilise the potential that business has to contribute to the sustainable and equitable management of water resources. Critical to this is the need for more emphasis on setting measurable interim targets and milestones for water management at local and regional catchment level.

Clear, practical objectives will attract business attention and foster commitment from companies to provide resources in the form of people, time, know how, technology transfer and money. Growing business engagement will, in turn, help accelerate progress from the bottom up, both through capacity building and through participation that facilitates project delivery with measurable results.

With so many people and communities lacking access to water and sanitation - and many more at risk from increasing water stress - our priority must be to harness these resources to build successes on the path to meeting the UN Millennium Assembly target to halve by 2015 the proportion of people without access to safe affordable fresh water.