



Mikhail Gorbachev's remarks at the World Water Forum  
Marseille, March 12, 2012

Mr. Prime Minister,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the government of France for the invitation to come here and for the great work that went into making this Forum possible. I support the view of President Sarkozy that water problems must be in the forefront of international politics.

The presence here of representatives of more than seventy countries and of prominent scientists and experts gives this Forum considerable global importance.

Preparations for it proceeded under an apt slogan: Time for Solutions. Indeed, the time has come to move from discussions and declarations to concrete action.

The deficit of fresh water is becoming increasingly severe and large-scale – whereas, unlike other resources, there is no substitute for water.

Looking for traces of organic life on other celestial bodies we start by seeking signs of the presence of water.

On our planet Earth we do have water, but accessible resources of fresh water are limited, and water use for human needs keeps rising. Continuation of water consumption at 20th century rates is no longer possible.

At the same time, millions of people die in poorer countries as a result of using untreated water.

According to a study conducted by the World Health Organization in five of the world's regions, 80 percent of infectious diseases and epidemics are caused by bad water.

Thinking about ways of countering the global water crisis, we must first of all recognize its true causes.

They include the growth of the world's population and of agricultural, industrial and energy production, which are the main consumers of water;

the environmental consequences of economic activities and the destruction of natural ecosystems;

wasteful use of water and other natural resources in an economy driven by hyperprofits and excessive consumption;

mass poverty and backwardness in countries where authorities are not able, and often have no desire, to organize effective water management;

and, finally, the arms race and the senseless waste of enormous amounts of wealth and resources in wars and conflicts.

It is therefore clear that the water problem should not be considered in isolation from other global challenges and from the overall international context.

Green Cross International, of which I am the founding president and which I have the honor of representing here, has been working for twenty years at the nexus of problems of security, poverty and the environment.

Some time ago, GCI launched the Water for Life initiative. We proposed developing an international convention on the right to water. In 2010 the United Nations decided to include the right to water among fundamental human rights. It was not easy for the international community to take such an important step – but it has been taken.

What's needed now is the practical implementation of this principle. Until now, only a few countries have included the right to water in their national legislation. Among those countries is France, which is also allocating significant resources to ensure access to water in developing countries.

Green Cross International is taking active part in the development of measures aimed at preserving and rationally managing water resources.

GCI is working to speed the entry into force of the United Nations Convention on non-navigational uses of international waterways; we also implement specific projects to assure the right to water.

Even simple solutions that do not require enormous investments save many human lives. Thanks to just one pilot GCI project in Ghana, 40 thousand people living in the basin of the Volta have now been given access to clean drinking water and sanitation.

Another important area in which we deploy our efforts is the prevention of conflicts related to access to water resources or resulting from their use as an instrument of pressure or diktat.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As someone who has more than fifty years of experience in politics, I am convinced that the water crisis is closely related to the flaws of contemporary economics and politics. Let me make two points in this regard.

We have met at a time when the world is still reeling from the consequences of a severe, global economic crisis.

The emerging signs of recovery in the world economy should not deceive us.

The crisis has shown that the currently dominant model of economic growth is unsustainable. This model engenders crises, social injustice and the danger of environmental catastrophe.

There is a clear need for an evolutionary but sufficiently rapid transition to a different model. It should be based on a combination of markets and private initiative with the principles of social and environmental responsibility of business and effective government regulation.

We therefore need to rethink the goals of economic development. Consumption must not remain the only or the principal driver of growth. The economy needs to be reoriented to goals that include public goods such as a sustainable environment, people's health in the broadest sense of the word, education, culture and social cohesion, including absence of glaring gaps between the rich and the poor.

Major water projects, both national and international, could become one of the engines in a qualitatively new stage of the development of global economy.

My second point: the world needs a new political architecture, a new architecture of security, global governance and sustainable development.

It should be based on the rejection of confrontational thinking or any attempts to dominate international relations and on demilitarization of international politics.

It is only on such a basis that we will be able to respond to the main challenges of this century – the challenge of security, the challenge of poverty and backwardness, and the challenge of the global environmental crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During the fifteen years of its existence, the World Water Forum has helped to put water problems on the international political agenda.

Unfortunately, however, it has still not gone beyond general discussion between representatives of governments and the business community, nor has it produced

breakthrough solutions to the water crisis. That is why, parallel to the forum, alternative discussion platforms are emerging as a result of civil society initiatives.

The voice of the public must be heard at this Forum. Therefore, let me convey to you the position formulated by our civil society partners:

“We believe that good governance of water and sanitation will only be brought about through human rights-based approaches and adequate investment in informed and effective civil society participation. We greatly welcomed the 2010 UN recognition of the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation and now urge all actors to support national governments to implement these rights for all people in accordance with human rights law and to recognize and effectively support local knowledge and community management as important to implement this right.”

Ladies and gentlemen, let us unite our efforts! Let us think and act on the basis of common principles: Peace for all. Water for all. Dignity and the life worthy of a human being, for all. We should not settle for less.

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