

2 April 2010 – Opening Key Note

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Your Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,
dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today on the occasion of the first MRC International Conference and Summit on Transboundary Water Resources Management in a Changing World in this beautiful and blessed country of Thailand. Before starting, I would like to thank the Mekong River Commission for inviting the World Water Council and providing the opportunity to share with you some reflections on the challenges around water and particularly those facing the 260 shared river basins around the world.

River basins not often reach headlines or are at the centre of the public debate. Mostly they silently flow along their natural boundaries without raising their voices. If they are in the news, it is often because some friction has emerged. Maybe because a drought is unfolding or high waters inundated low lying downstream areas. Yet, we know that good governance and management of river basins is essential for regional economic growth and development.

River basins are complex social and economic environments that are subject to increasing range of pressures: social, political, economic and

environmental. In response to these pressures, decisions that affect the river basin are often made within the realm of water and land management. But many longer-term water management decisions will be part of social and political environments that go well beyond hydrological boundaries and have regional and even global dimensions.

These are also decisions that go well beyond the confines of existing water institutions and actors and involve policy making and implementation across a large number of sectors – from agriculture and environment, trade and industry to education and social policy.

Given these pressures and responses, transboundary river basins around the world are increasingly the focus of enhanced efforts at achieving institutional cooperation between states. Indeed cooperation has been shown to be more the norm than instances of conflict, and so-called 'water wars' – a common media refrain – becomes more and more a piece of rhetoric.

Oregon State University data shows that for 1,831 conflicting and cooperative water relationships over the last fifty years, the balance is overwhelmingly towards cooperation – while there have been 507 conflict events (and only 7 disputes have involved violence), there have been 1,228 instances of cooperation and more than 200 agreements have been signed.

However, to be complacent would be dangerous. And the challenges remain for basin managers to turn arrangements of cooperation into development actions

and outcomes. Central to this is the long-term policy challenge of linking processes of regional economic cooperation to shared basin management. Today, cooperation arrangements are moving increasingly from a single focus on sharing waters to the sharing of multiple benefits from more optimal water management arrangements within basins.

This is a substantial change in management and requires that basin actors bring into the decision making process the wider 'problemshed' represented by the surrounding political economic realities in shared basins. No longer can water be managed in isolation from other regional social, political and economic realities. The involvement of high-level government officials and political leaders is fundamental for the success of this new governance of river basins.

Understanding the politics of river basins and the politics in river basins is therefore a critical precedent to effective and sustainable cooperation that can lead to solid development outcomes, and outcomes that are equitable both between and within states. Many challenges arise here – from a need to respect the sovereignty of countries while understanding the physics of water flow and the potential for cooperation; to the understanding of the different social and economic pressures (including poverty and demography) that affect political actors in countries. One also needs to be knowledgeable about how to manage critical sector issues such as the demand for energy and food by rapidly growing populations. And how do we deal with populations growing at starkly different rates both between different countries and

even within different regions of the same countries, particularly as a result of rapid urbanization? These sorts of questions are increasingly central to developing a shared vision on the river, the basin and its benefits.

In short, there is a critical need to transform the Governance of river basins such that decision making reflects stronger knowledge of the broader issues facing users, managers and political leaders.

Let us return to the Oregon State University data for a minute. The report shows 16 basins at risk of conflict affecting 51 nations on five continents; 8 in Africa and 6 in Asia. The likelihood of conflict in basins rises as the rate of change within the basin exceeds the institutional capacity to absorb that change. Changes may be due to the natural environment, population growth or asymmetric economic growth. They may be decisions taken in one country on major unilateral development projects combined with, perhaps, the absence of institutional and/or organizational capacity. Wider political hostilities can also play a role. What increasingly stands out is that the most resilient river basins are those that have capacities to co-operate and adapt based on international agreements, better political environments and higher levels of economic development.

This suggests that future governance of basins needs to include a 'future politics' of synergized decision making that takes a broad approach to regional integration and socio-economic growth. Water managers who are concerned to address the problem of water in time and place, need to be link up with those

who understand that a basin's future is not going to be in past methods of agricultural production but more probably based on wage labour and livelihoods diversification in urban areas.

This has major implications for the capture and storage of water for irrigation, versus energy production or maintaining environmental flows. Which jobs do we want to produce with our water? How to maintain productive agriculture and fisheries while providing energy for the cities and industries? Where are these jobs and economies located? Currently patterns of use are typically 70% of renewable water for agriculture, 20% industry and 10% for municipal use. But basins are struggling to fit changing needs stemming from changing demographics to future allocations and management. Concurrent with this challenge is the urgent need to protect environments and public health through managing more effectively wastewater.

So where do we go from here in managing the pressures and future challenges at the basin – and broader – scale? How can we bring more closely together the economic and financial planners and the water managers? Indeed, can river basin cooperation enhance and sustain regional economic groupings and provide new 'wins' for development? In sum, the water crisis, so-called, is mainly one of distribution of water, knowledge and resources and not one of absolute scarcity of the resource.

Good existing cases from different parts of the world – the Rhine river commission, the Nile Basin Initiative, the Senegal river - OMVS and the Plata basin come to

mind. But perhaps of increasing importance as a global showcase is the Mekong River Commission – a success story at the center of one of the most socially and economically dynamic regions in the world. The MRC is now commemorating 15 years of work and the World Water Council commends the initiative of these countries to improve water management in the basin. We applaud the very practical approaches being taken to ensure that basin management enhances economic and social benefits accruing to the basin's peoples and environments – but also those beyond the basins hydrological boundaries.

In noting this success story, we call on the MRC to reach out further with their wealth of experience and help to shape the emergence of a new paradigm based on economic, social and environmental benefit sharing in the context of stronger regional economic integration. Through the World Water Council and its partners we invite you to become part of wider efforts at strengthening river basin approaches through a series of regional dialogues taking place this year and next in the run-up to the World Water Forum in Marseille in 2012.

This International Conference and Summit is an excellent opportunity for others to learn from your experience and it is also a forum to discuss similar initiatives in different parts of the world. On behalf of the World Water Council and its President Loïc FAUCHON I wish you fruitful work and successful deliberations.

Thank you.