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The Future of Water: Opportunity and Risk

Dear colleagues, dear friends of water. Please allow me to call you dear friends of water as you do us the honour of participating in this conference on water.

Why are we talking about the future of water? Probably because we are worried about this future.

And why are we worried? Probably because we consider, we feel, even if some of you are not water experts, we feel confused that water is in DANGER!

And if water is in danger, then Man and Nature are also in danger.

Why is this? Because today's world is experiencing crisis after crisis. And these crises are creating very strong tensions all around our planet. They are so many political crises, military tensions, nuclear alerts and diplomatic tensions. But we are also experiencing food and health crises, as well as great demographic tension within the framework of climate transition. And these

crises are causing environmental degradation and economic difficulties.

So, here is the full picture. And of course, energy and water have become scarce resources, both in quantity and quality, in only a few decades, causing great concern and tensions.

These tensions may be internal to a country, as in California, or they may concern an entire transboundary river basin, such as the Tigris and Euphrates or the Mekong.

Why are there such difficulties in securing the future of water on our planet ?

Because today's demography is soaring. Billions of people, children, women and men depend on water resources for their lives. And any suffering inflicted on water as well as on nature is suffering for humanity.

The role of our World Water Council is to make water-thinking progress. First by detecting the current and future risks. And then by explaining the present opportunities and tomorrow challenges for the generations to come.

We are constantly working with our 400 member organizations on the pair “priority and solutions”. And I would like to thank them for their contributions.

To live in a fairer world which is sustainable in the long term, we need two elements :

First, give access to development opportunities and second, protect nature. To do that, we need to act with mutual respect and find a sustainable balance between the use of our coveted natural resources and a duty to protect them.

And water, along with air, is the first resource to be secured. Our lives depend on the availability of water, both in terms of quantity and quality. If we fail to manage its availability, we condemn entire populations to being excluded from sustainable development and equitable enjoyment of fundamental human rights.

Today, and tomorrow, we must ensure water security worldwide and at local scale. Water security, for us all, and by us all.

Very concretely, water security needs to combine technological solutions and political will. We can translate this as the strengthening of the three pillars on which the universal water house is built. These three pillars are: knowledge, finance and governance.

First, knowledge means sharing innovation. Water security must benefit from technical and digital developments. Today, for example, the desalination of sea water using reverse osmosis is implemented in more than 70 countries around the world at an acceptable cost. The reuse of wastewater is also a major step forward which will gradually become widespread. In Singapore, for example, for more than ten years, river water has been mixed with water from wastewater treatment plants. In Tunisia and Morocco, golf courses, gardens, parks and soon farming fields are using wastewater effluents.

In Europe, there are still regulatory obstacle. But in cases of water deficit, this solution will be considered good for agriculture, as it is in industry.

In the same way, digitalisation is gradually enabling farmers and citizens to monitor their consumption on a daily basis and to detect any leaks in their private networks.

The 2nd pillar is finance, which enables development. The situation can be summed up as "water is short of money, but money is short of water".

The main issue is about the generalization of sub-sovereignty, allowing a city in a developing country, for example, to borrow without a state guarantee, while at the same time proving its ability to repay. Another difficulty lies in the weak capacity of some of the poorest countries and communities to establish projects that meet the bureaucratic requirements of funders.

In northern countries, in Italy as in Ireland, the issue of balancing water and sanitation budgets is addressed through pricing. Free water has become very rare and has given way to social pricing. In France we say that "water pays for water", which means that the income from users and from subsidies, must pay

for all the expenses of the service, both for investment and maintenance. Water consumption can be paid directly through metering or through a water subscription fee, which I understand will be the case in Ireland.

This brings us to the third pillar, which is that of governance, which must guarantee equitable sharing and total transparency. Dear friends of water, the time of water centralism is over. Water governance must be effectively shared between the State, which guarantees the resource and controls its proper use. Then comes the role of the river basins, which organize the sharing of resources, and between uses, guaranteeing quality through public policies. Countries such as Mexico, Senegal, Brazil and many others have made huge progress in water security thanks to basin management. And finally, there is the level of local authorities and citizens who ensure treatment and distribution, as well as cost recovery.

You can see, step by step, this 3-level governance is proving its value, provided that the citizen is involved. Actors in the use of water, agriculture, industry and domestic consumers will fight against all forms of waste. Consumers, who are also citizens and voters, are aware of their responsibilities.

A new element has emerged in public debate over the last 20 years, namely the need for water for nature and not just for mankind.

Today, we understand that we also need water for nature. Why? Because nature is the best way to protect water. Nature preserves water, nature filters water, nature maintains the quality and quantity of water. So, we must understand the need to share between human beings, but also between human beings and nature. There is also a specific question upon which I insist, which is a sensitive question: water reserves, or water storage systems. Today, on every continent, and in nearly every country, there are places where humans and nature lack water at some point in time. Scarcity today, as we just said, is a problem in Africa, but also in the USA, in India, in Australia and even in France. We don't always have water from winter which can be

used during the summer season, or from one year to the next one.

We must re-think the concept of dams and reservoirs. Ecologists criticize dams, which are too powerful, too violent, move populations and 'assault' nature. They are right. But we need dams otherwise men are thirsty and nature as well. We think – and I have been advocating for this for several years - that there is a need to evolve from the concept of dams to the concept of aquatic biodiversity reserves, which are above all a means to protect biodiversity.

This concept is new, and it is still being criticised. But we have an example of this not far from Marseille: a water reservoir which is also an 'aquatic biodiversity reserve' that protects the fauna and flora but also provides fresh water to the inhabitants of Marseille.

It's a sort of continuation of the concept 'Water for Humans, Water for Nature'. Humans are mostly concentrated within cities, and nature in rural areas. We must stop opposing cities to the countryside, urban dwellers vs. rural dwellers. For years, when it comes to innovation, we have only talked about "smart cities", but never about "smart rural areas". But, Ladies and Gentlemen, who guarantees water protection? Who guarantees water production? Who protects forests and the countryside? Not city dwellers, but people from rural areas. Who produces food? The farmers, not people from cities.

Therefore, we must voluntarily but progressively shift towards adopting farming methods that are acceptable to humankind, but at the same time, we must make sure that humankind is not deprived of the water and food we need in order to survive.

More generally, we want everyone in the world to have access to basic services, which are water, electricity, food, health and education – at the very least. We cannot continue to separate these basic services from one another.

Until now, we have had Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), which is a vertical approach. Water for water, only water. For years, our Council has advocated for a horizontal approach, the Five Fingers alliance. Why? Because we must consider

solutions for water at the same time as we consider solutions for electricity. And what is the use of feeding people, if they die because of health issues. All of this is the same thing. Water for human development, water for humanity, so that not only we solve water problems, but we also address basic services.

This is why we must give more responsibilities and power to mayors, local communities, local groups. Because local authorities understand things better than the central government. We need this shared approach. In the poorest countries, you can't open a school if there is no electricity, no water, no medical center, or if you don't feed the children. We need this horizontal and fundamental approach. And in the coming years, we'll probably see it become mainstream in 'water-thinking'.

Just a few words concerning transboundary basins which are today the heart of a new geopolitical order. Forty to fifty percent of the world's population live across 250 transboundary river basins, flowing across several countries.

Successful examples of basin governance exist, such as the Senegal River, the Rhine River and the Parana River, established through treaties and operated dedicated organizations where dialogue and sharing are the rule.

There are other more complex examples where tensions continue due to strong political sensitivities and permanent media pressure.

This is the case of the Nile River, where the construction of the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia had triggered a major conflict with downstream States, such as Sudan and especially Egypt.

But there are no reasons today of speaking about water wars.

The dialogue, the full dialogue and nothing else dialogue is the only recommendation issued by our Council to deal with this type of situation.

And finally, I would like to end this overview of the future of water with an essential subject, a sensitive subject, an ethical subject but also an economic and social and therefore political subject. This subject is that of the right to water. The right to water so easily proclaimed but so difficult to enforce and concretely implement.

The right to water is first and foremost the possibility for those who are deprived of it to have access to water, in quality and quantity, at a price acceptable to all. It is a right insufficiently guaranteed by the UN system, which has never been able to impose this obligation on States. Only about fifty States have really included the right to water in their constitutions or founding texts. An international campaign must once again be led by our World Water Council to convince Heads of State and parliamentarians.

The other dimension of the right to water is local. This is the ability to prohibit water cuts for the poorest. And to set up minimum water and electricity allowances for very poor families to ensure respect and dignity for all. There is no technical difficulty in it, but here again, it is a decision that must be taken by the political authority.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends of water, this is how, through the risks to water, we can take opportunities to put an end to water suffering.

Our role at the Council is first to gather all of those who think about the future of water, to synthesise their thoughts, and to continue thinking. A famous European politician said : “to govern is to anticipate”. We must look ahead. Our role, my role, is to guess how things will evolve. I've been talking for the past 20 years about water for Men and water for Nature. We were talking about hydro-diplomacy in 1998. Today we insist on the role of parliamentarians, on the dangers that lie in opposing rural and city inhabitants, because we listen to our water community, our 400 member organizations, to understand how things are evolving. We talk about how dams must evolve, because we are aware that we must move beyond the idea of hard and vertical dams and communicate with the population.

Together, with a huge support of decision makers, we tried to make progress on water-thinking and at the same time be able to propose and share concrete responses. Water-thinking evolves every day. 20 years ago, water-thinking was done by and for engineers only. It was a technical and scientific approach. Today, who participates in water-thinking? Sociologists, demographers, political decision-makers, scientists, etc. Everyone is called upon to think about the future of water. And help us to consider the ideas and deliver the responses.

Dear friends of water, if you should remember only one thing from this presentation it could be:

Water is a political issue to which every citizen has the duty to contribute.

Thank you for your attention