



THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

11 September 2009

Excellency,

In my opening address, upon my assuming the Presidency of the General Assembly, I outlined that global water crisis would be one of the priorities of my tenure. I stated that 'we need to join forces and resources to take immediate steps to protect the sources of this precious resource, improve measures to prevent water pollution and alert peoples to the impending crisis, one which places at risk the lives and well-being of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of human beings. This is what prompted the United Nations to proclaim the decade 2005-2015 the International Decade for Action, "Water for Life".

To assist me with this task, I appointed Maude Barlow as my Senior Water Advisor. Since then, she has traveled extensively, including three visits to UN Headquarters in New York to carry out consultations with relevant UN agencies and Member States on my behalf, and to Istanbul where she delivered my statement to the 5th World Water Forum. I was pleased by the response to this statement, but troubled by the findings of the 3rd United Nations World Water Development Report, which was presented for the meeting in Istanbul. The report starkly outlined the grave challenges we face in dealing with the global water crisis.

I was honored to have Ms. Barlow to join me in New York for the historic inauguration of International Mother Earth Day. During that time, I also requested that she meet informally with Member States and specialized agencies of the United Nations dealing with water, and water-related issues, to get a preliminary reading of the progress achieved and to solicit their opinions on this important issue.

Ms. Barlow reported her initial findings and I would like to share her observations. I would also like to encourage Member States to continue an ongoing process of dialogue and exploration, one which hopefully may lead to action by the General Assembly on this most precious resource, water.

All Permanent Representatives and  
Permanent Observers to the United Nations  
New York

As I have previously stated, the General Assembly is the only forum where all 192 Member States participate on a basis of sovereign equality. The Assembly has a unique role to play in assisting the Member States in their search for a truly global and legitimate policy response to the crises we face.

Below are the observations, recommendations and possible next steps as outlined by Ms. Maude Barlow. As Member States formulate a collective response to Climate Change, I hope it will also consider ways to move the water, and global water crisis, as an important issue forward. I submit the findings below.

Observations:

1) The General Assembly, as the highest ranking global forum for political deliberation, is the ideal and most legitimate organ to deal with the global water crisis. At present, there is no coordinated water management authority or technical agency for water policy in the United Nations system. At least a dozen international or treaty organizations play some role –UN WATER, UNSGAB, UNICEF, FAO, UNESCO, UNIDO, UNDP, UNEP, UNCCD, UNFCCC, CBD, the International Water Management Institute, the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, to which countless regional bodies are also involved.

There is no overall responsibility, accountability, or vision as to how to address water issues in the context of sustainable development. The necessity for an international framework on water is an urgent and complex challenge, with intertwined political, economic, scientific and technological, and diplomatic dimensions. One possible way to move forward might be to concentrate on the most vulnerable countries, particularly countries in Africa. These are covered by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (191 Parties); but, as it currently stands, the treaty is still relatively unknown, and has had little influence or financial support. But instead of reinventing a new treaty, it would be better to reinvigorate it. For example, the Science and Technology Committee of the UNCCCD could complement the major international scientific assessments done so far.

2) The issue of the global water crisis is not a specific item on the agenda of the General Assembly, as either as a plenary item, or as a Second or Third Committee agenda item.

3) As a result, the General Assembly does not receive, in any organized manner, the reports and recommendations of the UN agencies dealing with water, nor does it benefit adequately from the immense resources available to it from these specialized agencies. One recent example are the important conclusions of the UN

World Water Development Report 3 “Water in a Changing World”, which are, literally, evaporating into an institutional void.

4) The UN agencies themselves informally expressed concerns over the lack of coordination and political move from policy to action in the United Nations. They also recognized that there is a powerful “institutional machine” at the disposal of the General Assembly that is “ready to have life breathed into it.” Many, if not all, were open to further General Assembly guidance, and are eager to create the synergy to move ahead with a more coherent plan on Water.

5) The lack of coordination and clear policy directives has resulted in a situation where, in spite of good work on the ground in many places, it will be difficult to meet the MDG goals relating to water and sanitation, as the global water crisis continues to gallop ahead of the solution.

6) It is important to support and respect those processes already underway within the United Nations’ system. This includes, among other courses of action, advancing and supporting the work of the independent expert on the Right to Water and Sanitation, Ms. Catarina de Albuquerque, whose mandate is to report to Human Rights Council considering the scope and content of the human right to water; and the various considerations of the Commission of Sustainable Development. These processes should not, however, preclude Member States from considering more comprehensive initiatives in the future.

7) Member States should concentrate efforts on the positive things they and the United Nation can do together, and not focus solely on the growing threat of ‘water conflict’, real as that is.

8) One good way to achieve this is to propose solutions to the ecological crisis that involves cooperation and peace building.

9) At the same time, we must not forget that in the end, access to clean and safe drinking water is ultimately an issue of management of our water resources and of development. There is ample evidence available which suggests that these issues of drinking water and sanitation can be tackled effectively, without incurring a lot of money, if Member States and UN agencies set muster the political will to do it.

10) The General Assembly must stress its support for the valuable legal work done by the International Law Commission and the Sixth Committee on the topic of “Shared Natural Resources”. Intergovernmental cooperation and science and technology must promote solutions and principles conducive towards a ‘water secure future for all’, with full respect of international law.

11) Finally, the General Assembly, and the UN as a whole, need to establish clear end goals toward which all Member States and UN agencies must work together.

Recommendations (from Ms. Maude Barlow)

- 1) The General Assembly should set a goal, perhaps one which would be two-fold:
  - a) By 2025, no one in the world shall have to walk for water.
  - b) By 2025, watershed restoration and full water conservation measures will be in place in every country in the world.

These objectives could also be discussed in the framework of the 2010 discussions on the process of achieving the MDGs.

- 2) I would suggest that the General Assembly consider the water issue within the following considerations:
  - a) There is a major ecological and human freshwater crisis in the world today;
  - b) The crisis is getting worse, fast;
  - c) To confront the crisis will require a clear global plan and commitment of the nations of the world and their peoples to a just and ecologically sound water future;
  - d) The UN General Assembly is equipped to take on this crisis in a sustained way, taking advantage of its role and structure as the world's premier deliberative forum, conferring structure and legitimacy to the issue;
  - e) The General Assembly could attempt to elaborate a framework or a feasible Plan of Action toward the realization of the above goals, with the assistance of the UN agencies responsible for water. This important step could become part of the Agenda of the potential 2012 Conference on the 20 years after the Rio 1992 Conference.
- 3) The Member States may promote an enhanced mandate for UN Water, in full cooperation with the General Assembly. At the moment, UN Water is a coordination and clearinghouse body that has a limited mandate, without adequate oversight, coordination or input from the General Assembly.

Next Steps

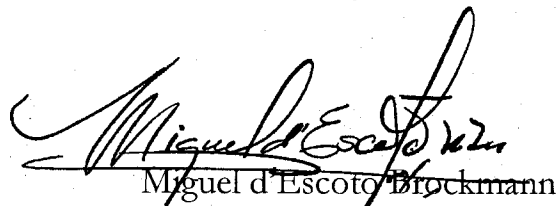
At the request of Member States, Ms. Maude Barlow is willing to undertake a commitment to prepare a more comprehensive report, outlining a series of possible options and next steps, but to do so will require further discussion, consultation and understanding of the issues touched upon in this letter.

Although Miss Barlow will not continue in her role of advisor to the President of this General Assembly, she is willing to make herself available to Permanent Missions here in New York, and with UN agencies interested in working towards effective collective action to address the global water crisis. Ms. Maude Barlow can be contacted at the email addresses: [mbarlow8965@rogers.com](mailto:mbarlow8965@rogers.com) and [anaidoo@canadians.org](mailto:anaidoo@canadians.org)

Excellency, I hope that you find the above initial report by Ms. Maude Barlow to be of interest. I invite you to refer to my statement at the 5th World Water Forum, available on the official website of this Presidency on the UN role in facing the global water crisis. I also encourage you to further the discussion of water, an issue of great importance to all Member States and to the global community.

Please accept, Excellency, assurances of my highest consideration and esteem.

Sincerely,



Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann

cc: United Nations Secretary-General Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB)  
Ms. Helen Clark, Administrador of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  
Mr. Achim Stein, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)  
Ms. Ann Veneman, Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
Mr. Kandeh K. Yumkella, Director-General United Nations UNIDO  
Mr. Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)  
Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)  
Ivo de Boer, Executive Secretary, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)  
Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)  
Ms. Maude Barlow, Senior Advisor on Water, sixty-third session of the General Assembly