

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 259 (2009)¹ Public water and sewer services for sustainable development

1. Water is a finite, vulnerable resource which is vital to life, and guaranteeing the availability of sufficient quantities of good quality water is a major challenge for the future of human societies and the sustainable development of the planet.

2. The current threats to water resources are growing constantly. They stem mainly from human activities, in particular urban growth, landscape development, increasing population levels, rising living standards and recurrent pollution.

3. The complexity and gravity of the issues relating to water and sewer services make them a challenge which needs to be tackled urgently. While the international community has recognised this complexity and the particular urgency of the issue in certain regions of the world, its attention is mainly focused on drinking water supplies. However, water is used for various purposes: food, energy, ecology, agriculture and industry, so the effectiveness of its use and management will depend to a large extent on actions and policies in these other sectors.

4. A new and consistent approach is needed today to cope with the demand for water at local and regional levels and the requirements of the various sectors. These challenges must have top priority and demand strong commitment from the international community, each tier of government and each individual.

5. In particular, it is necessary to improve water governance and modify behaviour. Efforts to conserve water and reduce demand and losses through leakage are not only relevant in regions with water shortages. Determined public action in this area is a vital investment for the future.

6. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe calls for a genuine culture of responsibility, for a new water culture in which the role of local and regional authorities in water and sewer management is reasserted. This role was recognised for the first time at the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico City in March 2006. The Congress hopes that this recognition will be confirmed at the 5th World Water Forum in Istanbul in March 2009.

7. The Congress also points out that water is by its very nature a public good; it is neither a commodity nor an unlimited resource. The example that Europe offers the world today is out of step with the major debates about the status of water and shows that involving responsible local and regional authorities in the provision of services is a vital benefit to

their sustainability and to maintaining a balance between the interests of business, society and the authorities.

8. Fair, effective and sustainable management of water resources demands an integrated approach, co-ordinated action and the sharing of responsibilities by the various tiers of governance. It also requires increased know-how, the exchange of information, in particular concerning river basins, and the identification of suitable and cost-effective solutions so as to make the management of water and sewer services more sustainable.

9. In addition, the challenges of climate change also have repercussions on water services and related costs. This new situation calls for multi-partner management and a strengthened role for states as regulators, in particular with regard to fairness and sustainability in water distribution.

10. The implementation of the “3 Es” of sustainability – environmental, economic and ethical – as guiding principles for a response to the challenges could be useful. Governments could also learn from best practices in the various European countries which have adopted different methods of managing water services.

11. In this respect, the need for greater transparency and benchmarking call for the institutionalisation of consumer participation in monitoring the delivery of public water and sewer services.

12. The Congress believes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that the most promising comparison is not between private and public management, but between the measures taken by the two systems to minimise undesirable side effects. The involvement of public authorities and civil society needs to be reinforced because of the long-term management issues regarding water and sewer services which are now mature and often require a new relationship to water resource management.

13. Modernisation of management methods should focus more on the correct level of governance and the desired integration and distribution of tasks between the national tier and regional and local managers. At regional level, the development of water-supply policy and alignment with water-resources policy could be very promising. Implementation and feedback could be determined at local level, taking account of local circumstances and interests. Alignment between the two levels is crucial, however.

14. *In the light of the above, the Congress recommends that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe:*

a. ask the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional/Spatial Planning (CEMAT) to incorporate these recommendations on public water and sewer services in its future recommendations on essential services;

b. ask the European Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR), and its Committee of Experts on Local and Regional Finance and Public Services to take account in their work of the challenges relating to the renovation of water and sewer services and of the need to improve water governance;

c. ask the Council of Europe Development Bank to support projects that develop public water and sewer services through its lending and financing policy.

15. *The Congress calls on the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to ask member states:*

a. to recognise the vital role of local and regional public bodies in managing water and sewer services and not to confine the debate on water to the public/private issue;

b. to develop tools for comparing the performance of the services and their price so as to ensure objective debate and encourage appropriate action;

c. to co-ordinate water, energy, food and environment policies more closely;

d. to take particular care to align the co-ordination of public water services and resource management policies;

e. to develop research in order to identify better economic, technical and management solutions;

f. to better inform the population of challenges concerning water issues and to reinforce the public's commitment to these complex questions;

g. to recognise the legitimacy of local and regional authorities as the appropriate tier of responsibility and co-operation and to encourage the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to decentralise and improve services in less advanced countries to do so in partnership with local and regional authorities in order to boost their capacity for action.

16. *The Congress recommends that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe ask the European Commission:*

a. to not include water services as services of general economic interest, given the health issues of water services and the fact that water resources constitute a common heritage;

b. to conduct comparative analyses of the various methods for organising and managing water and sewer services in several European countries, having regard to historic national factors and taking particular account of the impact of climate change on water management and spatial water requirements;

c. to identify best practices in funding water and sewer services and study the various experiences concerning the full cost price of these services in order to achieve a pricing system which takes account of all components of the price. Consideration should be given to compensatory mechanisms to prevent exclusion.

17. *The Congress calls on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to continue co-operating with the Congress on water issues and to encourage exchange of experiences on the implementation of public water and sewer services and particularly on the legal and legislative implications in the different countries of Europe.*

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 3 March 2009, 1st Sitting (see Document CG(16)6REP, explanatory memorandum, rapporteurs: V. Gorodetskiy (Russian Federation, L, SOC) and P. Jansen (Netherlands, R, EPP/CD).