

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 278 (2009)¹

Public water and sewer services for sustainable development

1. Water is an essential public good and an increasingly important issue in every country in the world. Access to sufficient and quality water supplies and to sewer services are key issues for all tiers of governance. The problem of water does not concern only developing countries.

2. The world is undergoing far-reaching changes and over the past few years there have been several major water-related disasters. The cyclones, floods and droughts which have struck many countries remind us that water can be destructive. This reality concerns numerous regions throughout the world, as well as Europe.

3. Some European regions are now experiencing pressure on their water resources. This situation reflects demographic growth and the concentration of population in towns and cities, changes in lifestyles and living standards, economic development and the impacts of intensive farming. An ever-increasing amount of water is required not only in towns and cities but also to produce food, energy and for industrial uses.

4. Besides water supply requirements, water services now include proper sewerage treatment, which must respect increasingly environmentally friendly water discharge standards. Furthermore, water infrastructure deteriorates rapidly and is very expensive and cumbersome to repair.

5. The efficient management of water and sewer services must also take into account climate change. The variations in rainfall and temperatures that are expected as a result of this must be taken into consideration in the future management of water, agriculture, energy and the environment.

6. In this respect the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe shares the viewpoint of the Committee of the Regions on how to address the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union. It firmly believes that water management processes and practices are facing increasingly complex inter-sectorial difficulties. A change of attitude, innovative approaches and new solutions are required to overcome these difficulties.

7. The Congress also believes that, in the context of global changes that are sometimes rapid and sometimes less noticeable, water management is mainly a local issue and that consequently there is no one-size-fits-all solution. However, there are solutions, most of which are related to governance and management. The Congress therefore believes that decisions concerning water must be taken at local and regional level and should involve the private

sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens as users.

8. However, if some governments have difficulty in addressing the various, interdependent problems relating to water resources, co-operation is necessary and responsibilities must be shared between the different levels of governance to improve the management of water and sewer services.

9. The Congress believes that the democratic and sustainable management of water, as a public asset, is a serious challenge. It acknowledges that, given the growing complexity of water-related problems, it is difficult to take decisions as to the best form of management. Given the scale of the measures that need to be taken and the funding that needs to be secured, it calls on local and regional authorities to promote public debate on these issues.

10. There are many different ways of managing water supply and sewerage treatment in Europe but these services are often a local government responsibility. The extent and nature of private sector participation vary from one state to the next, according to the historical context.

11. Over the last few years, various forms of private sector participation have been developed in the water sector. There has been much debate on the involvement of the private sector, on financial profit making, on the methods of fixing water prices and on the arrival of foreign operators.

12. The main issues concern the need to regulate and control the price of water services, the price and financing of services, their quality and performance and the conditions governing the presence of private operators in a sector that has to meet a vital basic need.

13. Finally, the Congress calls on European local and regional authorities and their associations to prepare for the 5th World Water Forum, to be held in Istanbul in March 2009, and to do everything they can to strengthen their role on the international stage. The declarations of the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico City were a major step forward in acknowledging local and regional authorities' fundamental role in water management. This position now needs to be consolidated.

14. *The Congress invites the local and regional authorities of Council of Europe member states:*

a. to uphold the principle that water resources are a public good, which must remain under public control and be shared in a reasonable and equitable manner between users;

b. to maintain public control of services at the most local level possible and to form syndicates, associations and consortiums when qualitative, quantitative or technical factors make this necessary;

c. to ensure that infrastructure capital remains in public ownership to guarantee long-term management and to avoid the short-term approach and to consider public-private partnerships as a means of performing some of the tasks relating to the provision of public services;

d. to do everything necessary to avoid the poor division of responsibilities and seek better and less costly solutions to current and future challenges by organising co-operation between public water services and those managing water resources;

e. to act as full partners in the integrated and horizontal management of water resources and seek local and regional solutions to reduce the costs of the technological choices made so far, as well as to pool water production tools and begin the introduction of innovative technologies;

f. to take account of the “3 Es” of sustainability – environmental, economic and ethical – when drawing up and implementing their public water and sewerage policies;

g. to undertake detailed studies into equal access to such services for the least well-off and compare experiences gained in the field to find solutions that guarantee the right of access to the service, at a cost which is financially acceptable to the community and to individual users;

h. to promote in their administrations and in their localities the acquisition of knowledge and skills to improve water management and facilitate the organisation and functioning of public water supply and sewer services;

i. to use existing organisations or, where necessary, to set up associations of local and regional authorities, to promote the exchange of experience in public water supply and sewer services at national and particularly European level;

j. to involve consumers in monitoring the provision of water and sewer services;

k. in the context of the 5th World Water Forum to be held in Istanbul from 16 to 22 March 2009, to:

i. participate actively in this Forum in order to consolidate the local and regional authorities’ place in the international process relating to water;

ii. affirm the fundamental role that local and regional authorities perform in the organisation and control of the public

water and sewer services, and their freedom of choice among the different management methods;

iii. accede to the Istanbul Water Consensus, a declaration by the local and regional authorities to be adopted at the Fifth World Water Forum, and formally undertake to develop actions for its practical implementation.

15. *The Congress instructs its Committee on Sustainable Development:*

a. to continue its work on issues relating to water governance and in particular the effects of climate change on water management;

b. to support and encourage local and regional authorities to play their full role in water management;

c. to continue its co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs with a view to establishing a joint water governance strategy;

d. to foster exchanges with the corresponding commission of the European Union Committee of the Regions on water-related issues, in particular with an eye to the 5th World Water Forum, and to work together on the question of the efficient and real sharing of responsibilities in water and sewer service management;

e. to hold regular exchanges with the international associations of local and regional authorities, particularly United Cities and Local Governments and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, with a view to fuller recognition of the role of local and regional authorities in water governance and in the international process relating to water.

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).