

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 183 (2004)¹ on the quality and quantity of drinking water

The Congress, bearing in mind the proposal of the Chamber of Local Authorities,

1. Having regard to the report on the Quality and Quantity of Drinking Water presented by Mr Peter Torkler (Germany, L) on behalf of the Committee on Sustainable Development;

2. Considering that:

Water – a key natural source and a basic human right

a. drinking water is a natural product that cannot be manufactured or replaced;

b. it is not just a commercial product like any other but, rather, a heritage which must be protected, defended and treated as such: the supply of drinking water is a basic public service;

c. water, particularly drinking water, has to be seen as a basic human right. As such it is unquestionably the responsibility of governments, both at national and local level, to ensure that everyone has access to good quality drinking water;

Pressures and threats to water resources

d. water resources are under increasing pressure throughout the world, owing to infrastructure development, land conversion, environmental degradation and pollution;

e. the adverse consequences are felt particularly severely by poorer population groups: in certain parts of the world, millions of people in rural areas suffer from inadequate water supplies and sanitation conditions that are beneath human dignity;

f. the growing shortage and unequal distribution of water resources threaten not only the long-term supply of clean water, but also the economic development of regions, countries and the entire environment;

g. there is also a risk of conflict about water not only between different users such as agriculture and cities, but also between different countries;

Recognition of the global water crisis

3. Pointing out that:

a. the seriousness of water supply and sanitation problems is recognised globally;

b. the global water crisis has environmental, economic and social dimensions;

c. achieving sustainable water solutions is a complex issue and will require different actions in different regions of the world. It is therefore essential to understand the wider environmental, social and economic context within which public authorities operate;

d. facing a global water crisis calls for much more than specialised knowledge and technology. It calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of our basic principles and lifestyles, as well as the existing patterns of production and consumption;

4. Noting that the European Union Water Directive 2000/60/EC establishes a framework for Community action in the field of water policy, calling for its “protection and sustainable use in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity”;

5. Welcoming, in particular, those objectives of the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development that seek to significantly reduce the proportion of the population lacking access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation;

6. Regretting, however, that during the Johannesburg Summit it proved impossible to achieve majority support for declaring unimpeded access to clean water at a reasonable cost;

7. Concerned that the negotiations at the World Trade Organisation on the further development of the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) that concern almost all service sectors have been going on with almost no national or European parliamentary scrutiny;

The need for efficient and sustainable water management

8. Noting that:

a. efficient and sustainable water management is essential for ensuring access to drinking water for all;

b. public water provision systems are not always efficient and their record in many countries is poor;

c. there is a growing desire of public authorities to hand over to private companies the responsibility for delivering water;

Principles of and approaches to sustainable water solutions

9. Stressing that:

a. efficiency alone is not enough to justify handing over such a resource as drinking water to private companies;

b. the primary objective of private companies is profit; they are not always concerned about the rights of individuals or of the need for equitable distribution of their products;

c. recovering costs through user charges can make the difference between services that are sustained and expanded and services that fail;

d. an appropriate pricing policy is often the key to the unimpeded access of all users to clean water at a reasonable cost;

e. the charging method must, however, be appropriate for the local cultural and economic conditions, especially with regard to low-income groups;

f. sustainable water development and management should be based on a participatory approach involving users, planners, policy-makers and all appropriate stakeholders at all levels, taking into account social and cultural diversity;

Public-private partnership

10. Convinced that:

a. no single sector of society can possibly afford to meet the basic human needs for water and wastewater services. Private sector participation could therefore be a way to break the circle of under-investment, low or no tariffs and poor services;

b. with regard to drinking water service provision, it is vital that private companies demonstrate that their businesses can be environmentally and socially responsible in respect of this major natural resource, and that they are willing to take on a universal service obligation to ensure that all basic needs are met, on a transparent, accountable and permanent basis;

Legal framework

11. Noting that:

a. the role of government, in many instances, becomes even more important, especially in the development and implementation of a sound legal framework for water service provision;

b. there is a need for a clear legal framework for the activities of local and regional authorities of Europe that have shared responsibilities for water supply, the disposal of waste water and the protection of surface and groundwater resources;

12. Recognising that local and regional authorities have a key role to play in ensuring access to clean water for all, in the protection of water resources and their sustainable use, and in mobilising governments, community associations, NGOs, professional organisations and businesses,

13. Calls on local and regional authorities to:

a. support sustainable development targets for water supply and sanitation as set out in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Johannesburg Declaration; and develop an action plan, investment strategy and timetable for meeting these targets at regional and local levels;

b. work with national governments and the international community to strengthen local governments' capacity to deal with sustainable water service provision;

c. promote bilateral and multilateral co-operation between local and regional authorities of Europe for sustainable water management;

d. promote good water management based on the perception of water as a shared responsibility that includes safe water supply and disposal, conservation of water resources, and managing water as an economic resource;

e. encourage integration of community water supply programmes with the issues of poverty alleviation, social equity and environmental sustainability;

f. support existing regional and local networks dealing with the protection of water resources;

g. promote discussions on the impact of liberalisation on local public services, with a view to ensuring that key public services, notably the provision of clean drinking water for all, are maintained;

h. encourage greater participation by involving citizens in the policy-making process for the protection of water resources, promoting dialogue at national, regional and local levels and within local communities themselves;

i. promote environmental education to strengthen public awareness of sustainable water solutions;

j. consider the possibility of organising an international conference on the quality and quantity of drinking water as a Congress follow-up activity.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 26 May 2004 and adopted by the Standing Committee of the Congress on 27 May 2004, (see Document CPL (11) 6, draft resolution presented by I. Bezrukavnikov (Russian Federation, L, SOC) on behalf of P. Torkler, (Germany, L, SOC), former rapporteur).