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REVIEW OF IMPLEMENTATION PLANS FOR AVERTING THE FRESHWATER CRISIS

Preparation of implementation plans for averting the freshwater crisis

Report of the Secretary-General

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* E/C.7/1996/1.

I. BACKGROUND

1. In decision 2/1, adopted at its second session, in 1994, the Committee on Natural Resources noted with concern the slow pace of progress with regard to the implementation of the recommendations of the Mar del Plata Action Plan and Agenda 21; it noted with alarm that some 80 countries, comprising 40 per cent of the world's population, were already suffering from serious water shortages and that, in many cases, scarcity of water resources had become the limiting factor to economic and social development; and it also noted that ever-increasing water pollution had become a major problem throughout the world, including coastal zones. 1/

2. In view of these considerations, the Committee, also in decision 2/1, recommended that the Commission on Sustainable Development, at its second session, in 1994, affirm the vital importance of establishing a global implementation plan to avert the impending water crisis, incorporating principles for the effective management of land and water resources and guidelines and schedules based on Agenda 21; it also recommended that the Commission on Sustainable Development support the formulation of such an implementation plan to be reviewed by the Committee on Natural Resources in 1996; and it further recommended that the Commission approve the formulation of the plan by the Working Group on Water of the Committee on Natural Resources jointly with the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, drawing upon the results of the regional meetings of the United Nations Environment Programme already scheduled to address the issue and other relevant activities of the organizations and specialized agencies of the United Nations. 1/

II. DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT ITS SECOND SESSION

3. At its second session, in 1994, the Commission on Sustainable Development noted with great concern that many countries were facing a water crisis, with rapid deterioration of water quality, serious water shortages and reduced availability of freshwater, which severely affected human health, the ecosystem and economic development. 2/

4. The Commission, however, did not act on the Committee's recommendation concerning the formulation of an implementation plan to avert a freshwater crisis. Rather, it urged the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and other relevant United Nations bodies, as well as non-governmental organizations, to strengthen their efforts towards a comprehensive assessment of freshwater resources, with the aim of identifying the availability of such resources, making projections of future needs, and identifying problems to be considered by the General Assembly at its special session in 1997. 3/

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5. The Commission invited Governments to cooperate actively with technical inputs to the process, taking into account the need for support for the full participation of developing countries, and welcomed the offer of the Government of Sweden to contribute by preparing a preliminary assessment of freshwater. The Commission recommended that the Economic and Social Council invite the Committee on Natural Resources to address the question of freshwater resources as part of the comprehensive assessment at its third session in 1996. The Commission decided to review, at its 1997 session, the result of all the work outlined above. 4/

III. REVIEW OF ACTIONS TAKEN IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A FRESHWATER ASSESSMENT

6. The implementation of the assessment is being carried out through a Steering Committee composed of organizations of the United Nations system and the Stockholm Environment Institute, which was commissioned by the Government of Sweden to collaborate on its behalf in the preparation of the assessment. At its fifteenth session (September 1994), the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination appointed the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, the Department for Development Support and Management Services, UNEP, UNDP, FAO, UNESCO, WHO, the World Bank, WMO and UNIDO to represent the organizations of the United Nations system in the Steering Committee. In addition to the support given by the Government of Sweden through the Stockholm Environment Institute, financial and technical support has been provided by the Governments of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway. So far, five meetings of the Steering Committee have taken place, the latest on 14 and 15 March 1996.

7. As envisaged by the Steering Committee, the report to be submitted to the Commission on Sustainable Development and to the General Assembly in 1997 will consist of four sections, supplemented by background documents containing an in-depth discussion of the issues discussed in each section. The introductory section of the report will provide a rationale for the assessment, outlining the concerns that led to the assessment in terms of increasing demands for competing uses, the stresses on the resource as result of increasing pollution, the impact and effects of inappropriate land and water management practices on the flow and quality of water and on land degradation, the need to manage environmental impacts of water resources development and use, the need to bring about cooperative approaches to the development of shared water resources, and the need to ensure that water resources development and management policies address the issue of poverty alleviation. The second section of the report will address global issues related to the availability, variability and quality of water and the stress on the resource brought about by its use. The section will endeavour to provide an assessment of the current situation concerning water availability and use in the context of the hydrological cycle. Driving forces, such as population dynamics and consumption patterns, will be discussed. Two meetings of an expert group were convened by WMO and UNESCO acting as lead agencies. The purpose of the expert group was to access and review the best available data and ensure its reliability. Data concerning agricultural, industrial and municipal uses have been provided by FAO, UNIDO and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat). Information concerning water quality is being obtained

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from UNEP and WHO through the Global Environment Monitoring System (GEMS) water programme.

8. The third section of the report, which is being prepared with the Stockholm Environment Institute acting as lead agency on behalf of the Steering Committee, will utilize a number of scenarios with a time horizon to the year 2025 in order to investigate the likely effect of trends and policies in search of a sustainability path. These scenarios will seek to display variations between different regions of the world and will include an analysis of selected river basins with a view to identifying priority areas for action.

9. The final section of the report will present a set of policy options for the long-term sustainable development and utilization of water resources, based primarily on the analysis carried out in the previous sections. These policy options will endeavour to link land and water management issues; water for food security; and safe drinking water supply, sanitation and sewerage and human health in the context of economic and social development.

10. The report will be supplemented by commissioned studies on the economic aspects of sustainable water resources development and use and gender issues, as well as a study on the relationship between water resources and growing urbanization and a study on cooperative approaches to the development of shared river basins.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 6 and corrigendum (E/1994/26 and Corr.1), chap. I, sect. C.

2/ Ibid., Supplement No. 13 (E/1994/33/Rev.1), chap. I, para. 133.

3/ Ibid., chap. I, para. 148.

4/ Ibid., chap. I, paras. 149-151.
