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Statement

by

Dr. Prodipto Ghosh
Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests

on

“Water Issues”

at the

Twelfth Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development

New York

April 29, 2004

Mr. Chairman,

We have heard with interest the various views that have been expressed on the subject under discussion i.e. Water. This being a review year we must be clear about our task here, which is to identify the constraints and obstacles to the realization of the Agenda 21 and JPOI goals i.e., halving the number of people without access to drinking water by 2015.

India is aware of the emerging challenges in the field of water resources. To address these, the National Water Policy of 1987 was revised and updated in 2002 to encourage participation by all stakeholders and give due weightage to ecological concerns. India has taken reforms initiatives in water resources aimed at greater involvement of users in cost sharing as also in operation and maintenance. Private sector participation is also encouraged, wherever feasible. People's participation and involvement at every stage, ensuring appropriate role for women; a move from top down to demand driven; cost sharing; a holistic approach and flexibility, are some of the characteristics that mark the recent initiatives in the water sector. Legislation has been enacted to facilitate a participatory approach. More than 41,00 Water User Associations (WUAs) have already been formed. We have initiated the rationalization of water rates for various uses to cover operation and maintenance charges.

Our experience of over five decades has led to the recognition that we need to build on the multiple approaches that we have, to find a range of solutions that take into account the diversity of our country. There is also recognition of the roles of multiple stakeholders in handling such complex tasks.

We have clearly articulated norms with regard to drinking water coverage and we are well on our way to meeting the national targets, which are in advance of the JPOI goals, for provision for drinking water in both rural and urban areas. As per National Norms for drinking water, 100% rural population will be covered by March 2005 and 100% urban population will be covered by 2007.

Quality of water is an area of concern. Surface water, and to some extent, even ground water, are being affected by industrial pollution, urban sewage and agricultural run-off. A number of legislative steps have been taken, and institutional mechanisms put in place to ensure acceptable quality of water. In regard to this and other issues related to water, sanitation, and other aspects of JPOI, we consider that technology transfer poses the greatest challenge in achieving our goals.

We recognize that projects must be financially viable; however the provision of safe drinking water to our citizens cannot be conditional upon their ability to pay. At the same time, we recognize that subsidies on water rates to the disadvantaged and poorer sections of society should be well-targeted and transparent.

Irrigation is the main use of water in India and therefore often remains the focal issue in water resources development and management. Providing irrigation facilities to small and marginal farmers is central to raising their standards of living. The thrust towards rapid development and efficient management of irrigation, which may involve components of hydropower, should be viewed in relation to its role in poverty alleviation.

The JPOI has provided the framework for the approach to integrated water resources management. In India several steps have been taken in a holistic approach, including afforestation, water conservation practices, watershed development, groundwater recharge, reviving traditional harvesting and conservation practices, etc. to meet the competing demands. In our view, a lot still needs to be done at the national level by countries themselves. In the context of management of trans-boundary waters, it has been our experience that bilateral arrangements have worked well. Appropriate arrangements are decided by the countries concerned and it is for these countries to approach an international agency for any specific assistance, if required.

It is felt that the 'ecosystem concept', which has been mentioned by some delegations with regard to JPOI implementation, is not internationally agreed upon and is still in the realm of expert technical discussion. We believe that it should be left to national

governments for deciding which is the best approach to adopt, keeping in view their national problems and challenges as well as their national priorities.

Mr. Chairman:

Policy making for the water sector has multiple dimensions in both the aspects of quantity and quality of water, which in turn are inter-related. Water is the most critical of all natural resources, and impacts health, pattern of settlements, agriculture, industry, power, fisheries and many other sectors. Major infrastructural investments relate to or are impacted by water policies. For these reasons, in India, we have found it inadvisable to locate all operational and policy making responsibilities for water in a single agency. I believe this consideration is important when we consider the role of the UN agencies and programmes in the realm of water issues. There is need for co-ordination mechanisms, but the question of institutional structures for water resources policy is a complex one. We believe that it would be better to hasten slowly in our multilateral effort in this regard, and revisit this issue once we have comprehensively addressed the main questions of financial resources and technology transfer.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.