Productive World Water Week Advances Global Water Agenda

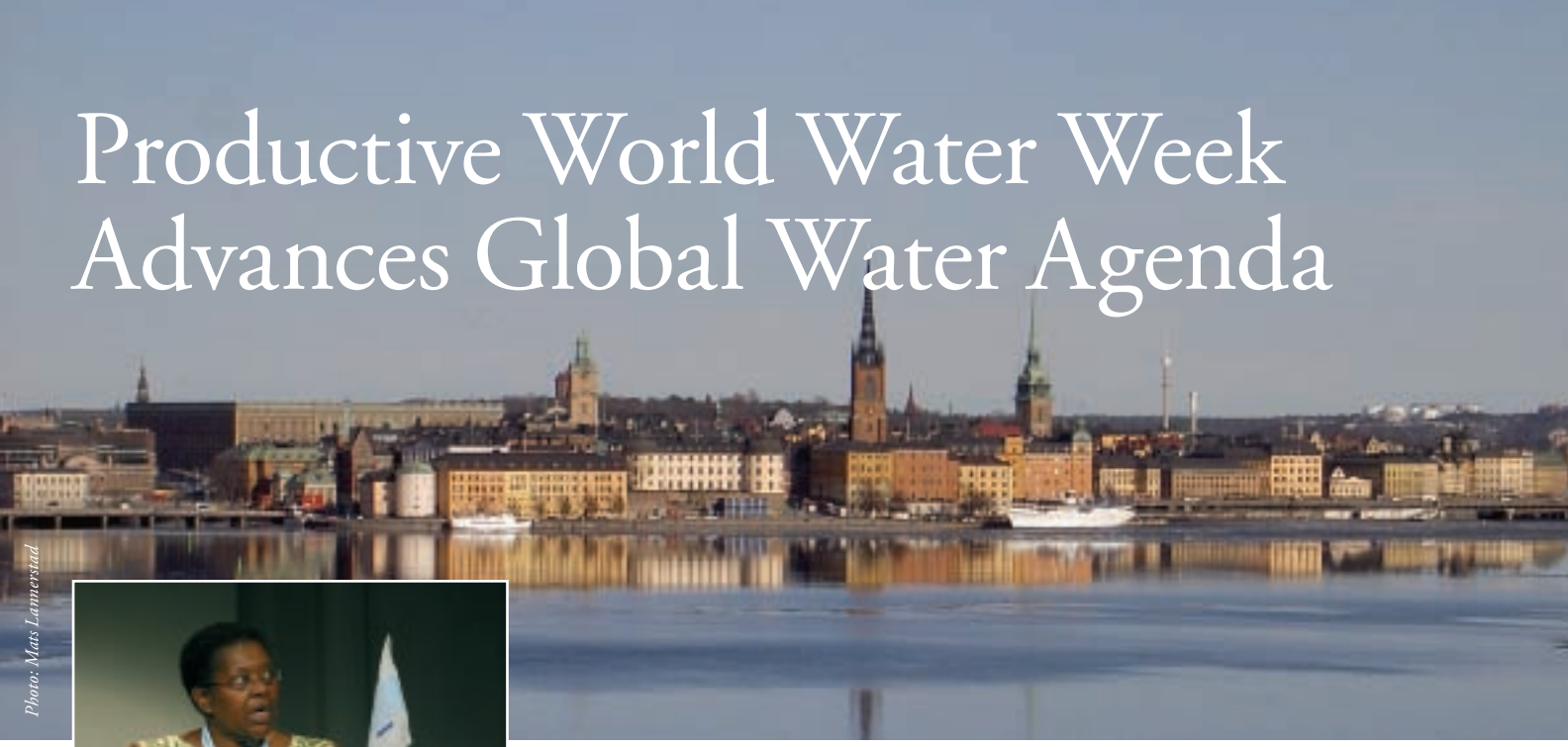

Photo: Mats Lannerstad

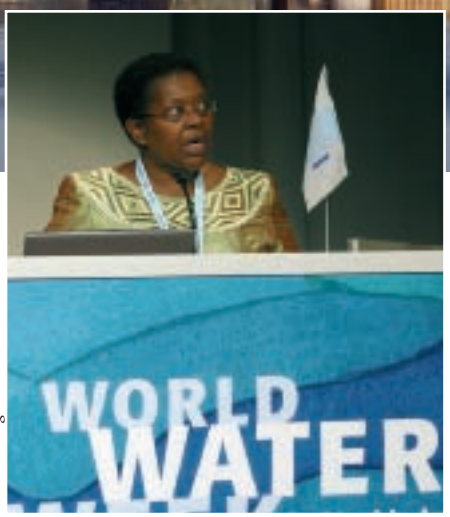

Photo: Orange

H.E. Buyelwa Patience Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, South Africa

The 2005 World Water Week in Stockholm, held August 21–27, was a memorable one. By the numbers, the week was a success: nearly 1500 participants from over 100 countries participated, as did more than 80 co-convening organisations.

More important than the numbers, however, was the general feeling among participants that the quality and importance of the discussions and presentations reached an all-time high in the 15th such gathering in Stockholm. Plenary sessions, workshops, seminars and side events provided the official contexts; corridors, coffee breaks and impromptu meetings provided the informal opportunities to learn and share with one another.

Regardless the format, capacity-building, partnership-building and the follow-up on implementation of international processes and programmes were in focus.

What did we learn?

"Drainage Basin Management – Hard and Soft Solutions in Regional Development" was the theme of the week, and discussions examined the challenges, and complementarity, between such solutions: for example, infrastructure and technical solutions vs softer human dimensions.

Many water-related professional communities interacted during the week. Some focused on the dependence on water for development. Some examined water needs for food production. Controlling water use, wastewater pollution discharge or water projects occupied others, as did conflict resolution between different stakeholder groups. Corruption, investment decisions, gender empowerment and diverse topics interested still others.

Among the collaborators intensifying their involvement in 2005 were the European Union (EU), through the EU Water Initiative, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and UN-Water, the forum that brings together the 24 different UN agencies and programmes working with water and sanitation.

Complexity necessitates flexibility, resilience and benefit sharing

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Ms. Sunita Narain, Executive Director, Centre for Science and Environment, India

The relations between soft and hard components showed that the best combination has been impossible to identify, since situations around the world vary.

As SIWI Executive Director Anders Berntell summarised at the end of the week, neither pipes nor institutions will do the trick. "People are the ones who deliver water," he said. "People are the ones who determine whether both pipes and institutions work."

And experiences shown during the week clearly indicate that both paths – often through astonishingly simple projects and participatory approaches – can give results:

The "soft" path, such as the Central American Handwashing Initiative demonstrated that effective partnerships among government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's groups, the private sector and the media can contribute to effective hygiene promotion and behavioural changes that are essential to combat diarrhoeal disease and create public awareness.

The "hard" path, with reports showing that improved water storage capacity makes national economies more resilient to rainfall variability and boosts economic growth. In Kenya, improved resilience to the effects of floods and droughts could make its GDP grow at a rate which is needed in order to start effectively reducing poverty. Indeed, Africa called strongly during the week for more infrastructure.

In North America, the quantity of water storage per person is about 6,150 cubic metres, Sonjica pointed out. But in Ethiopia, for example, it is just 43 cubic metres per person. Even in South Africa, the most developed country in the continent, the quantity of water storage per person is only 746 cubic metres.

Participants heard that hard or soft is not a question of either/or, but of a mix of both, implemented and managed from a people-first perspective. Once infrastructure is in place, it must work while economic sustainability is secured and unavoidable conflicts managed. The call for resilience and benefit sharing echoed through the halls of the Folkets Hus conference centre.

2015 is approaching

The week's workshops and seminars did reveal that approaches to problems are occuring on different fronts, some addressing more immediate concerns, others looking farther into the future. The Mar del Plata Action Plan from 1977 has now been repackaged and updated with water and sanitation targets as part of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7. As 2015 – the deadline to meet the goals – approaches, much talk existed on "gearing up" activities.

Emerging challenges such as those related to the water implications of the efforts required to eradicate hunger and also the water-energy link, since energy is fundamental to development and requires water both for hydropower production and for cooling purposes, are also in focus. An interesting point made during a seminar on the latter subject is that countries seldom have considered the water requirements of the energy sector in their water policy.

The river basin – where water-related linkages exist

Megacities – and their water-related problems – are growing. The week highlighted the problems of such urban areas, and how they need more water to meet the demand from growing populations wanting a better quality of life, particularly for poor inhabitants. Some Indian cities are contemplating long-distance transfer of water from 250–500 kilometres away, but where will the energy come from to pump the water all that distance, some asked during the week.

With 90% of global population growth expected to be in urban areas, the rapid urbanisation is making it difficult to use only river basins as the planning units, since inter-basin transfers and other water allocation diversions will occur. Water Week participants thus noted that it is essential a broader management unit does not hinder orchestration for compatibility within the water divide, where the law of gravity rules.

Attendees paid attention to the need for storage capacity, comparing the situation in developed countries, which have much greater water storage capacity per person than poor, semiarid countries. It was concluded that infrastructure is a fundamental base for socio-economic development, and that dams like other types of infrastructure have large benefits but are combined with negative impacts of different kinds. Since the infrastructure is a necessary element to support poverty alleviation and quality of life, the challenge is not to refrain from badly needed reservoirs but to find out how negative impacts can best be managed. For instance, people resettled from a reservoir should be guaranteed some part of the benefits of the dam.

Among the hard solutions in the catchment, attention went to infrastructure in general, its design and operation. The rapid urbanisation implies that rural-urban competition for water is growing. Long-term sustainable arrangements need to explore and integrate multiple water uses early in the design cycle. With time, decision making will become more and more complicated by the trade offs that will be unavoidable. Those trade offs will mean that stakeholder involvement is especially important and is supported by information dissemination. Once in place, management has to be adaptive to unavoidable changes.

Water for food

At the conference centre, discussions about access to sanitation, and on the role of water infrastructure, were common. But dialogue in the meeting rooms and corridors also focused on, for example, the massive amounts of water needed to grow food and feed humanity in the future – a subject virtually ignored in the Millennium Development Goals. Climate variability, a workshop and seminar subject, needs to be coped with in order to arrive at food security. Long-term outlooks must incorporate the ongoing climate change and demand a better communication of uncertainty in forecasts and projections.

More "crop-per-drop" opportunities were also discussed, since they are especially good in dry climate savannah regions where many poor nations are located. One workshop pointed out how agricultural water use efficiency increases both with improved irrigation practices and with better farming techniques in general, such as integrated soil-water conservation and improved soil fertility. Improved technology, water recycling and rainwater harvesting were all emphasised.

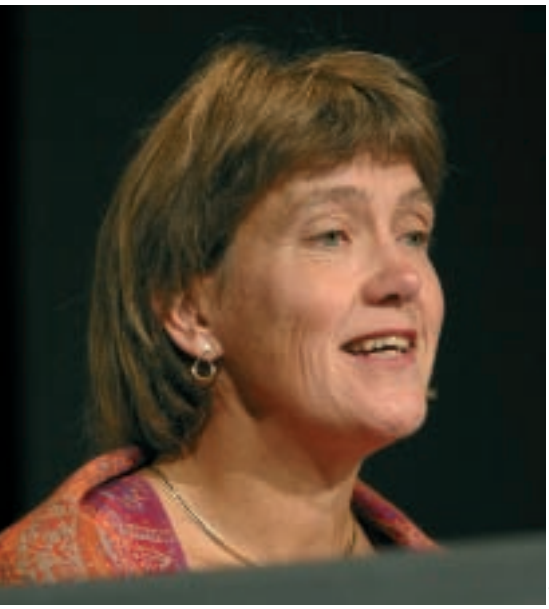

Photo: Orange

Prof. Lena Sommestad, Minister of the Environment, Swedish Ministry for Sustainable Development, during the Opening Speech.

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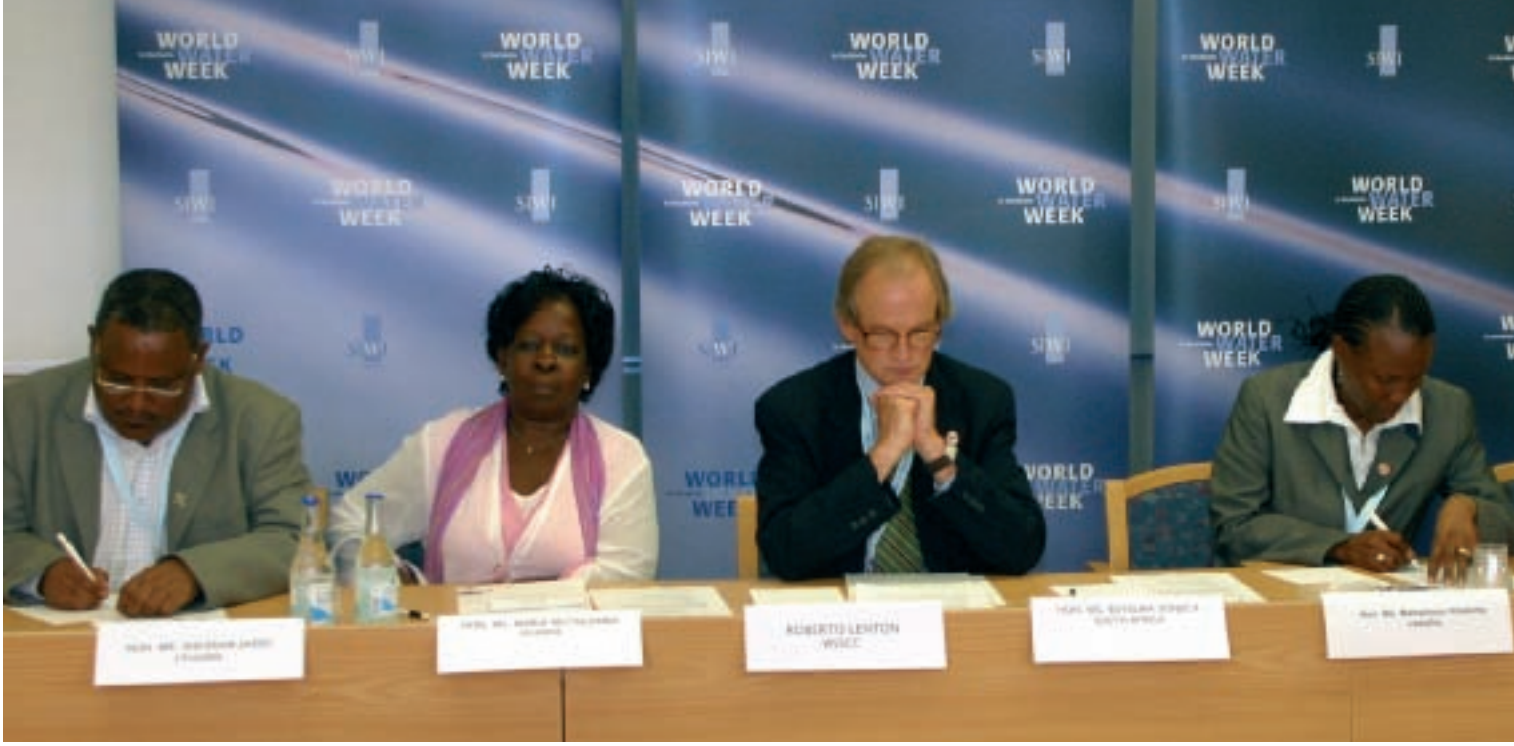
Mr. Nik Gowing, BBC World Service Television, moderated the High Level Panel on Large-Scale Water Infrastructure.



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From left: Hon. Mr. Shiferaw Jarso, Minister for Water Resource Development, Ethiopia; Hon. Ms. Maria Mutagamba, Minister of State for Water, Uganda, Dr. Roberto Lenton, Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council Chair, and Columbia University, USA; and Chair of the African Ministers Council on Water (AMCOW); and Hon. Dr. 'Mamphono Khaketla, Minister of Natural Resources, Lesotho.

Water pollution – act now or pay later

Water Week participants also heard about the failures to entirely mitigate water pollution from agriculture and industry. In developed and developing countries, discharge of hazardous chemicals is a problem, as are potential health effects from multiple exposures to them, particularly on children. Cancer, allergic reactions and sterility were named as potential affects of these chemicals which, if not mitigated, are profoundly threatening.

Four strategies which might help alleviate this threat are monitoring for detection, filtering out the pollutants before use, developing emission standards and development of substitutes. It was concluded that the cost of inaction is many times higher than the cost of taking preventive, corrective or remedial actions.

In Stockholm, the broad movements towards rainwater harvesting, towards urban water transfers, towards dry sanitation, and towards a water-food revolution resulted in repeated calls for shifts in thinking. New mindsets, reinvented urban water supply paradigms, local-level initiatives, smarter infrastructure decisions and development, looking at the "facts of the matter" rather than debating endlessly – all were among the concepts aired during the week.

Such flexibility in mindsets is needed, as the situation will continue to demand it. "Coping with growing complexity will be fundamental," said SIWI Professor Malin Falkenmark, in summing up the week. "We need to mobilise human ingenuity, especially from the young generation which is not yet too tied up with increasingly outdated approaches."

Timed as it was just weeks in advance of the United Nations' five-year review of progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals, the 2005 World Water Week in Stockholm, offered a prime opportunity to present concrete examples of how problems of poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and gender inequality can in large measure be solved with water and sanitation as the key entry points. The World Water Week in Stockholm is the leading annual multi-stakeholder platform of its kind. ■

Photo: Orange

Mr. Jamal Saghir, Director, Energy and Water, World Bank

2005 World Water Week Final Report

The Final Report from the 2005 World Water Week in Stockholm will synthesise and summarise the key discussions and conclusions from the week's plenary sessions, panel debates, workshops, seminars, side events and special activities. The Final Report will be mailed with the December 2005 issue of Stockholm Water Front magazine. ■

Join us in 2006!

The 2006 World Water Week in Stockholm, under the theme "Beyond the River – Sharing Benefits and Responsibilities," will take place August 20–26, 2006. The First Announcement will be mailed with the December issue of Stockholm Water Front. The deadline for the abstract submittal for the workshops portion of the week will be February 1, 2006. Stay tuned to developments at www.worldwaterweek.org. ■