

Get Ready: Adapting to Water and Climate Change

Photo: Getty Images

Changes in water availability are what hit us first with an altered climate. Beyond the stronger, less predictable and more frequent natural disasters resulting from global climate change, regions across the world are already suffering from the effect climate has on the water balance: “Too much or too little water; water at the wrong time or in the wrong place; rising sea levels; and floods in certain regions while drought in others,” as SIWI Executive Director Anders Berntell succinctly stated in his opening address to the World Water Week. “None of us can say we are prepared for what is in store.”

Beginning with a high level panel discussion on “Climate Change, Water and Vulnerability,” the World Water Week engaged in passionate debate over the most relevant question left on the climate table: What do we now?

Many seminars, workshops and events stressed the need for national strategies for adaptation to climate change, as well as an increased focus on its implications on water. Measures to increase adaptive capacities among vulnerable populations, coupled with deeper commitments to reduce greenhouse gases through stronger carbon emission standards and ecosystem restoration, were pushed as immediate ways to minimise present and future devastation.

At “Water and Climate Day,” speakers emphasised that the changing climate’s effect on water security strongly impacts each nation’s capacity to adapt. With the increasing pressures that will be felt, improved regulation and utilisation of water by the private sector is vital. Industries, they agreed, must take responsibility for their water footprints, while leading innovations

in climate adaptation coming from the insurance sector should be integrated across scales into local, city and national planning. The numerous discussions all pointed to a similar conclusion: humanity will need to achieve unprecedented levels of cooperation if we



Dr. Anna Tibaijuka, Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, said climate solutions also require progress on poverty, gender and inequity issues. Photo: SIWI.

are to mitigate, adapt, survive and thrive in the face of the shifting climate.

Storm on the Water

At the opening session of “Water and Climate Day,” speakers from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) presented the findings and implications of the latest climate research on global and regional water management. The presenters were frank on the considerable challenges we face, stressing

that water and climate issues are not future concerns, but problems of yesterday and today. “It’s quite clear that current water management practices are likely to be inadequate to reverse the impacts of climate change,” stated Dr. Zbigniew Kundzewicz. Flexible water management that accommodates new understandings of climate change scenarios was pushed as imperative for societies to be able to successfully adapt. In practice, this involves risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis of management schemes that both protects the vulnerable against hazards and takes advantage of new opportunities to increase water efficiency and equity.

Cities for the Future

During the Royal Colloquium held in the presence of H.M. King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden “A Warmer World and the Big Chill for Urban Planners,” participants heard that humankind’s capacity to adapt to climate change will be decided largely by how we construct and use our cities. Speakers stressed the stark challenge cities face in protecting their populations from rising sea levels, and stronger, less predictable and more frequent natural disasters. The most essential step to building resilient cities for the present and future is to fortify existing infrastructure in vulnerable areas and to ensure all new urban expansion is built in less disaster-prone locations, using construction methods that take climate uncertainties into account. As Dr. Anna Tibaijuka, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, explained, this profound challenge is neither simple nor singular. If any solution is to work for nations in the developing world it will require great global progress on poverty, gender and international inequity issues.