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Message from

Ms Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO,

on the occasion of World Day for Water

“Water for Cities: Responding to the Urban Challenge”

22 March 2011

As it has each year since the proclamation of World Day for Water by the United Nations in 1992, UNESCO has once again called for a response to the immense challenges posed by water management to the entire global community.

This Day's theme, “Water for cities: responding to the urban challenge”, serves to remind us all that for the first time in the history of humanity, most of the world's population is living in cities. Urban sprawl continues and slums, which continue to expand, represent 38% of this growth. Today, they are home to 1 billion people. This rise in the urban population has outstripped the development of water management, treatment and sanitation infrastructure. The gap between “haves” and “have-nots” is wider than ever, at a time when the sharing of resources and access to clean water are not only minimum requirements for community life, but also for the respect of human dignity.

In most developing countries, which account for the bulk of the world's urban growth, waste water is not adequately treated and flows directly into ground water, further polluting this fragile resource. Urban areas, with their high population density, are greatly exposed to diseases transmitted by poor-quality water. They are also more vulnerable to natural disasters in the absence of measures to manage floods caused by global warming. In these instances, the lack of access to water and sanitation weigh heavily on the economic and social development of poor city dwellers, who sometimes pay up to 50 times more than their richer neighbours for a litre of water.

As part of its mission to assist Member States in better understanding and responding to water challenges in urban environments, UNESCO has implemented an intergovernmental scientific programme devoted to water sciences, through its International Hydrological Programme. The UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education has developed a wide range of activities to promote sustainable urban water management solutions. UNESCO supports the principle of “integrated urban water management” which actually takes into account the diverse water uses and dimensions of urban living. The challenges of domestic and industrial consumption, hygiene issues, flood risks, and so on, must be taken up as a whole if we are to effectively respond to each of them.

Sustainable human development is not possible without good quality water accessible to all. This is the reality faced by city dwellers, and through them, all of humanity. Several countries share 276 drainage basins and almost as many aquifers throughout the world. All of these shared resources are natural crossroads of global civilization. If we fail to make water an instrument of peace, it might be tomorrow a major source of conflict. As we are celebrating 2011 as the International Year of Chemistry, UNESCO has undertaken to disseminate to as many people as possible, the possibilities offered by science to make the right to water and sanitation, recognized in 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, a reality for all. In reiterating our commitment today, I call on the international community to join our efforts.

Irina Bokova