Keynote Address by
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and
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Your Excellency, Yoweri Museveni, President of the Republic of Uganda

The President of AMCOW, the Honorable Buyelwa Sonjica

Honourable Maria Mutagamba, Minister of Water and Environment, Republic of Uganda

Honourable Ministers,

Prof. Wangari Maathai, Nobel Laureate

The President of the World Water Council, Mr. Lioc Fauchon,

The President of the International Water Association, Dr. David German

The President of the African Water Association, Mr. Mamadou Dia,

Development Partners

Representatives of the Private Sector,

Distinguished Guests and Delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

Allow me to express my sincere appreciation to the Government of Uganda and the African Water Association for organizing this very important international congress and exhibition. As more than a billion people continue to live without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation and, as the effects of climate change and the increasing cost of energy become more severe with every passing day, the theme of this conference – “Water and Sanitation – Perspectives relating to Energy and Climate Change” – touches the heart of one of the most critical developmental issues of our time.

I feel deeply honored to have the opportunity to address this very distinguished gathering. In line with the mandate of UN-HABITAT to support the achievement of sustainable urbanization, we are deeply engaged in a number of water and sanitation and climate change initiatives in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. Our programmes include the Water For African Cities Programme, the Lake Victoria Region Water and Sanitation Initiative, the Mekong Water and Sanitation Initiative, and the Global Water Operators Partnership Alliance. The central objective of these programmes is to improve water and sanitation services for the urban poor – the central theme of my address, “Emerging Challenges for Reaching the Poor”.
Excellencies,

It is now over 170 years since the sanitation revolution of the 19th century showed that safe water and sanitation constitutes an effective defense against disease and a prerequisite to improve living conditions for all. Indeed it is gratifying that this sanitation revolution is still recognized as a hallmark medical advance of the past 200 years.

Despite this historical recognition of the critical importance of safe drinking water and sanitation and the widespread know how to provide these services, it remains a tragedy that so many poor people continue to lack access to these basic services.

The statistics are indeed alarming. Over 1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water and some 2.5 billion people lack access to adequate sanitation. But for the urban poor it is not the numbers that count. It is the harsh reality of having to face a daily struggle to find a jerry can of water or a toilet.

We are faced with a crisis in sub-Saharan Africa of looming proportions, a crisis that is getting progressively worse, under the impact of climate change and the increasing cost of energy. Progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation is far from satisfactory. Some projections indicate that with present trends, many countries in Africa will only achieve the MDGs well after the year 2050. This situation calls for new thinking, more creative approaches and stronger commitments from Governments, public service providers and the international community.

Distinguished delegates,

Any discussion on providing affordable water and sanitation services for the poor must begin with an analysis of one of the major demographic and socio-economic trends that is taking place today. I am referring here to rapid urbanization and the urbanisation of poverty.

Africa is the fastest urbanizing continent in the world with the urban population growth at nearly 5 percent a year. The urban population in Africa, now numbering about 220 million, will increase to over 740 million by the year 2030. While urbanization is a largely positive trend, the worrying feature of this trend in Africa is that cities have become the centres of poverty and deprivation. About 72 percent of urban Africans live in slums. For comparison purposes, this figure is 46 percent for Asia and a little over 30 percent for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Many urban residents in Africa have only intermittent water supply and no sanitation. The lack of access to safe water and basic sanitation causes widespread ill health that prevents people from exercising their productive capabilities.

Women and children suffer the most. They are forced to wait until dark to relieve themselves; exposing themselves to harassment and indignity. Many girls drop out of school due to lack of proper sanitation facilities. Many of them are often forced to trade education for water.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Congress provides an excellent forum for urban water utilities to begin a constructive dialogue with Governments, the private sector, the academic community, and development partners on the key issues which inhibit the extension of water and sanitation services to the urban poor.

At UN-HABITAT we believe that public water utilities, which provide more than 90% of piped water supplies to urban areas, have a key role to play in providing affordable services to the poor. In this regard, I am happy to report that UN-HABITAT has established the Secretariat of the Global Water Operators Partnership Alliance to provide support to water utilities in enhancing their capacities through partnerships, networking, benchmarking and learning and knowledge sharing mechanisms. The Global Water Operators Partnership Alliance is actively supporting the African Water Operators Partnership and a growing number of utilities in Africa.
Our assistance to water utilities aims to promote a more pro-poor focus in utility management and operations. It is a common fallacy that extending water and sanitation services to the poor will compromise financial viability. The fact is that poor people in informal settlements largely rely on private water vendors who charge per litre up to 50 times what is being charged by water utilities. From a purely financial standpoint, poor people constitute a major untapped market.

It is true, however, that there are inherent challenges in extending water and sanitation services to the informal settlements. Access is often difficult, space is limited, and land tenure arrangements are unclear. While this situation is more challenging than in planned settlements, our experience shows that solutions can be found by using a mix of creativity and flexibility. This includes innovative business models, such as considering entire communities as the client rather than the individual, as well as the application of innovative design standards.

UN-HABITAT recently helped implement community-managed public sanitation facilities in Kibera, Kenya. Kibera is home to over 700,000 people. It is the largest contiguous slum in Africa and, without a doubt, one of the most difficult environments in which to provide public services.

Within the water and sanitation sector, water utilities are the custodians of technical and local knowledge. We need to put in place the management systems that can build on this knowledge to implement more cost-effective solutions.

A typical example is in the area of sanitation. There is too much emphasis on conventional water-borne sewerage systems. These are expensive, difficult to construct and costly to maintain. They do not make any sense in water critical situations. Examples abound where such systems have been built in African cities that are being used at less than 20 percent capacity largely because people cannot afford to connect. Affordability issues aside, one has to ask whether the quantity of water and the treatment facilities required to make such systems run properly are sustainable in the long run.

Simplified sewerage systems use smaller pipes and less water. They are much more affordable and appropriate. They have been in use in many countries for over 20 years, but have yet to be applied in Africa. I am happy to report that UN-HABITAT will soon be launching a project to apply this technology to small towns in the Lake Victoria region.

Dear friends and colleagues,

An efficient water utility is not only in a better position to achieve financial viability, but also to extend its service coverage to the poor. Furthermore, in this era of climate change and high energy costs, utilities in Africa simply must move faster to achieve greater operational efficiencies in order to better cope with higher fuel bills and changing rainfall patterns.

The water utility sector in Africa is plagued by high levels of inefficiencies. Rates of unaccounted for water often exceed 50 per cent. Furthermore, per unit energy consumption is high and energy recovery from waste through biogas generation - a common feature in many countries - is yet to be exploited in Africa.

For these reasons UN-HABITAT gives high priority to water demand management and to revenue enhancement. We have started to focus on energy audits to improve operational efficiency for water utilities. We are also engaging development partners to exploit the potential of biogas generation from waste and we have recently launched a study to assess the vulnerability of small utilities to the effects of climate change.
Excellencies,

I now turn to the issue of investment planning and financing in the water and sanitation sector. This issue determines the capacity of Governments and utilities to extend services to the poor and their capacity to access these services.

We are all aware of the huge financing needs of the water and sanitation sector in Africa, a continent that has suffered from a long legacy of under investment. Some estimates put the investment shortfall at US$ 30 billion just to attain the Millennium Development Goals. This investment shortfall is expected to increase, given the need for the utility sector to adapt to the effects of climate change. UN-HABITAT strongly believes in strategic partnerships. A good example is the partnership between UN-HABITAT and the African Development Bank which leverages the efforts of UN-HABITAT in pre-investment planning and capacity building with the Bank’s mission to provide investment capital.

There is a clear role for the private sector as well and we are very pleased that some private companies are taking concrete steps to engage in the water and sanitation sector. A partnership between UN-HABITAT and Coca Cola in Asia provides a good model that we are hoping to replicate in Africa.

UN-HABITAT is also working to assist Governments in poverty mapping and developing more effective monitoring tools to maximize impact. Examples of this work include poverty mapping of the urban areas in Kenya in partnership with the Government of Kenya and GTZ, and our partnership with Google.Org to develop better monitoring tools in Zanzibar and other towns in Tanzania.

Excellencies,

The water and sanitation sector is complex and the process of addressing the needs of the poor require partnerships at all levels, between development agencies, Governments, local authorities, civil society, the private sector and community based organizations.

Let me conclude by making an appeal to all of you here today, to join forces in building an effective partnership to ensure that, by 2015, the sanitation revolution, started over 170 years ago, will finally reach every household in Africa and bring the benefits of safe drinking water and basic sanitation to all our people.

Thank you.