



PRESIDENT JACQUES CHIRAC'S SPEECH



Mr Director General of UNESCO,
Mr Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority,
Distinguished Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends,

Thank you Mr Director General for welcoming us here in UNESCO's headquarters. My esteem for this institution is no secret. Its work in culture and education is more than ever necessary in today's world.

The world in which we live is fascinating but in need of direction; it is more open but also more fearful; it is a world in which inequalities are ever increasing. We live in a world in the throes of a moral crisis and we must find new forms of solidarity, of justice, of fraternity.

Mr Director General, ten years ago in this very building, I asked the international community to support a program of action for water. This initiative, upheld by France and the European Union, was one of my great priorities. It became the foundation for the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals for access to water. It opened the way for the Monterrey process, for the Johannesburg Summit. It prepared the Kyoto Forum and allowed a world plan for access to water to be adopted at the Evian G8 Summit in 2003.

10 years already. Some commitments were met, progress has been made, but the problem, both painful and tragic, persists. 900 million of our planet's inhabitants - 900 million - still do not have access to safe drinking water.

How much longer can we tolerate such a scandal? How much longer can we allow millions of young girls to be deprived of an education, because, far too often, they are the ones in charge of the exhausting and sometimes dangerous chore of going to the well or the fountain, kilometers from their homes ?

Can we continue to stand by as ten thousand children die each day from drinking unclean water? Ten thousand children, the equivalent of a city, have died today because of dysentery, cholera, polio...

Eight years after adopting the Millennium Development Goals, the findings are bleak: in Africa, 50% of hospital beds are still occupied by patients suffering from water related diseases.

Water is the source of life. It allows us to farm, it quenches our thirst, it feeds us, it washes us. How we use it and how we share it are inseparable from how we have created our civilizations. All cultures, from the Sahel to China, from Mesopotamia to the Native Americans, from Gaul to India, have celebrated water and have fostered a specific and yet universal relation with it. We know today that certain civilizations have disappeared because they lacked water and that this deprivation was the result of specific circumstances in the weather, bad resource management, or the deliberate destruction of ancestral techniques.

If we do not want our children to one day face the very real threat of the rarefaction of water resources, we must urgently reinvent, incorporating scientific progress, the knowledge and techniques that resulted from long experience, from an extended relationship between man and his environment. It is also by delving into what the past has to offer, what has been transmitted from generation to generation, that man will invent the future. This is why I wanted my Foundation, in partnership with the African Development Bank, to support training for the access to water in rural areas.

Successful actions show us the way. I want to personally dedicate these meetings to the women of Keita, in Niger, who, with admirable determination, reinvented ancestral techniques and made the desert bloom thanks to a parsimonious and judicious use of water. Their work has rendered fertile 34.000 hectares (84.016 acres) of desert, which now boast 18 million newly planted trees.

Water is now rationed. It is threatened by pollution; the result of the incompetence of certain industries and of the absence of informative campaigns. This has transformed lakes, rivers, interior seas into open-air sewers. Water is threatened by bad management that can be seen in the dilapidation and waste of resources. It is threatened by the rise in population and the conflicts tied to the agricultural, industrial or urban uses of the land still available.

Access to safe water must be consecrated as a universal human right. Every man, woman and child must have an enduring right to drink and to bathe without risking their lives. In 2008, this most fundamental of human dignities is still denied, hushed, unspoken. For most people, it is a topic not to be talked about: in Africa, a child can still die of a simple diarrhea.

This, despite the fact that solutions exist, well known solutions. Michel Camdessus is a precious friend whose utter commitment to building a more fraternal world I commend yet again today. In 2003, he gave me a report on water denouncing the absurdity of the system. Taking into account only Africa, the annual cost of the lack of access to safe water or sanitation, in terms of public health and loss of productivity, was estimated at 20 billion dollars. With a constant and guaranteed commitment of only 1.4 billion dollars per year until 2025, we can achieve universal access to water and sanitation, making the right to water for all a tangible and daily reality.

We are not lacking in resources but rather in management and distribution capacities. World, regional and local water authorities need to maintain their governance efforts.

For this, we must of course continue the efforts of Public Aid for Development (PAD). I solemnly reassert that we must maintain the target of 0.7% of the GNP dedicated to foreign aid. The collapse of aid funding in almost all northern countries is shameful, morally wrong, and a strategic error. What we do not give today will need to be accounted for tomorrow. If we do not take decisive action now, we may not face water wars but we will soon be confronted with thirst riots.

As I did when I committed the international community to a planeticket tax, we must also unblock stable and reliable resources for development, especially in terms of access to clean water and sanitation. Taxing maritime transportation of goods, especially the most congested routes – those most at risk from pollution – could be considered.

Finally, we must also have a strategic vision of resource sharing. A strategic vision that states that water is a common good, protected from any attempts to monopolize it. More than 260 river basins worldwide are shared between several countries. In 1998, the UN had already listed 70 sites where water tensions were high: the Middle East, the Sahel, Latin America, the Indian sub-continent, central Asia... Will we wait for them to erupt?

Until now the worst has been avoided but for how long? It is now urgent to establish and adopt rules of sharing and arbitration.

Equitable management by countries sharing water resources, both surface and underground, can only be achieved through active cooperation and the respect of each participant's interests. We must keep in mind the equal rights to the populations whether living upstream or downstream. Geography must not be and cannot be a discriminating factor.

Large rivers are dying off and with them the populations who depend on them for their survival, for the development of their civilizations. I embarked France on a resolute policy of support for organizations and regional initiatives to save important rivers such as the Senegal River, the Volta, the Niger River and the Congo River. Such initiatives must become systematic; when a river is shared, there cannot be a single master. India and Pakistan have understood this and have always maintained joint management of the Indus River, even at the height of hostilities. We must be capable of doing the same for the Jordan River, a river of cultural and symbolic importance for the different populations of the region. Allow me to suggest to the leaders of the States within the Union for the Mediterranean to devote one of their next meetings to this central issue. An important initiative to save the Jordan River would do honor to this magnificent project. Let us not forget that it was on those banks that the following, profoundly human words, were uttered, "I was thirsty and you gave me drink."

Dear friends,

By organizing these international encounters with UNESCO and the French Agency for Development, whose General Director, Mr Severino, I salute warmly, I want to remind us all that ten years after the Paris meeting for the improvement of access to safe drinking water and for the fight against pollution and waste, mobilization must not weaken.

Even though the Millennium Goals in terms of access to water are not overly ambitious, there is a very real danger that they will not be reached. These commitments at the dawn of the 21st century were a gesture of hope. Must we accept that our united efforts, which have marked this symbolic step, should thus be trampled underfoot? It is high time the planet's nations rectify the course of events by remobilizing the necessary means so that universal access to safe water becomes the foundation, in fact and by law, of the cohesion of a world community.

We cannot settle for half-measures. The current economic and financial crisis, and the resolution that France and the European Union are determinedly working towards, must lead to even more determined acts on our part. We must work towards goals destined to guarantee the future of our species and not contribute to its absence. The crisis must not divert our attention from the urgent efforts to be accomplished to ensure universal access to safe water. On the contrary, it must shake the world's nations into creating new goals to reduce poverty and a charter for the global community. The lives of millions of men and women on every continent depend on it. Peace depends on it.

The 5th World Water Forum will be held in Istanbul next spring. I hope the debates that follow will lead to concrete propositions that will further this Forum's efforts.

I would like to warmly thank the prominent figures that were generous enough to help us by sharing their experience and testimony during both these round tables.

May your efforts bear fruit.

Thank you.