



Statement by
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Foreign Affairs

Ministerial Luncheon on Tackling
Water Risks to Ensure a Sustainable
Future

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Opening Speech

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Water is essential for our survival. It cannot be substituted. And it is finite. As water is at the core of sustainable development, it deserves special attention within the framework of today's event on follow-up efforts to the Millennium Development Goals.

This is why Switzerland has decided to organize this Luncheon, together with Colombia, the Netherlands, the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, the World Water Council, and with the participation of UN-Water.

I am very pleased that you have responded favorably to our invitation – and I wish to welcome you to this event.

It is our ambition that this will not remain a stand-alone gathering. Rather, it should become, in the words of Humphrey Bogart, “the beginning of a beautiful friendship”. We hope this will become the kick-off to a whole sequence of events – and to the building of a platform of like-minded actors willing to invest in the potential of water as a source of development, cooperation and growth. I will come back to this in the closing remarks.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The global water crisis is one of the most pressing political, environmental and social issues of the 21st century.

Two and a half billion people still have no access to proper sanitation, with all the implications this has for health, dignity, and ultimately prosperity. According to some estimates, at least 2 billion people use water that is unsafe. More than 80% of used water is discharged without any treatment. Water pollution of rivers, lakes, groundwater and oceans is on the rise.

The bottom line is this: Water issues are pressing. And the scope of the challenges is bound to increase further as a result of demographic growth, urbanization, higher levels of consumption and the negative effects of climate change. Water supply is unlikely to keep pace with water demand. Over 50% of the global population may live under water stress by 2050.

The consequences of these mounting water challenges are multifold:

- They can have dramatic impacts on the quality of life of millions of individuals by exacerbating disease, hunger, and poverty.
- They can negatively affect regional and global food security.
- They can produce electricity gaps and hamper economic development, as many developing countries rely heavily on hydropower in their energy mix.
- They can also fuel social tensions and further weaken fragile states.

- And, they can exacerbate regional tensions, particularly if water-sharing arrangements are absent, inadequate, or insufficiently implemented.

But, Ladies and gentlemen,

We should see not only the risks, but also the benefits of dealing with water challenges for human welfare, the economy and the environment.

Water is part of the solution.

It is a key to poverty reduction and development. Each dollar that Switzerland has invested in water has an impact for people living in poverty worth 3 to 5 times this investment. This is a remarkable and very encouraging finding!

Water is a solution for food security, for energy security, for human health, and for climate change adaptation.

It is also a solution for economic growth: It is estimated that more sustainable water practices could generate about \$17 trillion of global GDP. Such practices could also decrease by 21 percent the number of children suffering from malnourishment.

Beyond the development agenda, water can be a vital source for cooperation. Joint water management, for example, can become an important confidence-building measure, helping to reduce tension in a wider conflict setting.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let us not be overwhelmed by the tasks ahead of us. While urgent action is needed, we do have concrete solutions at hand. Let me cite four examples from the Swiss experience.

- First, our efforts with our good partner Colombia to promote partnership between Swiss and Colombian companies has resulted in a reduced water footprint for their products, which is good for the environment and helps them reduce costs.
- Second, we seek to contribute to a paradigm change that could transform the way we value and manage the world's watersheds. As work with our partners "Forest Trends" and the "Katoomba Group" has made clear, investing in *natural* infrastructure such as wetlands, streams, and forests that can capture, filter, and store freshwater is emerging as one of the most cost-efficient ways to secure clean water and recharge aquifers. It could indeed become a key contribution to global water security, as governments – from mega-cities, such as New York and Beijing, to small villages – seek sustainable alternatives to costly *traditional* infrastructure.
- Third, there is our Blue Peace initiative – our water diplomacy efforts in conflict-prone areas in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Preliminary results of this Blue Peace Initiative demonstrate how water diplomacy can help address the challenges of transboundary water management.

- Finally, we are well aware of how important international law and intergovernmental processes are for water issues, too. This is why we very much welcome how the UNECE Water convention is going global.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Tackling water risks is not just an imperative, but also an opportunity. Our opportunity is to lay the basis for a “water-secure” world today. A world in which our freshwater resources are managed in a sustainable manner, in which access to water is secured for people, food production, ecosystems, energy and industry. A world in which we are protected from pollution and water hazards. And a world in which water is a catalyst of cooperation rather than a source of conflict.

Given the seminal importance of water, Switzerland is convinced that water has to be treated as one of the highest priorities in the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Today’s and tomorrow’s most critical water challenges for a sustainable world require action in three interlinked areas:

- First, universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene;
- Second, sustainable management of water resources based on an inclusive and integrated, basin-wide approach. An approach that satisfies human needs, respects cultural values and serves economic growth, while also respecting ecosystem

requirements and ensuring their services. This approach should also include management practices that improve resilience to floods, droughts and other water-related disasters;

- Finally, the third area concerns water quality and the management of all wastewater based on the concept of “reduce – remove – re-use”.

To achieve all this, we need committed and coherent efforts by a broad range of actors: developed, emerging and developing countries; the public and private sectors; researchers and civil society.

This is why we call for a sustainable development goal dedicated to water.

Such a water goal will foster commitment and guide accelerated and concerted action. It will allow moving from a silo approach to an integrated approach – the only possible way forward in dealing with the complexities of water issues.

We are glad that many share this vision and that the calls for a dedicated water goal are multiplying.

Switzerland will continue to advocate for such a goal with our partners. We hope that more and more of you will join us.

I wish to thank all of you for your interest in the water issue. I would also like to thank all speakers who will share with us their views and ideas on how to move forward. Finally, let me express our gratitude to our co-hosts for the great cooperation in the organization of this event and beyond.

I look forward to interesting and inspiring discussions.

Concluding remarks

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to start by thanking all speakers and discussants for the interesting and passionate debate.

We heard many arguments reaffirming the gravity of water risks and their implications, and calling for urgent action.

We heard that water problems are complex and interrelated and that we cannot just pick and choose the easy and socially acceptable parts of the water tasks in the development mix.

We also heard that while the perspectives of different countries and sectors of society might be different, we are all united by common water challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is important that these voices for water be heard loud and clear in the discussions on the post-2015 development agenda during this General Assembly session.

This is why Switzerland proposes that we should build a common platform for a water goal in the post-2015 development agenda.

We can make a difference if we jointly stand up for an inspirational and comprehensive water goal.

We should have an open platform for the exchange of views, experience, capacity and evidence. We should also seek to identify best-practice solutions to harness the potential of water to sustainable development and economic growth. We need to enhance understanding so that in the next months, when the negotiation phase starts, all countries can make informed decisions.

Our ambition should be to strengthen the collective commitment and political will, and to build exchanges and dialogue across sectors such as energy, food and health.

We invite all countries and organizations to join in with their views and experience to work together for such a water goal.

Let us not lose time. Our next appointment is already in less than a month at the Budapest Water Summit where we will start formulating concrete recommendations for the UN General Assembly.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Humphrey Bogart did not just famously talk about “the beginning of a beautiful friendship”. He also, and even more famously, said, and I quote: “This is the stuff that dreams are made of.”

The Swiss dream is a blue world where water brings us together to sustain equitable growth. It is a dream that can come true if we join forces, work hard, and convince others of the large, untapped potential of water as a source of development and peace.

Thank you.