



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

International Commitment is needed to Fight Global Water Scarcity

Colombo, Sri Lanka – March 20, 2007 – Addressing ‘the rapidly unfolding and unprecedented crisis of global water scarcity’ is an issue of increasing urgency on the global political agenda, requiring rapid implementation of wise water management strategies, innovative technologies and effective institutional arrangements at multiple scales, by multiple actors. So say leading agricultural researchers, development professionals and policy experts who attended the International Forum on Water and Food in Vientiane, Laos, November 2006. **The culmination of their recommendations is captured in the Vientiane Statement – a declaration of vision and strategy on how to achieve a more water and food secure world.**

Released to coincide with World Water Day, March 22, 2007, the Vientiane Statement exemplifies the current push from the international community for widespread action on the escalating global food and water crisis, and justifiably so, as water scarcity has recently been identified as affecting 1/3 of the world’s population – a fact also denoted by the theme of this year’s World Water Day, ‘Coping with Water Scarcity.’

“The Vientiane Statement outlines many innovative technical options for improving water management,” says Jonathan Woolley, Program Coordinator of the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF), “however, what really strikes home is that the scientists and policy makers see an urgent need for learning about how people can work together to understand and agree on tradeoffs in the use of water and this is where they offer us many exciting options.”

The ground-breaking Vientiane Statement represents a consensus among the water and food research and development community on a way forward for the developing world to achieve much needed increases in water productivity for both ecological sustainability and poverty reduction. The statement represents a strong commitment towards ameliorating the global problems posed by hunger, poverty and disease.

The International Forum on Water and Food was organized by the CPWF, which is at the forefront of international research on water scarcity and food security. By conducting research in 9 benchmark river basins throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the Program aims to increase agricultural water productivity, a goal also adhered to by participants at the Forum.

Presently, the agricultural sector consumes between 70 – 90% of total water in less-developed countries, making it the single most powerful area in which to create necessary change. ‘By using less water to produce more food, more water can be made available for non-agricultural purposes. Poverty can be reduced and food security improved when smallholder farmers and subsistence fishers achieve higher levels of sustainable productivity’ says Forum organizer, Kim Geheb, of the Mekong River Commission.

Targets for reform include farms and agricultural ecosystems, local communities, water sheds and river basins, national and global policies and institutions.

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The change is needed now. At present, the world's rapidly growing and urbanizing populace requires an increase in food production by over 30% in the next 20 years. This involves immense water resources. According to Dr. Geheb, **“If we don't learn to better manage our water by 2025, the extra water needed to produce food will be equivalent at least to the present annual flow of the Mekong river...we just don't have the luxury of using that extra water. We need to do things better. And the researchers at the Forum suggest ways of doing things better.”**

Among the recommendations:

Introduce multiple-use water systems. Most people use water for a multiplicity of domestic and productive purposes. Unfortunately, water supply systems are usually designed for a single use, e.g., irrigation. Such systems are often unable to cope with additional demands. Where appropriate, water systems that are multiple-use by design should be introduced. Diverse water sources should also be explored—such as waste water. Attention must be paid at all times to the ways that water effects human health.

Improve communication and collaboration among water users. Water is often a source of conflict, e.g., between upstream and downstream users or across national borders. Raw power often determines who has access to water resources. Dialogue among stakeholders can, however, foster awareness of each others' interconnected needs, leading to more efficient, equitable water allocations and, where appropriate, a shift from sharing water to sharing benefits derived from water use.

Recognize environmental services. Inappropriate upstream land and water use can damage downstream ecologies and people's health. Downstream stakeholders may need to provide incentives to upstream people to allow greater flows of higher quality water. Within a basin, aquatic and land management systems produce ecological services such as clean water, fresh air and the preservation of biodiversity. The services are difficult to value, whereby their importance is often not fully appreciated.

The Vientiane Statement represents a call to action from the globe's leading minds in the field of water productivity in agriculture. Adhering to their guidelines offers one of the most promising paths to a water and food secure future.

-CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food Secretariat-

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2. The Vientiane Statement is available on the Challenge Program for Water and Food Forum Website <http://forum.waterandfood.org/>
3. The Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF) is a multi-institutional, research-based initiative that aims to increase water productivity for agriculture in order to improve livelihoods and leave more water for other users and the environment. More information about the Challenge Program on Water and Food can be accessed online at <http://www.waterandfood.org/>
4. 'Coping with Water Scarcity' is the theme for World Water Day held annually on the 22nd of March. For more information about World Water Day visit <http://www.unwater.org/wwd07/flashindex.html>
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