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THE WORLD OF WEATHER AND WATER

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Development issues for the 21st Century

Interview with Dr Gordon J. Young, Co-ordinator
by Dr Hessam Taba

Dr Young obtained his Ph.D degree in Physical Geography from McGill University, Montreal, Canada, in 1975. From 1972 to 1987 he worked as a Research Scientist and as a Programme Manager, Inland Waters Directorate, Environment Canada, Ottawa. He became Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, in 1987 and, in 1988, Director, Cold Regions Research Centre, Wilfrid Laurier University. His scientific interests are in high mountain hydrology. From 1988 to 1990 he was Chairman, Intergovernmental Council for the International Hydrological Programme, UNESCO. At present Dr Young works at the Secretariat of the World Meteorological Organization in Geneva as Co-ordinator of ICWE.

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H.T. Could you briefly tell us where and when the Conference will be held and how it fits into the schedule of major conferences in the next few years?

G.Y. First of all, the title of the Conference is the "International Conference on Water and the Environment: Development Issues for the 21st Century" which puts water in a broad framework of environmental and developmental concerns. It will take place from 26 to 31 January 1992 in Dublin, Ireland. The conference will provide a focus on freshwater issues and its main purpose is to formulate strategies for addressing freshwater problems worldwide.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992, will cover a very wide range of environmental and developmental topics. The conference in Dublin is designed as the official United Nations freshwater lead into the Brazil "Earth Summit". It will cover all aspects of water resources and can be considered as part of a worldwide co-ordinated effort to recommend specific action plans in the water area set within the framework of environment and development.

H.T. Why is water so important in environment and development issues?

G.Y. Water is essential to life on earth. Plant and animal life are both vitally dependent on water. Water can be regarded as a lubricant which allows life to function, and life can be greatly affected if there is too little or too much water. If the quality of water changes adversely then life is affected.

As you know all human activities are vitally dependent on water. The agricultural, energy and industrial sectors all depend on a reliable water supply at reasonable cost. Water availability varies from region to region. The type of agriculture, industry and development vary very greatly from one part of the world to another. However we can generalize to say that water is of vital importance to economic activity everywhere.

We should not look at water issues as totally independent within the economic and development framework; we have to look at water issues within an integrated framework of issues. I'd like to put water into a global context by mentioning two or three important points. Let us consider the problem of population growth. Within the next few decades, world population may double and clearly there are going to be incredible demands on natural resources, one of which is water. Depletion or degradation of natural resources - forests, soils, minerals - is intimately linked with the availability of water.

We are also facing the problem of climate change, be it man-induced or natural. A change in climate may mean changes in precipitation patterns and quantities, changes in evaporation and, consequently, dramatic changes in water resources. Rivers may flow less predictably with altered discharges. There will be less immediate, but perhaps in the long run, just as important consequences in groundwater supply for, as you know, many areas of the world are dependent not only on surface water but on groundwater supplies.

At present there is a dichotomy between, on the one hand, conservationist strategies and, on the other hand, development strategies. At one extreme of this spectrum, there is the desire to conserve natural resources and preserve nature. At the other end of the spectrum, water must be used for development and there is a real problem of how to steer a balanced course between these two extremes. This is the essential problem which has to be addressed by the Dublin Conference. We have to reconcile the desire for conservation and the necessity for development. The developed world is in a very different situation from the developing world and so the attitudes towards conservation strategies and development strategies are different from one part of the world to another.

Another very important theme in water management is that many of the world's very large rivers transgress international boundaries, so there are problems of jurisdiction. Just to quote a few examples: in Africa, the Nile, the Niger or the Zambesi; in Asia, the Ganges, the Indus, or some of the major rivers in South-East Asia; in South-America, the Amazon or the Parana, in Europe the Rhine or the Danube. All of these very major rivers transgress international boundaries so that any development which takes place upstream is likely to have consequences downstream. This problem of mobility of the resource is a very major problem for water resource managers. It is not so much of a problem in some other resource management sectors. For example, in the forestry sector or in the mineral sector; forests and minerals do not move, but water does move from one place to another.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that most rivers do not flow constantly. There are seasonal variations in flow and there are long-term trends dependent on climatic trends which mean that supply is not constant. Therefore, in making decisions about allocation of the resource, the water manager has constant problems concerning inconsistency of supply and possible changes in quantity and quality induced by actions of upstream neighbours.

H.T. Which agencies are involved in convening the conference?

G.Y. There are about 20 agencies and bodies within the United Nations system which have involvement in freshwater issues, some having major involvement such as: the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Other organizations such as the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) do not have their prime focus on water but recognize the importance of water in their work. Their interests are co-ordinated through the Intersecretariat Group for Water Resources chaired by Dr. John Rodda, Director of the Hydrology and Water Resources Department at the WMO Secretariat. It therefore falls to WMO to convene the Dublin Conference on behalf of all the UN agencies involved and hence the Secretariat for the Dublin Conference is housed within WMO.

H.T. What action has been taken for the preparation of the conference?

G.Y. The UNCED, to be held in Brazil in 1992, has several preparatory conferences, two of which have already taken place. The Dublin Conference on freshwater will be an additional meeting leading into the UNCED process.

A small secretariat which I co-ordinate has been established at the WMO Headquarters in Geneva. People are being seconded from other organizations and from some countries to come and work with the secretariat from periods of a few months up to about a year. This secretariat has been operating since February 1991 and is in the process of co-ordinating the conference.

Co-ordination involves a vast range of activities such as selecting major speakers for plenary sessions, organizing a series of working groups, making the logistic preparations in Dublin such as interpretation and translation facilities, the press and media coverage. There is a great deal of co-ordination with the local organizers and we are putting into effect a public information and promotion strategy for media briefings, for exhibits, posters, information leaflets, commemorative stamps, logo and letterhead designs.

H.T. Are there any pre-conference meetings planned; if so, what topics will be discussed?

G.Y. Yes, there are a number of symposia and workshops which will lead into the discussions at Dublin and I would mention just a few of these:

In June, at Delft, the Netherlands, there will be a Symposium on Capacity Building for Sustainable Water Resources. It will involve an examination of institutional structures, the capacities of those structures and will suggest ways in which the structures might be modified or adapted to better deal with water resource problems.

In August, at Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, there will be a Workshop on Water Quality where that particular segment of water resources issues will be discussed in detail.

In November in Copenhagen, there will be a meeting on the initiative of the Nordic countries, to promote specific actions relevant to developing countries.

Finally, there will be a scientific conference in Vienna in November where the International Council of Scientific Unions will be hosting a conference on scientific aspects of UNCED.

H.T. What are the plans for the conference itself; the format of plenary and working group sessions, etc.?

G.Y. The conference will last five and a half days; the first half day will be devoted to opening ceremonies; the main sessions will begin on the second day with a plenary session lasting the whole day. Ten or 12 speakers will make keynote addresses. They will discuss a whole range of topics which will address systematically all the major issues facing water resource managers. The next few days will be spent in working group sessions and this is where most of the discussions on topics within the area of water resources management will take place. The working group sessions will have at their disposal a number of papers in order to focus discussion on the most important issues. National statements and concerns of particular non-governmental organizations will also serve as background documents.

A poster session and exhibits will be held in Dublin Castle and some short excursions will be organized. On the final day, a summary document of working group recommendations will be presented. A short "Dublin Statement" will also be prepared to be formally submitted to the fourth Preparatory Conference in New York in March 1992 before UNCED in June 1992.

H.T. Who will participate?

G.Y. I should mention that this is not an intergovernmental meeting as UNCED, but a meeting of government-designated experts. The participants will have expertise in policy as well as technical matters. They will be sufficiently high-ranking that they can transmit the decisions made at Dublin back to their own countries for implementation at country level. There will also be experts from non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations to address issues of particular concern. Keynote speakers in the Plenary will be invited and the chairpersons of plenary sessions and working groups will be elected from the participants during the conference.

H.T. How much does a conference like this cost and who pays?

G.Y. In a conference as such this, there are a great many hidden costs. There are of course people working in UN agencies and at governmental level on their normal salary, and these costs don't appear in our budgetting. But the tangible costs which we have to consider are three: first of all, the costs of running a secretariat for the conference; secondly, costs of the conference services, such as translation and interpretation, costs of organizing media coverage, thirdly, costs of funding participants, particularly from developing countries to travel to the conference. Many of the local costs are graciously being assumed by our hosts, the government of Ireland. If you take those three groups of costs, we estimate that the total is likely to be between 1.5 and 2 million SFR over the next year.

The above expenses are borne by the UN agencies involved and also by countries. The OECD group of countries has been requested to contribute to a Trust Fund which will support all the secretariat and conference activities. The kind of support can either be in cash or in kind. I might just mention that, while it is relatively easy to obtain money to fund the cost of participant travel to the conference, it is quite difficult to find money to support the activities of the Secretariat.

H.T. What are the current problems in your work?

G.Y. Well, these are more "challenges" than problems. First of all, we have to plan what we want to achieve in the next decades in the freshwater area and what sort of overall strategies we want to adopt. Clearly, it is important to bear this in mind in our conference planning because the outputs from the conference have to address those high-level strategic issues.

Secondly, on an organizational level, there is a need to meet the requirements and aspirations of the many agencies and countries and individuals involved. This is a challenging task because there are many different individuals involved. They have their own agendas which have to be accommodated diplomatically and for this compromises have to be made.

Thirdly, one has to think at the "nuts and bolts" level of conference organization, structuring the conference, structuring the working group sessions to maximize effective output. This is not easy since, on the one hand, everyone should be allowed to speak at the conference and, on the other hand, one should concentrate on the most important issues. A great deal of personal diplomacy at all levels is needed. Conferences do not just happen, they take a very great deal of organization and preparation. I would also say that, despite appearances, the aims of most conferences are not always worked out completely in advance, but rather they evolve and change as the day of the conference approaches.

Finally, a problem which plagues almost any conference organizer, until the last minute, is the uncertainty, until the last minute, of the number of participants involved. This can have enormous ramifications on local facilities and hence on costs.

H.T. What will be the major outcomes of the conference?

G.Y. At this stage, it may be useful to summarize the main purposes of the conference as well as the anticipated outcomes.

The first objective is to assess the current status of the world's freshwater resources in relation to present and future water demands and to identify priority issues for the 1990s.

The second objective is to develop co-ordinated inter-sectoral approaches towards managing these resources by strengthening the linkages between the various water programmes.

Thirdly we must formulate environmentally-sustainable strategies and action frameworks for the 1990s and beyond to be presented to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development;

Lastly we must bring the above issues, strategies and actions to the attention of governments as a basis for national programmes and increasing awareness of the environmental consequences and developmental opportunities in improving the management of water resources.

We envisage three written outputs. I have already mentioned that there will be a Dublin Statement. This will be a short summary of focussed recommendations coming out of the conference. It will probably consist of only two or three pages but this will be the most important conference document which will be taken on to the UNCED in Brazil.

Then, there will be written conference proceedings which will essentially summarize the findings and the recommendations coming out of the working groups. Clearly, this will be a very much more substantial document than the summary Dublin Statement and will expand upon the contents of the Statement. Lastly, we intend to publish, possibly commercially, a volume containing the 10 or 12 keynote speeches and that will be a very substantial text and will form another major output from the conference.

Within these written statements, there will be very important action frameworks for water resources management for the future. There must be better co-operation and integration between the work of the various UN agencies involved in freshwater. There must also be rational strategies for integrated water resources management at national levels and at regional levels. We must investigate better mechanisms of bilateral co-operation between developed and developing countries and between groups of developing countries. We must also look at better mechanisms for capacity building for strengthening the institutional basis of integrated water resource management in developing countries.

I'd like perhaps to end with my answer to a comment from one of my colleagues in Canada. Just before I came to Geneva, he questioned the necessity of high-level meetings when as he put it the "real action" takes place at the local level. My answer to that is that there must be action at all levels. There is a need for political action at the highest governmental and intergovernmental levels. High-level political agreement sets the scene for action at national levels and regional levels. This facilitates action at the local level.

My colleague is correct, of course, that there must ultimately be action at the local level if we are to improve the situation of our water resources. My view is that action at all levels is necessary. In a way I would go even further than my colleague and would say that, while high-level action is clearly necessary, the most important place for action is in the minds of people. Hopefully the publicity deriving from the international conferences will stimulate the required action in individual human beings.