



WMO FEATURE

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THE WORLD OF WEATHER AND WATER

Point Of View

ELEVENTH CONGRESS WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

Interview with Professor Godwin Olu Patrick Obasi
on the occasion of his re-appointment as
Secretary-General
of the
World Meteorological Organization

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The World of Weather and Water

POINT OF VIEW: Eleventh Congress

Interview with Professor G.O.P. Obasi
Secretary-General
World Meteorological Organization

by Dr. Sylvia Moore
Public Information and Press Office (WMO)

Dr. Moore: Here we are at the International Conference Centre at Geneva where the Eleventh Congress of the World Meteorological Organization is in session. That Congress has just reappointed Professor Godwin Olu Patrick Obasi as Secretary-General. This will be his third term of office. This is a momentous occasion and we are very privileged to have him in the studio today.

Dr. Moore: Professor Obasi, in your national and international career you have bridged many worlds - the worlds of science, politics, technology and education. You are ideally placed to lead the World Meteorological Organization into the future, in the face of new challenges. You were first appointed Secretary-General in 1983. Now you'll start your third term of office. What does this mean to you personally?

Professor Obasi: I thank you very much. This means quite a lot to me. First of all I have been very deeply touched by the honour conferred on me by my reappointment as Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization. It shows that my stewardship has been appreciated by all accredited representatives of governments which are Members of the Organization. Sure enough, there are many challenges confronting the Organization which require the effective response of the Organization in the next few years. I am very pleased that I will have that opportunity to be able to serve the Organization in meeting these challenges.

Dr. Moore: One of the challenges concerns the balance of nature which is maintained in a very delicate fashion. In fact there is an old Latin saying that nature does not take great leaps. Even a hurricane disperses seeds. So, what is upsetting this balance in the atmosphere and in the hydrosphere? What is happening to the prime mover of mankind?

Professor Obasi: Well, you are aware of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, set up jointly by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environmental Programme. One of the purposes of the IPCC is to provide a scientific assessment of the greenhouse gases which are responsible for the potential climate change. Its terms of reference also provide for an evaluation of the possible impact and response strategies. The IPCC released its first assessment report in August last year, and this report was also presented to the Second World Climate Conference that took place in November 1990, in Geneva.

It is quite clear now that the greenhouse gases have been increasing in the atmosphere due to man's activities. It is quite clear also that unless something is done to curtail their accumulation the situation may become irreversible.

Dr. Moore: But to monitor the greenhouse gases, you need a greenhouse observing network and I understand that the network at present is unequally spread out and that there are not enough monitoring stations. I know that there is unique trust in the World Meteorological Organization and its Members who freely provide and exchange meteorological and hydrological statistics everywhere in the world, yet, in the present circumstances it is clear that expansion of the observation network is absolutely necessary. What more does the World Meteorological Organization need now to be sure of the current evolution of climate?

Professor Obasi: You are correct that the network of the so called Global Atmospheric Watch programme requires improvement. Indeed the distribution in the less developed parts of the world especially in Africa, Latin America and Asia is a matter of concern to the Organization. We believe that we all have to pool our resources to improve the situation. Recently, we made proposals to tap some extra-budgetary resources from the Global Environmental Facility Fund which has been set up to arrest the deficiencies which are necessary to sustain the Environment under continued development. I am pleased that our submission to the Fund has been favourably considered by those responsible for its management.

Dr. Moore: I am sure that in addition to monitoring and observing, the World Meteorological Organization's Congress at present must be considering other aspects of controlling problems of climate change such as the climate convention - what is happening now in that respect?

Professor Obasi: The World Meteorological Congress is the highest policy-making body of the Organization. As such, it examines the programmes and the budget necessary for their implementation of its approved Programmes in the next financial period. This particular Congress has been very, very interested in what WMO's response has been and would be on the overall environmental issue where climate has been most prominent.

And indeed all aspects of the climate issue including the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee which is charged with the preparation of a Framework Convention on Climate through, the IPCC, and indeed, the new global climate observing system - have to be adequately supported. Hopefully Congress will make available the necessary funding for us to play the proper role which the Organization should perform in all bodies concerned.

Dr. Moore: I believe that the World Meteorological Organization will have a role to play in issues of man-made disasters especially air pollution caused by the oil wells now burning in Kuwait. Is there something that WMO is doing about that in terms of monitoring any possibilities of micro climate change?

Professor Obasi: Yes. About two weeks ago, WMO called a meeting of experts concerned with pollution, fires and smoke. This body considered the various aspects of the emission of various substances and gases emanating from the oil wells which are burning in Kuwait. There are plans to improve our monitoring capabilities in that part of the world, and to improve our research capabilities to ensure that all follow up action is based on sound scientific information.

Dr. Moore: I think developing countries must be close to your heart. You are from Nigeria. You are close to the people in your own village. You worked in Kenya as Professor of Meteorology. What do you feel are the most important things that should be done for developing countries in terms of meteorology and hydrology?

Professor Obasi: Of course, in my position as Secretary-General, my role is to be of service to all Members of the Organization, both developed and the developing countries - meteorology being a field where there is interdependence - no nation can go it alone. If the facilities in developed countries are strengthened and the others are left weak, obviously this will affect derived products prepared for users in all countries.

Therefore, we need to look at the weak links in the system, which are primarily in the developing countries. These weak links are inadequacies in the network of observations, telecommunications and data-processing facilities. Unfortunately, because of their economic situation, it is at present not possible for each individual national weather service or hydrological service to derive maximum benefits from their participation in WMO's programmes. As a result, I am particularly encouraging, and indeed the Organization, is encouraging, the pooling of available resources. Members coming together jointly operating some systems will be advantageous.

In this connection you might have heard about the African Centre for Meteorological Application to Development which is being established in Niamey. That will pool the expertise of the fifty-one African meteorological services together to jointly operate the Centre. The ASEAN countries are also doing the same, for the ASEAN Specialized Centre which is to be located in Singapore. We are encouraging the development of these centres and I am giving them the necessary support and backing.

Dr. Moore: That brings us back to the unique trust in the World Meteorological Organization. I think it is perhaps unique in that it is the only Organization which is so widely spread in terms of the exchange of information. And, at the same time you cannot put the atmosphere into quarantine. The atmosphere is democratic. So what happens in Chile, for instance, has an effect on what is going on in the Antarctic. What happens in Australia also has an effect on the Antarctic and so on. These key issues of the future are all interrelated in terms of climate change, environment, energy conservation and development. It seems to me that the World Meteorological Organization has a crucial role to play in all of these. In what way is Congress looking to the future to meet these kinds of challenge?

Professor Obasi: You know that next year in June 1992, there will be a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The World Meteorological Organization, and this Congress in particular, is looking into the role which the Organization can play in that conference to ensure that the fields of meteorology and hydrology make a proper contribution to the social and economic development of all nations. I want to assure you that the application programmes which Congress has also studied, and for which the necessary resources will be made, will ensure that national weather and hydrological services make their proper contribution to the various economic sectors in their respective countries.

Dr. Moore: In this respect, will the Organization be taking a new orientation?

Professor Obasi: Well, we should consider the pressing problems in the world at large at the present moment. You will find that many nations, especially the developing ones, have economic problems. Even some of the industrialized nations have problems. Therefore, in my view the present challenge to all nations is to come out of this economic depression. It will be much more difficult for the developing countries, but at the same time, they should develop their plans and study their situations, identifying particularly which areas and sectors can really contribute to their economic revival.

In many developing countries you will find that agriculture is basic and fundamental. Therefore agriculture and climate should be areas where we should focus our attention. In some countries it will be water resources, management and development, or tapping rivers in order to generate non-polluting energy resources. Fields also vary depending on the location of the countries concerned. Nonetheless, the field of climate which is a fundamental resource, affecting all activities of mankind, is most important.

Dr. Moore: Climate touches everything.

Professor Obasi: Definitely.

Dr. Moore: A lot has been achieved in the past forty-one years of the existence of the World Meteorological Organization as a United Nations Agency. The challenges are great, there is a long way to go and I wish you all the very, very best in meeting those challenges. Thank you so much for the interview.

Professor Obasi: Thank you.

In this broadcast, Professor Obasi was speaking to me, Sylvia Moore, in Geneva at the Eleventh Congress of the World Meteorological Organization.