



22 March 2009

WORLD WATER DAY STATEMENT

22 March is World Water Day, a day to celebrate this marvel of nature that sustains all life on earth.

However, World Water Day cannot be a celebration as long as lack of water or contaminated water kills thousands of people every day. People have a right to water in sufficient quantities to ensure their lives and to protect their dignity. Governments have responsibilities to ensure this right. Water is a fundamental human right.

Our members are committed to provide the highest quality water to all of our citizens, regardless of their ability to pay. We call on government and management of the water utilities to support this collective effort. We believe that much more can be done to help those in need. And we believe that the public sector has a special responsibility and a special role.

But, for the past 20 years, governments have tried privatising these services, in the hopes of delivering better services with less impact on the public budgets. This privatisation or public-private partnership approach has failed, especially in developing countries.

Public sector utilities provide water and sanitation services to more than 90% of the populations currently served. Public water utilities must be equipped to supply these services. Governments must provide the necessary resources to these public utilities, whether it is appropriate technology, finance or managerial and technical skills.

The only credible strategy for delivering water and sanitation services to all citizens is through the public utilities. A number of strong water utilities support weaker ones, through public-public partnerships, either in their own countries or across borders. These public-public partnerships (PUPs) operate on a not-for-profit basis, although like any public service, they are not free of cost.

On World Water Day, we, the unions, call on our governments to support the PUPs mechanism in the water and sanitation sector. There are many thousands of public utilities that will benefit from such a systematic mechanism of international solidarity. But they will need specific government support.

Public water utilities are most often under local or municipal government control. These utilities are typically not allowed to engage in international activities and have no budgets to facilitate such work. The huge experience of the many thousands of public utilities is not drawn upon to solve the global problems in this sector.

Therefore we demand that our governments channel the planned aid in this sector through the PUPs system, encouraging utilities to start PUPs as well as facilitating the financing of the PUPs. Governments must systematically involve their public utilities in the international assistance projects in this sector.

Trade unions understand and practice international solidarity. Our members, the workers in these public utilities, have a wealth of knowledge and expertise that is not sufficiently drawn upon in the global campaign to provide water and sanitation services to all. We commit our support to global PUPs mechanisms, and call on public utilities and governments at all levels to join us. Together, we can deliver the Human Right to Water.

The divide remains deep, between the people who want quality water and sanitation and the bankers and corporations who control the World Water Council – the central think tank for making profit out of water and sanitation. Their vision is the same one that brought us the financial crisis – a shrinking government, unregulated markets and corporate profits.

Today, with the financial crisis in every newspaper, it is time to use resources to accelerate the building of water and sanitation infrastructure. This will not only give people around the world better access to water, but also create jobs to reduce the impact of the financial crisis in terms of job losses.

Last year it was possible for governments to find money to support banks. Just one example: support from the UK government for Northern rock has now been consolidated in a nationalisation which is estimated to cost £100billion (\$200billion).

This amount would be sufficient to finance more than half the entire costs of the MDGs and the urban sewerage target in every city on earth.

In 2009, PSI is also focusing on the connection between women workers, health and water. The links between the sectors and with women are clear. It is estimated that half of the hospital beds in the world are filled with people suffering from waterborne diseases. Women and girls suffer most heavily from lack of water, due mainly to their responsibilities to maintain their families. Underfunding water and healthcare are very bad political choices, our governments and international governmental organisations must assume their responsibilities and meet the needs of their citizens. We need to stop the approach which is shrinking our governments to the smallest possible and turning all public services over to the market.

The choice is clear – do the politicians only want to support banks – or will people's lives be just as important. This is an ethical question – and a political one.

On World Water day 2009 our answer is clear: water and sanitation must have the highest priority during the crisis.

We – the workers – are ready to offer our commitment and our knowledge to help. We have a solution – a massive effort to start Public-Public Partnerships involving the workers and their trade unions.

Public Services International (PSI) is a global trade union federation that represents 20 million women and men working in the public services around the world. It has some 600 affiliated unions in more than 150 countries. PSI is an autonomous body, which works in association with federations covering other sectors of the workforce and with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). PSI is an officially recognised non-governmental organisation for the public sector within the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and has consultative status with ECOSOC and observer status with other UN bodies such as UNCTAD and UNESCO.