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Annual Conference of the Arab Forum for Environment & Development

Recommendations

The Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) held its third annual conference in Beirut on 4-5 November 2010, dedicated to discussing the sustainable management of water resources in the Arab world. The conference, held under the patronage of His Excellency the Lebanese Prime Minister Mr. Saad Hariri, has brought together 500 delegates from 32 countries, representing corporations, non-governmental organizations, academia, research institutions, and media. Ministers and representatives of government and international organizations participated as observers. Conference delegates deliberated the findings of the AFED report on the state of the water sector in Arab states and the prospects for water policy reforms.

The conference endorsed the following conclusions and recommendations:

- 1) The conference agrees with the AFED report that the state of water in Arab countries is critical and demands immediate action. Prospects of severe water shortages are serious under a business-as-usual scenario, which would contribute to reduced agricultural production, increased poverty, adverse public health outcomes, and more environmental degradation, all of which would gravely undermine the human development agenda that is the stated priority of every government in the region. The conference also agrees that without a fundamental change in water policies and consumption patterns, the benefits of sustainable use and equitable sharing of water will continue to elude the Arab region.
- 2) Despite large sums of investments in Arab water infrastructure over the past few decades, the water sector in Arab states continues to suffer from a crisis, which manifests itself in multiple forms: safe sanitation and reliable water supply services are still lacking for millions, over-extraction of groundwater has left aquifers depleted and at a risk of contamination, urban water supply and irrigation infrastructures perform poorly and inefficiently, and average water availability is projected to continue its decrease below the severe water scarcity threshold of 500 cubic meters per capita per year by 2015, dropping below 100 cubic meters in some countries, compared to a world average exceeding 6,000 cubic meters. Due to high rates of population growth, freshwater availability per capita will continue to decrease, which demands more efficient use of water, cutting losses, increasing the ratio of water treatment

and reuse, securing more crop per drop, and achieving a breakthrough in desalination technology to make it more widely accessible.

- 3) The conference concurs with the AFED report that at the root of the Arab water crisis is a set of political and management shortcomings: water institutions are fragmented, water legal systems are deficient, public water budgets are constrained, water policies are divorced from sound science, water investments are poorly targeted, funding and regulations for pollution control are insufficient, controls over proper aquifer use are lacking, and water prices are artificially low. For the Arab water crisis to be dissipated, water reforms must address these and other shortcomings.
- 4) The conference calls upon Arab governments to:
 - a) Make a sustained effort to introduce policy, institutional, and legal reforms to enable a shift from a culture limited to securing more supplies through expensive water development, to one which manages demand, by improving efficiency, cutting losses, and protecting water from overuse and pollution.
 - b) Adopt economic criteria for enabling water efficiency and prioritizing the allocation of the available supply of water resources among competing sectors. Governments are urged to introduce water tariffs that rationalize water use, achieve cost recovery in a gradual manner, and promote equity through targeted subsidies.
 - c) Support new agricultural policies by offering economic incentives, research assistance, training, and public awareness campaigns to persuade farmers to improve irrigation efficiency, change cropping patterns, improve irrigation scheduling, and shift toward higher-value adding crops and agricultural activities.
 - d) Develop adaptation policies to climate change predicated on using saline water in agricultural production, developing new local crop varieties tolerant to aridity and drought conditions, and rehabilitating water harvesting systems.
 - e) Reorient the role of state water authorities from that of a water provider to that of an effective regulator and planner, including establishing legal frameworks that enable private investments and public-private partnerships to provide clean water and safe sanitation, while maintaining transparency and accountability.
 - f) Promote, through a mix of economic incentives and publicly sponsored research programs, opportunities for the private sector to assist in developing locally-based competitive desalination technologies, while encouraging the application of solar energy.
 - g) Commit to a national strategy for tapping the underutilized potential of wastewater reclamation as well as greywater recycling to augment Arab countries' water supply. The strategy should commit to strong institutional coordination and planning to ensure that wastewater is properly treated and suitably reused according to requirements for protecting health and the environment.
 - h) Commit to investing in scientifically credible and policy-relevant research that addresses the practical problems of water management in Arab states.

- i) Enact comprehensive national water legislation that addresses existing gaps in current laws and establishes mechanisms to control and regulate water access, promote water use efficiency, enable pollution control regulations, establish protected areas vital to water resources, provide for land use planning, and institute enforceable penalties for violations that cause damage to water resources.
 - j) Foster joint management of shared river basins or aquifers and identify a sustainable formula for sharing transboundary waters, fairly guided by customary legal principles of 'equitable and reasonable use' and the 'obligation not to cause harm'. Arab governments are also urged to sign and ratify the UN Convention on the Law of Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses, and draw on its principles for concluding effective and fair water sharing agreements.
 - k) Launch sustained public awareness campaigns to cultivate a water ethic of care among the public, inspire behavioral changes, and inform water users about economic incentives for achieving water efficiency targets. Civil society, including non-governmental organizations, academia, and the private sector groups, should be included in water reform planning.
- 5) The Conference calls upon private industrial enterprises to apply extensive water efficiency measures to substantially reduce the quantity of water used per unit output, to prevent pollution at the source, to make process changes whenever possible to minimize the volume of wastewater generated, and to ensure that wastewater is treated to meet strict regulatory standards prior to disposal.
 - 6) The Conference calls upon real estate developers and users to accord water efficiency a high priority in the design and operation of buildings and to take advantage of water retrofits to make existing buildings water efficient.
 - 7) The conference calls upon non-governmental organizations, academia, and the private sector to cooperate fully in the implementation of these recommendations.
 - 8) The conference wishes to thank the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) for its constructive initiative on the sustainable management of water resources in Arab states, and requests it to present the recommendations to all Arab governments and other stakeholders.
 - 9) The conference invites the AFED Board of Trustees to consider means of following up the implementation of the annual conferences' recommendations, and to present the outcome at AFED's fourth annual conference.
 - 10) The conference expresses its gratitude to the Lebanese government for hosting the event. It offers its appreciation to all sponsors for their support to the convening of this conference.