

Your Excellencies,

It is wonderful to be here among so many dear friends and colleagues to mark World Water Day, our annual day to celebrate, honor and find ways to protect our most precious resource. Each year, World Water Day gains more momentum and spurs thousands of local initiatives around the world – in schools, in churches, in communities. Its emphasis on local action is what gives World Water Day its power and beauty. We know that no single global instrument can ensure our most important common good is saved. Water must be protected locally.

Today, I am delighted to be in Africa for World Water Day. As Chair of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Advisory Board on Water and

Sanitation, which galvanizes action and momentum for the Millennium Development Goal targets on water and sanitation, I would like to extend my thanks to UNEP and UN-Habitat for their skillful handling of a packed World Water Day agenda here in Nairobi. And of course I want to express my gratitude to the Government of Kenya for hosting the event. Later today we will greet our friends video-linked at UN headquarters, who are celebrating in New York.

Our theme this year is “Clean Water for a Healthy World.” The MDG target for water is to cut in half by 2015 the number of people globally who do not enjoy sustainable access to safe drinking water. According to the Joint Monitoring Programme, the UNICEF and WHO collaborative group which tracks progress, the world will reach that target. It estimates that no fewer than 810 million people, including 120 million

people living in sub-Saharan Africa, have gained access to drinking water from an improved source since the MDG targets were formulated in 2000. Of course, progress is not even among regions or between urban and rural populations and we still live in a world where 883 million people do not use or even have access to improved sources of drinking water. Still, the progress on water noted in the Joint Monitoring Programme's report released just last week is encouraging news!

Yet we must remember that although this group does a commendable job of tracking coverage trends for access to improved drinking water, it does not monitor the quality of that same water. And so, while we basically know how many people have access to drinking water, we do not know if that water is actually safe to drink. In fact, a recent UNICEF-WHO study, the Rapid Assessment of Drinking

Water Quality, determined that an alarming quantity of the improved drinking water tracked by the Joint Monitoring Programme is not safe for human consumption. It carries unsafe levels of microbes and chemicals. Rather than sustaining life, this water is actually making people sick. Drinking contaminated water sets up a vicious circle of ill health and further impoverishment that has severe personal and financial costs while threatening health and development.

When leaders gather in New York this September for the 2010 Millennium Summit to assess progress on the MDGs, they will be congratulated for progress that will actually exceed the MDG water target. And rightly so. But we should not be lulled into complacency, since we know that despite the increased access to improved sources of water, millions of these people are not yet enjoying the

health benefits that come with a reliable supply of safe water for drinking, cooking, and personal hygiene.

Today is about clean water for a healthy world. It is not enough to have water. It must be fit for humans to drink. As we move forward, and beyond 2015, we must strengthen advocacy efforts for water quality while finding effective ways to collect robust water quality data so we have a solid global understanding of not only how many people need access to water, but how many people have no choice but to use unsafe drinking water on a daily basis.

Ladies and gentlemen,

So many things improved during the end of the last and beginning of this century. We easily move across the globe. We treat medical problems to prolong life

with medicines undreamed of only decades ago. Words, ideas, and knowledge are pulled from the electronic and optical networks of the Web. But some things haven't changed enough and they need to. Some of them are right beneath our feet. I'm talking about the way we deal with wastewater. Every second of every day, we use water to carry away what we don't want near us. We extract massive amounts of water from rivers, lakes, aquifers and wetlands. We then return it to our water ecosystems full of our waste – from our industries, from our farms, from ourselves. UNEP's report "Sick Water," makes this stark fact alarmingly clear. Our water is killing us, our freshwater habitats, and our coastal ecosystems.

We need a concerted effort to treat polluted water before returning it to the environment or else we will have no hope of enjoying clean water for a healthy

world. But we need a 21st-century model. Business as usual for wastewater collection, treatment and reuse is not the answer. Massive, over-engineered trunk and branch systems, which are prohibitively expensive, difficult to maintain and prone to breakdowns, are not the answer. Given the enormous price tags for many of these systems, it is not surprising that often the work never even gets started.

We need a wholesale paradigm shift – and we need it now. Which is why UNSGAB’s recently adopted new workplan – the Hashimoto Action Plan II – broadens our existing efforts on sanitation to include a new focus on wastewater collection, treatment and reuse. Our Board believes that the technology currently available creates exciting new possibilities. And many of these new technologies are being used around the world. For example, membrane technology which can decontaminate water in a

single step is advancing and becoming less expensive.

21st-century systems should employ cascading use – cleaning water for drinking and personal hygiene, cascading down to grey water which can be ‘cleaned enough’ for industrial use, environmental recharge or agricultural use. Do you know that about 50 million hectares of agriculture currently depend on wastewater? We have to expand this practice and do it better.

Let’s take advantage of the triple benefit afforded by building wastewater systems that save energy, lower construction costs, and harvest nutrients. Moving water creates a lot of greenhouse gases. The energy required runs as high as 35 to 40 percent of many municipal energy bills. New systems should use less water and be much more energy efficient, thereby

contributing to our efforts to combat climate change. We need more affordable systems adapted to local conditions that are as small as possible and as big as necessary. For example, small-scale aerobic ponds, with biodigesters that allow for biogas recovery, not only remove deadly pathogens from water; they also produce affordable fuel which can be used for cooking and as a safe, cheap fertilizer. Of course we don't want to tear apart existing installations – but new installations and retrofits of older systems need to be more innovative and efficient, and easier to operate and maintain.

But this wastewater revolution will not happen naturally. It will require a dedicated movement and constant engagement with engineers, city and regional planners, mayors, local officials and bankers, with governments taking a proactive role in stimulating structural change and technological

progress. This is an area where developing countries, not only in Africa, but also in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and across all regions can seize a real opportunity for green growth and sustainable jobs.

We can see positive signs of change. In Africa, leaders have already shown their political will to tackle these issues by signing the Sharm el Sheikh Declaration for Accelerating the Achievement of Water and Sanitation Goals in Africa at the July 2008 African Union Summit. A global alliance for water quality is taking shape here on World Water Day, with our colleagues and partners in UN-Habitat, UNEP, and all the organizations represented here. I was very pleased to hear from one of my Board Members, Professor Eric Odada, that the Pan Africa Chemistry Network has produced an impressive report entitled “Africa’s Water Quality”, with clear

recommendations to formulate sustainable water strategies and to improve water quality as a vital requirement for public health, productivity and economic prosperity. And our Board will continue to bring wastewater issues to the attention of world leaders, particularly at the MDG Summit in New York this September. We will also campaign for urgent action on basic sanitation since the world is badly off-track to reach the basic sanitation MDG target.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our Board thanks all the individuals, organizations and communities who are fighting to protect their local water quality. This is a day to recognize these efforts. I would also like to acknowledge the important work of the organizations represented here today. We need UN-Water, UNEP, and UN-Habitat

to continue their crucial coordination, research and programming work, which is critical to protecting our water quality. It has been said so many times, but it bears repeating. Water is life. This is a fundamental fact which we must not let the world forget.

Thank you.