Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1222 (2000)[1]

Lack of water resources and agriculture

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The limited nature of water resources, the threats to their use (over-exploitation and pollution) and the imbalance in their distribution have now reached critical levels and will pose serious challenges to the international community in the coming years. The international community has begun to recognise the risks involved and, especially since the 1992 Rio Summit and the adoption of Agenda 21, has been looking more closely at ways of tackling the problem, most recently at the Second World Water Forum (The Hague, March 2000).

2. For their part, the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly have been giving the matter consideration for many years. In particular, past initiatives have included the European Water Charter (1967), the Freshwater Europe Campaign and Assembly Recommendations 1224 (1993) on the protection and management of freshwater resources in Europe and 1232 (1994) on the management of water resources in relation to agriculture, as well as participation in the establishment of the "Solidarity, water, Europe" network in 1998.

3. Agriculture is, by its very nature, the largest user of water resources – accounting for approximately three-quarters of water consumption – and it is here that the greatest savings can probably be made with the aid of more efficient irrigation technology and procedures. However, we must not destabilise the sector with radical measures, as our peoples' food security depends on it. Solutions can only be found within the context of comprehensive, integrated management of water resources.

4. In Europe, the problems are particularly serious in the countries of the south, which suffer chronic water shortages (low precipitation levels, overuse of ground water, salinisation and pollution of water-bearing layers, deforestation and desertification and conflicts over types of use between different sectors, etc.), as was correctly highlighted again at the 3rd Mediterranean Agriculture Forum (Nicosia, October 1998).

5. Moreover, the population growth forecasts in the Mediterranean region imply a doubling of food needs over the next thirty years, which will demand significant growth in agricultural output and higher levels of water consumption, while also bringing about increased difficulties in terms of the supply and use of water resources.

6. The Assembly urges the governments of member states, in particular those of countries most exposed to water shortages, to:

6.1. include agricultural policy measures for water in a comprehensive water resources management policy and, to that end, set up national water agencies responsible for all issues relating to water (supply, demand, charging, data collection, research, co-operation, information facilities, etc.) so as to encourage rational and sustainable management of water resources and the drawing up of national water management plans to improve the conservation and renewal of water stocks and improve supplies;

6.2. promote co-operation between member states, notably with regard to the transfer of surplus water resources to countries with a water deficit;

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1. Assembly debate on 25 September 2000 (25th Sitting) (see Doc. 8805, report of the Committee on Agriculture, Rural Development and Food, rapporteur : Mr Hadjidemetriou). Text adopted by the Assembly on 25 September 2000 (25thSitting).

6.3. encourage farmers to grow traditional crop varieties more suited to local climates, employ irrigation methods that consume less water (micro-irrigation, “fertigation”, etc.) and adapt agricultural consumption to the water available;

6.4. introduce, in co-operation with professional agricultural organisations, measures to assess agricultural practices and provide advice with a view to promoting sustainable agriculture, notably with regard to the efficient use of water resources;

6.5. promote less intensive and more ecological agriculture and breeding to reduce the excessive use of chemicals (fertilisers, pesticides, etc.) and the production of effluents, which are the cause of serious pollution of water resources (surface and ground water);

6.6. adopt measures to reduce the very great losses that occur in water collection and supply systems by renewing distribution networks, reducing evaporation losses and improving the management of irrigation systems;

6.7. reduce all excessive water consumption in line with available resources, not exceeding the threshold for the restoration of stocks, and, where appropriate, provide the necessary alternative installations on a timely basis (recycling, desalination, etc.);

6.8. adopt, to this end, a comprehensive, integrated water management policy which, on the basis of constant assessment and monitoring of available resources and needs, makes the necessary adjustments between supply and demand, and strikes the appropriate balance between competing types of use;

6.9. adopt flexible water charges that vary according to the types of use and sector, and bring the price of water gradually into line with its real cost so as to prevent excessive consumption without, however, penalising the agricultural sector, on which our food security depends and for which water is an essential resource;

6.10. expand co-operation with agricultural organisations so as to improve the information, training and assistance provided for farmers with regard to irrigation and cropping methods and choosing high-value varieties that need little water;

6.11. promote research on irrigation methods, recycling and re-use techniques for waste water, and the selection of crop varieties that need little water, while paying particular attention to health and environmental risks;

6.12. foster co-operation with international, research and agricultural organisations competent in the water sector (the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU), the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean and Agronomic Studies (Icamas), the World Water Council (WWC), the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (Ifap), etc.).

7. The Assembly urges the parliaments of the member states, in particular those of countries with a water shortage, to adopt the necessary legislative measures to implement the above recommendations.