

Address of Mr. Gerard O'Donoghue, Deputy Director General (IWMI) at the Opening Session of "International Workshop on Drought Assessment and Mitigation in South - West Asia" 7 - 8 October, 2004

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me a great pleasure to welcome this Workshop on behalf of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI). We believe that this meeting is an important event for South west Asia and hope that it will be a success. And, I think it should be: drought is a common issue in the region, the meeting is well represented and its goals are noble.

We are happy to be the organizers and hosts of this event. International Water Management Institute is a research organization, which deals with multiple aspects of water management in developing world. We have over 100 researchers worldwide and, in Asia - offices in Colombo, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangkok. Some of the main areas of our research include agricultural water management, water institutions and policies and environmental and health aspects of irrigated agriculture. We are running a long-term research program on Comprehensive Assessment on Water and Agriculture and are also an active member of the large-scale initiative - Challenge Program on Water and Food. All these initiatives are eventually aimed at achieving sustainable water use and food security for generations to come.

Drought is very often identified as one of the major obstacles on the way to food security, and one of the major problems which hamper socio-economic development in the world in general and in South Asia in particular. It is a natural hazard, which according to some international sources, affects more people than any other natural disaster. It comes slow, it is difficult to detect, its detrimental effects are non-structural, can spread over large regions and felt long-time after a drought is over.

A lot of valuable anti-drought work and experiences exist in the region. But droughts still hurt and there is a lot more to do for all of us. The ability of governments in the region and international relief agencies to deal with droughts is constrained by the lack of reliable data, information networks, professional and institutional capacities, and many other factors which need to be improved, enhanced and developed further.

We have been very pleased to initiate in last year a Project on Drought Assessment and Mitigation in southwest Asia. The project received funding from the US State Department Regional Environment Office for South Asia through cooperative agreement with the USAID. It focuses on west India, Pakistan and Afghanistan and aims to identify common goals and priorities for anti-drought work in the region. We hope that this Workshop, which forms part of the Project, will make a significant contribution to regional collaboration in the field of drought research and management by engaging scientists, practitioners and policy-makers from all three countries.

We also hope that it will be an interesting event for our Sri Lankan and international participants. Regional anti-drought networks should be expanded to include other countries of the region. I also am pleased to know that we have here today a few representatives from Afghanistan – the country which was suffering from war and unrest for decades and where drought coping capacity has been almost completely destroyed. It is good to know that Afghanistan is participating in international gatherings more these days – welcome!

There is a saying ascribed to, I think, a Minister of Agriculture of India, who said that the real Minister of agriculture of India is Mr Monsoon. That also applies to other parts of the region – agriculture does depend upon the monsoon rains. True – when rains don't behave as expected for a year or more in a row, drought is inevitable. But one has to accept that this will not go away. We can hardly control weather, but we can prepare ourselves to recurring droughts, get better drought prediction mechanisms, decrease vulnerability of communities sectors and countries to drought, be pro-active in anti-drought actions. This is, I think what this workshop and any follow-up activities in the region should focus on.

To my knowledge, this is one of the first, if not the first, workshop which brings different specialists from several countries of the region to talk specifically about drought issues. We hope that it will set a good example and impetus for future anti-drought work. I wish you all very productive two days.