Developing countries, water management: policy and priorities for development cooperation

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The committee adopted the report by Paul LANNOYE (Greens/EFA, B) on the Commission communication. It began by pointing out that, out of 6 billion people, 1.7 bn have no access to drinking water and more than 3 bn have no access to sanitation. Moreover, nearly 30 000 people each day die of illnesses linked to a lack of drinking water. The committee accordingly argued that access to water is essential for life, health, food, well-being and development, and that water cannot therefore be considered simply as a good. Indeed, access to drinking water in a sufficient quantity and of a sufficient quality is, according to MEPs, a basic human right which has, moreover, been enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The report added that there was a risk that the increasing scarcity of resources and economic and territorial water-related issues could cause armed conflicts in certain regions of the world, thereby compromising sustainable development, peace and cooperation. MEPs were critical of the way in which public water services were being marginalised as a result of the large-scale involvement of the private sector, operating at international level through public-private partnership (PPP) programmes. The report stressed that the private sector's aims were not necessarily compatible with providing a public service. Several studies had shown that the privatisation of water services following the 'full cost recovery principle' had led to an increase in charges. Solutions focusing on the privatisation of drinking water supply had clearly failed, in that there had been no improvement in access to drinking water and no decline in illnesses related to lack of water. The committee concluded that the PPP system, whereby the public authorities retain the ownership of the infrastructure and conclude a management contract with the private sector, securing access for all and ensuring publicly transparent pricing, should not be viewed as a panacea, but as one among several ways of providing improved access to water. The Commission in particular came in for criticism since it was calling for water supply in 14 of the least developed countries to be liberalised and privatised as part of the GATS negotiations. The committee said that a revision of the relevant articles of the GATS agreement was needed in order to protect the right of each developing country to decide freely on its method of water supply, according to the collective national or regional interests of the population concerned. It also called for the World Bank and the IMF to end their policy of making the privatisation of water management and supply services a condition of grants and loans. MEPs welcomed the decision to establish a European Water Fund and said that the Fund must help the ACP countries to put in place measures clearly regulating management and control of the water sector. It should also contribute to developing local capacities for the establishment and maintenance of water supply systems. The ACP countries were urged to hold national and regional consultations involving representatives of civil society and local private players with a view to devising appropriate strategies to meet the socio-economic needs of the population. Lastly, the committee called for the ACP countries' debt to be cancelled and the money thus released to be used to fund basic water supply and purification infrastructures.