

Event Summary: Declaration on U.S. Policy and the Global Challenge of Water

On Wednesday, March 18, CSIS launched the *Declaration on U.S. Policy and the Global Challenge of Water*, cochaired by E. Neville Isdell and Senator William H. Frist.

In his introductory remarks, CSIS President John Hamre stated, “I think nothing would do more to lift up the world’s perceptions of America than if we were to embrace a goal of ensuring that within 10 years, every human being on the planet would have access to fresh and clean water.”

Erik Peterson, director of the CSIS Global Strategy Institute, offered a broad overview of the global water crisis and summarized the recommendations of the Declaration.* He noted that the global challenge of water represents a remarkable opportunity for the United States to engage with the rest of the world. Peterson framed the water challenge by breaking it into four parts: access, quality, sanitation, and impact on broader economic development.

More than 880 million people across the world lack access to safe drinking water. This is compounded by the fact that areas of the world that are already water stressed are experiencing rapid population growth. As many as 3.9 billion people on this planet could face water stress by the year 2030. Furthermore, 2.5 billion people still do not have access to adequate sanitation. All of this carries social, medical, and environmental costs.

The bottom line, Peterson said, is that water is a crosscutting, essential resource that needs to be at the center of our policies. It is a global health issue, a humanitarian issue, and a gender issue; there is a strong case to be made for water’s ties to economic development, environmental concerns, political stability, and national security.

Former Senate Majority Leader William H. Frist spoke next, asserting that water is fundamental to fighting global disease and extreme poverty around the world. He recalled that four years ago, in March 2005, he stood on the floor of the U.S. Senate and spoke about the importance of safe drinking water and sanitation. Shortly after that, the *Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act* was signed into law with extraordinary bipartisan support in the House and the Senate. He explained that the law’s importance is “to elevate the spotlight, to elevate water to what it is fundamentally, in the public mind.” Senator Frist also recalled that in 2005, the United States agreed with its international

* Note: A copy of Erik Peterson’s presentation is available at http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_events/task,view/id,1928/.

partners to the UN Millennium Development Goals and the “International Decade for Action: Water for Life.” This bound the United States and its partners to the goal of cutting in half the number of people in the world who lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015.

Senator Frist acknowledged that we have seen progress over time. Since 1990, more than 1 billion people have gained access to improved drinking water. However, he also argued that much more progress is needed. Senator Frist offered sobering statistics linking water to economic development and poverty alleviation: one child dies every 15 seconds of a waterborne disease, and women spend 40 billion working hours gathering water every year. In regard to sanitation, he warned that “without an immediate acceleration in progress, the world will not achieve even half of the UN Millennium Development Goals’ Sanitation Target by the year 2015.”

But Senator Frist remained optimistic as he stated:

The bright side of this challenge is that we have the ability to solve it. Faith-based groups and elementary schools, Rotary Clubs, [and] universities are taking action today at almost the grassroots level to bring safe drinking water and sanitation to communities all over the developing world.

At the government level, Senator Frist applauded the efforts of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which has incorporated water as one of its central pillars for investing in infrastructure to fight poverty.

However, according to Senator Frist, the U.S. government still needs greater overall commitment to meeting its goals for water and sanitation across the globe. The first step, he said, is to establish a water strategy for the U.S. government to fulfill the obligations of the *Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act*. Senator Frist spoke of his vision for America to “be that beacon for others around the world” to generate support for water and sanitation. He stated:

The United States must lead. If we focused on water as a priority instrument for Washington’s engagement with the rest of the world, it would enable policymakers to achieve a range of all our foreign policy goals in an integrated, efficient fashion. It pulls it all together, it’s the glue. It ties that overall policy together. Water is absolutely central to supporting public health commitments... as well as education and economic development. ... Water must be integrated as a key element moving forward.

E. Neville Isdell, chairman of The Coca-Cola Company, then provided remarks on the role of the business community in addressing the global water crisis. He opened by stating to the audience, “I think we are putting forward to you something that is probably the most important work that CSIS has undertaken, certainly in the last months but if not in the last years if you look at it in the overall global context...”

Mr. Isdell explained that he wanted to encourage the business community “to step up in their overall collaborative efforts on water sustainability.” According to Mr. Isdell, each

piece of society—government, business, and civil society—has a role to play in addressing the global challenge of water. He said:

Working separately—as so often we have done—is no longer enough. We have to come together as partners to create literally a triangle of sustainability that will generate the scale and the speed that is required for a challenge of this very significant magnitude.

Elaborating on his experiences at The Coca-Cola Company, Mr. Isdell explained that water is important to the company, not only because it is a key ingredient in their beverages, but also because water is critical to the health and economic prosperity of the communities that the company serves.

Mr. Isdell then presented his three-part vision of the broader business community’s role in addressing the global challenge of water. He stated that companies should “address their footprint, extend their handprint, and help shape the public policy blueprint.”

According to Mr. Isdell, the “footprint” represents how companies’ operations directly utilize water resources. For example, The Coca-Cola Company is working toward “water neutrality” through a number of avenues. Mr. Isdell explained that the company is increasing water efficiency within its factories and across its supply and distribution chains, returning the water it uses to nature at a level that can support aquatic life, and supporting community watersheds. For companies of all sizes, addressing the water footprint can actually save money and make their business more sustainable. Mr. Isdell encouraged the audience to look into the CEO Water Mandate, which offers a sustainability roadmap for companies that are committed to addressing water challenges.

Next, Mr. Isdell discussed the water “handprint.” He called on companies to serve as a catalyst for further action, take on a leadership role for water, and have a larger impact on society—beyond what they can directly affect through their business. Mr. Isdell stressed the importance of reinforcing public-private partnerships, which is the essence of the final recommendation in the CSIS Declaration. For example, The Coca-Cola Company is partnering on water and sanitation programs in host countries with a broad base of groups, including USAID, CARE, UNDP, WWF, and most importantly, local-level governments and communities. These projects are guided by the philosophy of enabling local communities to “do things for themselves.”

Mr. Isdell then explained why the private sector should help shape the “public policy blueprint.” He stated:

We do have shared interests. Governments, the public, and businesses all want a sustainable, clean water supply that enables—not inhibits—economic growth, and that encourages public health and social development. Both governments and businesses are really exposed to reputational and significant political risks when access to clean water is negatively affected. The political dimension is huge. And there are really many opportunities for businesses at large and for everyone to partner and to support policies like this Declaration.

For example, Mr. Isdell has urged business leaders, members of the G-8, and others to make the UN Millennium Development Goals a major policy priority. The Coca-Company company has also helped encourage water-related legislation on Capitol Hill, and hopefully all of these efforts can have a multiplier effect to help shape the blueprint for the future.

In closing, Mr. Isdell stated, “The important thing really is that any business can take the first step, and there is no better time than today to take that step because it will make your business more sustainable.”