Remarks by World Bank Group President David Malpass at the Ninth World Water Forum in Dakar, Senegal

March 21, 2022

As Prepared:

President Sall, Presidents, Distinguished Guests, Honorary Speakers, Friends,

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the opening of this year’s World Water Forum. This is a timely and historic event—the first time this forum has met in sub-Saharan Africa.

Thank you to the organizers for focusing this year’s Forum on Water Security for Peace and Development. Now more than ever, the world needs more peace and more development.

The recent trends for both these imperatives are disheartening.

We see unprecedented increases in conflict and violence – here on the African continent and more recently in Europe. The costs and losses are devastating – including violence, famine, and malnutrition. Millions are facing crises that will shorten their lives or end them abruptly.

At the Fragility Forum at the World Bank in early March, we showed that 23 countries – with a combined population of 850 million people – are facing high- or medium-intensity conflict. Over 300 million people in fragile and conflict settings experienced acute food insecurity in 2021, and the war in Ukraine is making shortages and food price spikes even worse.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought dramatic reversals in development outcomes. Indicators of poverty, growth, nutrition, education, and security are all deteriorating, rather than improving as is needed for the world to truly develop. The latest hammer blow is inflation and rising interest rates. They hit the poor the hardest, and make inequality worse.

Today’s world faces other enormous challenges. The Water Forum today focuses on the importance of water security for development and peace. Population growth and increased use of water are creating water scarcity and intense competition for water. Ongoing climate change heightens the water crisis, which is starkly evident in Africa.

Only 58 percent of Africans have access to safe drinking water. Only 10 percent of hydroelectricity potential is being put to work. Globally, 2 billion people lack access to safely managed drinking water and over 3.6 billion people lack safely managed sanitation.
This has severe implications for human capital. Poor water quality is the cause of 70-80 percent of diseases in Africa. The health effects also lead to learning losses, especially for girls, with lifelong repercussions.

Water is essential for production, including for power generation, mining, industry and of course farming, which accounts for 23 percent of GDP in sub-Saharan Africa. With nine out of ten climate events being water-related, better water management is critical for adaptation and resilience.

Addressing gaps in water-related data is a critical building block for improved water resource management. We recently launched the World Bank Water Data Portal. It consolidates curated water data into one place for the first time. We are now collaborating with the World Meteorological Organization—through the Water and Climate Leaders Coalition—on a Global Water Information System to bring together data on water and climate.

Once the data is gathered, coordinated action is urgently needed on three fronts to address the water crisis: first - focused policy measures and better institutions, second - increased public and private investment, and third - greater citizen participation. Let me take a few minutes to describe each of these key actions.

First, policy and institutional reforms are vital in order to enable sustainable and equitable water use, value water properly, and improve service delivery. Reforms require strong political leadership to create the economic, social, and mindset changes that are needed to better manage water resources and deliver services efficiently to more people.

Water and wastewater utilities can achieve significant efficiency gains. Useful reforms also include stronger safety nets to cover water shocks, enhanced storage solutions, and better city planning to improve the way water is managed.

A circular economy approach to water security could bring enormous benefits -- by helping countries develop wastewater reuse for aquifer recharge and irrigation; and by capitalizing on wetlands and green infrastructure to improve stormwater management and capture.

The World Bank is working closely with the Government of Senegal on a multisector program to address water security. If successful, the program could become a blueprint for other countries in the region.

Cross-border cooperation on water is essential, particularly in Africa, where 90 percent of water falls within catchment areas that cross national borders. Sharing water data—through initiatives like the Global Water Information System I mentioned earlier—is key to managing the impacts of climate change on the hydrological cycle; and key to helping countries manage water resources to meet their development and growth needs.

Several steps are needed to help this work. Accurate information needs to be available and shared publicly. There's immense value to managing water effectively across borders. This requires measurement, information sharing, and trust in using shared resources. For example, advance notice of any expected changes to the water flow
regime is critical. Sharing information allows for early warning and creates better decision making about how water is shared across various sectors, administrative boundaries, and countries.

We are working to enhance regional integration through the OMVS - Senegal River Basin Development Organization—in cooperation with national irrigation and rural development agencies in Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, and Guinea. The aim is to support the development of a shared vision and master plan; and create a cost-sharing formula, which is key to financial sustainability.

The second important action is increased investment. Delivering and sustaining water and sanitation services requires large-scale public and private investments and partnerships. To enable the water sector to operate efficiently, these need to be underpinned by sound policies and appropriate incentive structures and regulations. The estimated annual cost of delivering universal safe water and sanitation globally is $150 billion. The public sector cannot do this alone. Africa will need investments of close to $20 billion a year, but countries today allocate only 0.5 percent of their GDP to the sector on average, roughly $13 billion. Innovative investment platforms and enabling environments are needed to bring in private sector partners.

The third action I will highlight is the importance of greater citizen participation in order to achieve a meaningful transformation of the water sector. Here in Senegal, the World Bank is supporting farmers to work with irrigation agencies to establish climate-smart, solar-powered irrigation systems and rehabilitate water mobilization schemes. This will increase efficiency and production, reduce risk, create jobs, and boost income for farmers.

At the World Bank we have a vision of a “water secure world for all”. We are the largest multilateral source of financing for water in developing countries, with a portfolio of $27 billion for water projects in over 70 countries, and a large IFC-supported program through the private sector.

The world needs bold leadership, investment, innovation, and partnerships. In that spirit, I would like to thank all the participants in this Forum for their work and dedication. It is instrumental in getting us closer to our goal – a water-secure world for all.

Thank you.