

United Nations Conference on Water (Mar del Plata 1977)

In 1977, the UN Conference on Water was held in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Its goals were to assess the status of water resources; to ensure that an adequate supply of quality water was available to meet the planet's socio-economic needs; to increase water use efficiency; and to promote preparedness, nationally and internationally, so as to avoid a water crisis of global dimensions before the end of twentieth century.

The conference approved the Mar del Plata Action Plan, which was the first internationally coordinated approach to IWRM. The plan had two parts: a set of recommendations that covered all the essential components of water management, and twelve resolutions on a wide range of specific subject areas. It discussed assessment of water use and efficiency; natural hazards, environment, health and pollution control; policy, planning and management; public information, education, training and research; and regional and international cooperation (Biswas, 2004).

The Mar del Plata conference was a success, in part due to the active participation of the developing world and the discussions on various aspects of water management, specifically the country and region specific analyses. The conference considered water management on a holistic and comprehensive basis, an approach recognized as one of the key IWRM issues in the 1990s. To provide potable water and sanitation facilities to all, and to accelerate political will and investment in the water sector, the conference recommended the period 1980 to 1990 as the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade.

The Mar del Plata conference was undoubtedly a major milestone in the history of water resources development for the 20th century. Viewed from any direction, the conference has become an important yardstick in water resources management, particularly for IWRM. Regrettably, transboundary water resources management was not discussed comprehensively, and an implementation scheme for the Action Plan was not developed during the discussion (Biswas, 2004).