

Freshwater is Central to Sustainable Development Goals

Water sustainability needs to be made central to Sustainable Development as it is the axel around, which all else revolves. It is the element around, which life on Earth has evolved. This may seem obvious but the fact that freshwater is not currently a stand alone Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicates that greater awareness and emphasis is necessary.

“A dedicated goal on water is necessary for a world where all people can live in safety and dignity.” (Stockholm Statement 2013)

However even a successful water dedicated SDG, is dependent upon there being an adequate supply of fresh clean water. A functioning water cycle is core to water security. It is unsustainable to put energy into managing ever-decreasing water resources whilst ignoring the natural water cycle and allowing it to degenerate. This is akin to designing a house and disregarding solid foundations. Collapse is inevitable.

“Water security is defined as the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability.” (U.N Analytical Brief, 2013)

Unsustainable development throughout the last century has been at the expense of present and future generations. Now the disastrous repercussions from this are becoming more and more obvious and startling. People all around the world are recognising the need to resolve these problems and to secure long-term environmental sustainability.

2013, the International Year of Water Cooperation, reflects the global recognition that freshwater is an absolute necessity for achieving Internationally agreed upon Sustainable Development Goals. These include the nexus between water security, food security, poverty eradication, gender equality, human health, equity, peace and prosperity. It also reflects

the emerging global understanding that these issues are not separate and that fresh water security is a critical issue.

Water security needs to be included in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDG process must incorporate a goal and related targets for achieving water security, as this will address multiple priority development areas under consideration: conflict and fragility; environmental sustainability; growth and employment; health, hunger, food and nutrition; inequities; energy; and of course, water. It is safe to state that investment in water security is a long-term pay-off for human development and economic growth, with immediate visible short-term gains. (U.N Analytical Brief 22/3/13)

Fresh water security and sustainability is such an important issue that UN Water, UNESCO and other groups are advocating for a stand alone Sustainable Development Goal for water.

"Water security has to be addressed as one of the highest priorities in the Post-2015 development agenda and water must feature prominently as standalone goal with measurable targets and indicators in support of life, wellbeing, economic development and the environment."(Swiss Position Paper on Water 2013)

Fresh water needs to be conserved so that it can cover the needs of present and future generations. To do this some substantial changes need to be made in the way that humanity considers and uses Earths' natural resources.

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (U.N, 1987, Brundtland Commission Report , ' Our Common Future')

Adequate supplies of fresh water globally are the foundation upon which all Sustainable Development Goals rest. Insufficient fresh clean water reduces all SDG'S to unrealizable aims and ideals, rather than guidelines, which facilitate long-term beneficial, life enhancing development.

“We recognize that water is at the core of sustainable development as it is closely linked to a number of key global challenges. We therefore reiterate the importance of integrating water in sustainable development and underline the critical importance of water and sanitation within the three dimensions of sustainable development.” (The Future We Want RES/A/66/288 para.119)

In 2012 UN Water set up a task force comprising many UN Departments and coordinated by UN University. It was set up with the purpose of analyzing the global water crisis and creating a paper to guide world government on global water security. In March 2013 the Analytical Brief was released in which it states:

“Ensuring that ecosystems are protected and conserved is central to achieving water security – both for people and for nature. Ecosystems are vital to sustaining the quantity and quality of water available within a watershed, on which both nature and people rely. Maintaining the integrity of ecosystems is essential for supporting the diverse needs of humans, and for the sustainability of ecosystems, including protecting the water- provisioning services they provide.” (U.N Analytical Brief, 2013)

It is these same water-resourcing ecosystems, which include mountain forests and wetland that the global freshwater cycle is dependent upon to function effectively. This ensures the provision of adequate quantities and quality of fresh water for present and future generations.

“Sustainable development is the centerpiece and key to water resource quantity and quality, as well as national security, economic health, and societal well-being. The word sustainability implies the ability to support life, to comfort, and to nourish. For all of human history, the Earth has sustained human beings by providing food, water, air, and shelter.”
(R. Warren Flint, 2004)

At the 2013 Budapest Water Conference, Sibylle Vermont, Head Negotiator for International Environmental Policy Water, Swiss Federal Office for the Environment, discussed the UN Economic Commission for Europe Convention on the protection and use of trans-boundary watercourses and international lakes, emphasizing its value as a framework convention to

drive further progress in this area. She also stressed the need for the water SDG to address the whole water cycle, rather than just water supply and sanitation.

“Progress in many of the future post-2015 goals will be determined by how governments respond to the water crisis and whether they value water-related ecological services and incorporate these services into decision-making and development strategies (UNDP, 2006).” (U.N Analytical Brief, 2013)

With the water cycle and the climate cycle being so interlinked it becomes even more obvious that the water cycle is at the heart of all forms of development and needs to be made a matter of crucial importance. If we really want a long-term future on this planet, then it has to be sustainable and to achieve this, we need to safeguard the water cycle.

“Managing the natural resources base in a sustainable and integrated manner is essential for sustainable development. In this regard, to reverse the current trend in natural resource degradation as soon as possible, it is necessary to implement strategies which should include targets adopted at the national and, where appropriate, regional levels to protect ecosystems and to achieve integrated management of land, water and living resources,” (UN World Summit on Sustainable Development ,2002)

Any water management schemes that do not include the whole water cycle, along with the ecosystems that the cycle needs to function effectively, will never be able to provide true answers for water scarcity. Choices made regarding this, will not determine the economics of just a few in the present, they will determine long-term global economics. How we deal with this, will determine the extent and severity of water crisis around the world.

“Water security encapsulates complex and interconnected challenges and highlights water’s centrality for achieving a larger sense of security, sustainability, development and human well-being.” “It is important to ensure that water security is achieved for all users, whether up- or downstream, and does not come at the expense of water insecurity for some.” (U.N, Analytical Brief, 2013)

Regardless of who we are or where we live it is important to understand that the water cycle and its inherent ecosystems are the life support system of the entire planet and that the responsibility of safeguarding these is a common human responsibility. It is also in our own long-term interest to safeguard these for future generations and for all life on Earth. It is utterly unsustainable to ignore the regenerative nature of water and use existing time and resources in managing ever-decreasing water resources, whilst in the meantime allowing the natural water cycle to degenerate. This is like designing a house and disregarding the need for solid foundations. Collapse is inevitable.

Human life is not viable independent of other species and ecosystems. We are all interdependent and because we utterly depend upon them, we need to live in such a way as considers their needs as well as our own. The imperative work that needs to be done to safeguard and secure the water cycle is immense, yet still potentially possible. The alternative would be no long-term future for the majority of life on Earth. This is Our World, Our Water and Our Responsibility!

<http://www.activeremedy.org/freshwater-is-central-to-sustainable-development/>

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