

UN-Water Chair's Speaking Points
By video link, 23 May 2013, 21:00-22:00 CEDT

General Assembly Open Working Group On Sustainable Development Goals
Third Session, 22-24 May 2013, New York

Co-Chairs, Excellencies, distinguished participants,

In my role of Chair of UN-Water, it is a great privilege to be here with you today to give this keynote address and to introduce the UN Technical Support Team's Issues Brief on water and sanitation.

I would first like to thank the UN Technical Support Team for the excellent Issues Brief on water and sanitation, which is very informative and balanced. During my intervention, I would like to present its salient points and shall highlight some emerging themes that you may wish to consider.

Before starting, I would like to recall that the Rio+20 outcome document "The Future We Want" recognizes that "water is at the core of sustainable development" and of its three dimensions.

At Rio+20, Member States reconfirmed previous commitments made in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the Millennium Declaration, and stressed as well the fundamental human right to safe drinking-water and sanitation.

Member States committed to an integrated vision for water resources, encompassing the management of water ecosystems and the reduction of water pollution to improve water quality and quantity, safe and affordable drinking-water and sanitation for all, improvement of water efficiency and addressing water-related disasters, such as floods and droughts, as well as water scarcity.

The Rio+20 outcome document also highlights the linkages and interdependencies between water and other priority areas, such as food security and nutrition, sustainable cities, health and population, biodiversity, desertification and many natural disasters.

Excellencies, distinguished participants,

What is the situation to-date with respect to the vision enshrined in the Rio+20 “The Future We Want”?

Today, as we know, the Millennium Development Goal Target on drinking-water, as measured by access to improved water sources, was met. Yet, further progress is still needed to realize fully the human right to safe drinking-water and sanitation. Today, diarrhoeal disease is still the second cause of death in Low Income Countries and the fifth biggest globally. The vast majority of these deaths are children under five.

Roughly 800 million people remain without access to an improved water source and many more remain without safe and sustainable water supply.

Today, the MDG sanitation target is the most lagging of the MDGs. 2.5 billion people live without improved sanitation. 1.1 billion people still practice open defecation. Without significant policy change and investment, around 1.4 billion people are projected to be without access to sanitation in 2015.

Also there is widespread discrimination and inequalities in the access to drinking-water and sanitation services. As an example, in many countries, women and girls carry the

burden of fetching water. Poor water and sanitation conditions also affect their health negatively, including sexual and reproductive health. There is also clear evidence of the linkages between the lack of sanitation and malnutrition, with long-lasting effects on human capital and growth.

The focus of the MDGs on aggregate global outcomes tends to mask these inequalities. Improvements in access often do not reach those groups who suffer most — the elderly, persons with disabilities, women and children. This is also reflected in the fact that schools and health centers too often lack appropriate drinking-water and sanitation facilities.

Another clear lesson from the MDGs is that the Target for drinking-water and sanitation does not address the wider water agenda as called for at Rio+20, including water resources and wastewater management and issues of water quality, which are critical for sustainable development. Access to safe drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene, food and energy production, disaster risk reduction, industrial development and healthy ecosystems rely on the availability and sustainable management of the water resource.

Over 1.7 billion people live today in river basins where water use exceeds recharge often by a large margin, leading to the depletion of groundwater and rivers. As countries develop and populations grow and urbanize, their demand for water is projected to increase by 55% by 2050. Two thirds of the world's population could be living in water-stressed countries by 2025 if current consumption patterns and demographic evolution continue. 80% of wastewater from human settlements and industrial sources worldwide is discharged directly untreated into water bodies, with detrimental effects on human health and the environment. At the same time climate change is anticipated to increase the spatial and temporal variability of the hydrological cycle

and in particular the frequency and intensity of several extreme events such as floods and droughts.

These trends could increase the risk of conflicts over water. To achieve poverty eradication and universal human development, while respecting the Earth's finite and vulnerable water resource base, water productivity needs to be enhanced significantly, appropriate infrastructure developed, an integrated approach to water resources management implemented, water governance systems improved at all levels (including transboundary level), and ecosystems protected and restored.

On a positive note, there is a growing body of evidence that shows that, in all water-related investments, the benefits far exceed the costs. For example: the value of wetlands for human well-being has been estimated at several trillion US dollars; The benefits of achieving universal access to sanitation outweigh the costs by a factor of 5.5 to 1, whereas for universal access to drinking-water the ratio is estimated at 2 to 1.

However, to fully realise these benefits, we need to move from a sectoral approach to a nexus approach. We need to analyse and exploit better the inter-linkages and interdependencies among water and food security, energy, health, environment, job creation, peace and security. Wise water management stands at the core of this nexus approach that calls for a better synergy between technical solutions and political will and commitment.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me now consider the approaches that have been put forward to respond to these challenges, in particular with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

Several proposals for integrating water and sanitation issues into the SDGs framework have been made so far. These can be broadly grouped in two categories.

The first category proposes to integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of the water challenge in one single water-related SDG. Proposals falling under this category tend to combine an access to safe drinking-water and sanitation target, with a water resources management and water use efficiency target, as well as with a wastewater/water quality target.

The many proponents of a stand-alone water-related SDG stress that all water issues are connected through the hydrological cycle. The complex interrelations between the various water-related needs require an integrated approach which would be better catalysed by keeping these aspects together in one SDG.

The second category identifies the development dimensions first such as, for example, basic human needs, environmental sustainability, equality and gender. Thematic targets are then assigned under each dimension. In this case different water-related issues would be addressed in different goals.

Proponents of this approach stress that bringing together different related policy objectives along different dimensions would limit the number of goals and allow numerous related sectors (e.g. energy, food security, health, water) to be addressed jointly.

While the Issues Brief produces an objective summary of various positions, I wish to underline that UN-Water Members and Partners overwhelmingly support the option of the “One SDG on Water”.

Excellencies, distinguished participants,

In your last meeting, it was noted that conceptualizing the SDGs is not an exact science, but ultimately a political endeavour reflecting what is possible or, as it was also suggested, reflecting what is the highest common ambition.

To help define this highest common ambition, a number of processes and consultations have been organised at the global as well as at the regional and the national levels. In particular, I would like to mention the Global Thematic Consultation on Water, which was co-hosted by the Governments of Jordan, Liberia, Mozambique, Netherlands and Switzerland, and facilitated by UN-Water under the UNDG umbrella on the “World We Want” platform.

All stakeholders from around the world were encouraged to take stock of the lessons learnt from the implementation of the MDGs and to indicate the key global water-related challenges to inform the post-2015 development framework, in ways that are measurable, inter-generational, ambitious, pragmatic, and rest on the equitable use of the water resource.

It is important to mention that the Global Thematic Consultation on Water has collected opinions, without influencing the discussions, but just facilitating them.

The messages emerging from the Consultation confirm that, as the Rio+20 Outcome Document says, “water is at the core of sustainable development”.

The participants in the Consultation suggested that the future agenda should seek to achieve the MDGs and other existing commitments but also to build on and go beyond them. The new agenda should encourage an integrated approach to water expressed in universally agreed goals which should be simple and able to focus policies, resources and all partners on delivering concrete outcomes that improve people’s lives and protect the future generations and the environment.

Excellencies and distinguished participants,

I would like to conclude my intervention by highlighting the following four key aspects.

First, water issues are in people’s hearts and this gives us a strong support for future action.

Second, this future action should be broad and include all the elements of the hydrological cycle, going beyond a sectoral approach.

Third, the goals need to be ambitious and inspire behavioural changes: business as usual will not get the job done in achieving sustainable development goals.

Fourth, the targets should be realistic, achievable and measurable, as the experience of the MDGs shows that aspirational goals, alone, do not work. Instead, a more realistic and flexible framework would allow to take into account the existing differences among countries.

Such flexibility will allow the necessary responsiveness to new technical developments in monitoring and in infrastructure, and it will also respond to the challenge of reconciling a global goal with the variety of national, local or basin-specific realities.

However, these are no small challenges and, for this reason, we need the collective strength of all stakeholders together, working in true partnership.

We are at a critical junction and there could not be a more auspicious time for making bold decisions than during this year 2013, the International Year of Water Cooperation, and after the launch of the UN Deputy Secretary-General's Call for Action on Sanitation.

I wish to assure you that, in the post-2015 landscape, the UN System, and UN-Water in particular as the "one common voice" of the UN and the main lever for action on freshwater and sanitation, stands ready to respond to needs and demands, continuing to bring together collective experience and action.

In the immediate, more work is needed to build the evidence base on water-related targets and their indicators, and on identifying data-needs to capture the many dimension and inter-linkages and to ensure national relevance and measurability. This is something that UN-Water has already started to work on, in order to provide you with the consolidated collective expertise of the UN System and of its partners, and to inform and support your decisions.

Excellencies, distinguished participants,

As I mentioned at the beginning of my intervention, it has been a privilege and an honour for me to be here with you today and share with you some elements for your consideration. Let us never forget that life is possible only because we are on a blue planet. Let me conclude by saying that the importance of water should never be “watered down”!

I thank you for your attention and I wish you successful deliberations.
