

A Dedicated Water Goal

UNSGAB

March 2014

“Beyond 2015, our aim is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and to create an equitable world of opportunity for all. Our societies cannot prosper without clean, plentiful freshwater. People cannot thrive without adequate sanitation. That is why my Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation is advocating for a dedicated water goal.”

***UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon
Budapest Water Summit, October 2013***

Executive Summary

Good management of water and sanitation is critical for poverty reduction and a precondition for inclusive and sustainable development. Billions of people do still not have access to adequate sanitation and water that is safe for human consumption. Growing water scarcity and pollution are projected to further exacerbate the drinking water and sanitation crisis, seriously hamper economic growth and irreversibly degrade the environment.

Much remains to be done to realize the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. At the same time, the water challenge is more complex than simply increasing access to water supply and sanitation. The Board recommends that the post-2015 agenda includes several water-related targets as part of a **Dedicated Global Goal on Water** that reflects water’s contribution to development needs and the related need for more action.

Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) framework should include quantified, qualified and time-bound targets that respond to the three following objectives:

- 1) Achieve universal access to sustainable sanitation and to drinking water that is really safe;*
- 2) Increase wastewater management and pollution prevention;*
- 3) Improve integrated water resources management and water-use efficiency.*

UNSGAB also notes the importance of highlighting water-related disasters in the post-2015 agenda. Given the increasing frequency and severity of such disasters with growing climate variability, including such disasters within a dedicated water goal will build resilience and preparedness while helping national institutions plan to reduce risk and suffering.

An evolving process is bringing with it a proliferation of indicators and targets that could never be practically reported against or reliably managed to yield globally meaningful statistics. Against this backdrop, simplicity must be retained. UNSGAB believes that no matter what form the post-2015 agenda takes, it is vital that the framework which succeeds the MDGs is a practical basis for monitoring and reporting. For supporting indicators, effective monitoring mechanisms need to be built and adequately financed to measure progress. This will allow the dynamism of the MDGs to continue. UNSGAB’s three clear targets are offered in this spirit.

Background

In January 2013, UNSGAB called for a post-2015 Global Goal on Water and shared its position on the objectives and elements that could comprise a dedicated water goal as part of the post-2015 development agenda. Since that time, the Board has been pleased to see this position gain traction in the active development discussion which took place in 2013. Now, a year later, after observing the various processes and how water is figuring into them, the Board believes just as strongly that a dedicated water goal must be an essential pillar of the post-2015 development architecture. It is important to reiterate this point as water could be subject to a “derailment threat” whereby water, which is intimately linked with all other development objectives, could only be seen a component across other goals. While it is desirable to see water issues connected to health, economic growth and environmental sustainability, expectations in these areas will not be met without action on water management. Only specific post-2015 water-related targets will drive the ambitious action programmes that are necessary to face the growing water challenges. A dedicated water goal seems appropriate to combine them in a coherent way.

A growing consensus

The Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals has moved beyond their stock-taking phase and is moving to build consensus on focus areas including water and sanitation. As the Open Working Group Chairs noted, countries thus far agree “that the SDGs should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries”. The challenge will be to extract from this complex dialogue a clear set of priorities with meaningful goals, targets and indicators. In addition, keeping sanitation a priority within the overall framework, linked to water, health and ecosystem protection is critical. UNSGAB’s recommendations for a water goal are designed to sustainably address social, environmental and economic development in a way that is as simple and clear as is feasible.

The World Economic Forum conducts an annual analysis which ranks risks that threaten global development. These shocks do not respect national boundaries nor do they respond to short-term solutions. Water crises, after fiscal challenges in key economies and structurally high unemployment, ranked as the third most concerning global threat in 2014. The Forum recognises that mitigating water crises in the future requires robust institutions, infrastructure and investment. UNSGAB believes that a dedicated water goal could lay the foundation for a unifying global regime to help take on the myriad challenges ahead. To build prosperity, all countries are unified by the need to effectively and efficiently manage their water resources. In building a universal post-2015 development agenda, a unified water goal can channel collective will, political authority, and global knowledge around this global development risk.

My World is the United Nations global survey for a better world. By continually gauging public opinion about priorities vis-à-vis the post-2015 development agenda My World

captures the voices, views and priorities of civil society to inform leaders as they forge the next development agenda. Consistently, water and sanitation has ranked among the top 5 concerns (among 16 or more priorities). It is clear that water and sanitation resonates as fundamentally important to the general public. This was also demonstrated through the World We Want 2015 Thematic Consultations - the water discussion which drew among the widest audience of all Consultations. Participants repeatedly made the point that clean water is not only a human right but fundamental to health, dignity and development. The new development agenda needs to remain clear and accessible to the public. In many ways this is the strength of the Millennium Development Goals. A dedicated water goal speaks to the public concern in a clear manner and in this way will strengthen the public's trust in the post-2015 development regime.

UN-Water, representing 31 members from UN entities and 36 international partners has shared technical advice from the UN system on the elements of a possible water goal. Building on the experience of the MDGs and Rio +20 priorities, UN-Water suggests a concept that is universally applicable while able to respond to national circumstancesⁱ. The Board stands behind a universal goal that has resonance across nations. While it is essential that goals and targets are not overly prescriptive, a global goal should set forth ambitious global objectives. A post-2015 framework requesting each country to define their own targets could lose the aspirational value of the MDGs for example. It is also important to remember the realities of monitoring and reporting which necessitates a restricted number of targets and indicators. UNSGAB widely agrees with the UN-Water advice to Member States as they continue their work on formulating the SDGs. However, the Board is of the opinion that drinking-water quality needs to be adequately considered in the proposed WASH sub-target on universal basic accessⁱⁱ.

Related efforts such as the May 2013 findings of the SG's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons were welcomed by the Board. The Panel recommended a goal to "achieve universal access to water and sanitation" with targets on providing universal access to safe drinking water, ending open defecation, bringing freshwater withdrawals in line with supply and recycling or retreating municipal industrial wastewater. Later, the Sustainable Development Solution Network proposed 6 water-related targets and the Global Compact proposed a dedicated Water Goal. Other milestone events in 2013 which helped shape the water discussion included the 3rd Session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (May), the High-Level International Conference on Water Cooperation (Dushanbe – August), the Budapest Water Summit (October - which resulted in a statement that advocates for a dedicated water goal including targets in four thematic areas), and the discussion on Water in the UN General Assembly on Feb 18, 2014. In participating in all of these sessions, the Board took the opportunity to advocate for a global water vision articulated through a dedicated water goal.

Driving action through quantified and time-bound targets

Water challenges cover a wide spectrum. Making progress on access to safe drinking water and sanitation is impossible without intelligent management of the larger water cycle underpinned by an ambitious global water vision. UNSGAB's mandate,

“Hashimoto Action Plan III” commits the Board to helping secure this vision through a dedicated water goal in the post-2015 development agenda. For the post-2015 development framework, the Board supports a dedicated water goal that includes three essential objectives. Keeping goals, objectives and targets clear, simple and measurable will help ensure their success.

1) Achieve universal access to sustainable sanitation and to drinking water that is really safe

The next development agenda needs to reflect an ambitious objective to complete the unfinished work under the MDGs. In doing so, creating clear indicators and targets to measure progress is essential. When the MDG target to halve the proportion of people lacking access to an improved source of drinking water was officially met and announced in 2012, UNSGAB was vocal about the fact that MDG monitoring mechanisms were unable to measure water quality, hence an improved source of water did not translate into a safe source of water. The overall perception that the drinking water target was met could instil the notion that “our drinking water work is done”. This could not be further from the truth. We know that 800 million people lack access to improved water sources globally but the number of people lacking access to safe drinking water is estimated to be at least 2 billion. Against this backdrop, the SG’s High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda pointed out that a more coherent effort to ensure access to continuous safe water is needed. The UN Secretary General stated at the Budapest Water Summit: “Close to one-third of people drink water that endangers health”. Learning from these challenges, the next development agenda should adopt a precise target that includes universal access to drinking water that is really safe. For sanitation, among the most lagging of all MDG targets, it is abundantly clear that the post-2015 development agenda requires reinforced focus.

2) Increase wastewater management and pollution prevention

As the global population exceeds 7 billion with an increasing number living in urban areas, managing wastewater and preventing water pollution is critical. UNSGAB promotes innovative wastewater management through a cost-effective approach supported by sustainable financing models. In this area, part of the economic equation must include pollution prevention to enhance the productivity of industry and agriculture. Done right, wastewater treatment can offer a host of green jobs. Again, monitoring tools for wastewater treatment are essential. Rough estimates suggest that 80 to 90 percent of wastewater in developing countries is untreated, particularly in the agricultural sector. However these numbers are not yet backed by a rigorous monitoring system. . It is important going forward that a fuller understanding of the need for wastewater treatment and pollution prevention is supported by an internationally endorsed and globally applicable monitoring framework.

3) Improve integrated water resources management and water-use efficiency

While not new, IWRM provides a comprehensive approach for the water sector to aid sustainable growth and to protect essential environmental services. Linked to national planning, institutional strengthening and improved water management instruments, integrated approaches can improve synergies between food, energy and water

management objectives. A post-2015 target should drive action to mitigate growing water scarcity through improving sustainability and efficiency of the different uses of available water resources.

Transboundary water governance is a clear priority both in terms of governance for international cooperation, but also for intersectoral rivalry for water use (among agriculture, industry, and ecosystem services for example). Conflict prevention and international cooperation on water can be strengthened with monitoring and reporting especially relating to transboundary river basin and aquifer management.

Improved monitoring and reporting

Learning from challenges encountered with the MDGs is critical as the post-2015 development agenda is negotiated and agreed. This time, countries need to dedicate resources to improve monitoring and reporting on a uniform, global basis. This is true for a dedicated water goal along with the other goals that the international community adopts. For water, this is most critical for drinking water. It is not enough to measure access to an improved source. The quality of that drinking water, to ensure it is safe and healthy, also must be measured for all drinking-water targets. This is also critical for wastewater. It is important for all involved in the negotiations to remember, “if it cannot be measured, it cannot be managed”.

As the process evolves, well-meaning actors are offering a proliferation of indicators and targets which could never practically be reported against or reliably managed to yield globally meaningful statistics. Simplicity must be retained. UNSGAB believes that no matter what form the post-2015 agenda takes, it is vital that the framework which succeeds the MDGs is a practical basis for monitoring and reporting. This will allow the dynamism of the MDGs to continue. UNSGAB’s three clear targets are offered in this spirit.

ⁱ The technical advice offered by UN-Water in “A Post-2015 Global Goal for Water: Synthesis of Key findings and Recommendations of UN-Water” Jan. 2013, is comprised of five elements: 1) drinking water, sanitation and hygiene; water resources; water governance; water-related disasters; wastewater pollution and water quality.

ⁱⁱ In “A Post-2015 Global Goal for Water: Synthesis of Key findings and Recommendations of UN-Water” Jan. 2013, Target A, Element 2 needs to incorporate drinking water quality, pg. 37.