Thematic Scope
Water for Development


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Water and the development challenge

2015 is the target year for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Although considerable progress has been made in halving poverty, the targets to achieve improved access to key basic services during the first 15 years of this century will not be fully reached. Almost two billion people will still lack access to safe water and about 2.5 billion people lack access to basic sanitation. More than one billion people will still be without electricity and almost one billion people will go to bed hungry. They are largely the same underprivileged poor. The challenge remains for the world community in 2015 to formulate, commit to and urgently pursue a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Water is central to this challenge. Our lives and livelihoods, along with all other living creatures, depend on water. Without it we cannot sustain a productive economy to live healthy lives, produce our food, energy and other basic necessities and commodities. This is why World Water Week in Stockholm focuses on these issues, and the vital role of water in addressing them, from "Water and Food Security" in 2012, through "Water Cooperation" in 2013 and "Energy and Water" in 2014 to "Water for Development" in 2015.

2015 – The year for renewed global commitments

Irrespective of how water will be captured in the future SDGs, the understanding that smart water management underpins success across sustainable development is most important. Without improved development and management of this finite and vulnerable resource we cannot achieve better livelihoods for all, and particularly for the poor, regardless of where they live. Poverty is appearing not just in the least developed countries but also to a large extent in middle income countries and growing economies. Poverty, lack of dignity, as well as (lack of) access to basic services, is a daily challenge for the underprivileged in every part of the world. Therefore, the SDGs will need to apply to all.

2015 is also the year in which a new global climate agreement will be arrived at during COP 21 in Paris in December. The recent 5th Assessment by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has clearly shown the need for urgent action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and scaling up of investment and action in climate change adaptation. A review of the Hyogo Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction will take place in Sendai, Japan in March 2015. Both of these processes have strong links to water and its role in the three key dimensions of sustainable development: economic development, social progress and equity, and the maintenance of a healthy and rich environment.

The Post-2015 agenda and Sustainable Development Goals
In debating the water dimension of the SDGs, with a strong call for a dedicated water goal, a broad approach has been advocated that recognises the following key aspects: drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), water resources, water productivity, water governance, water quality, improved resilience, healthy ecosystems, mitigating water related disasters, managing wastewater and reducing pollution. The need to highlight the role of water in other SDGs, such as those addressing food, energy, climate, health etc., and preferably including some specific targets, has also been raised. During World Water Week in Stockholm in August 2015, the negotiation of the Post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs are entering a final phase, therefore the main contribution of the Week will be to discuss how the water-related goals and targets can be most effectively implemented, measured and monitored.

New development pathways

In addressing the role of "Water for Development" in Stockholm in 2015 it will be important to bring into focus how we go beyond the discussions about global goals and targets to address the actual implementation of the new Post-2015 development agenda in the local context. If we are to progress beyond 'business-as-usual' that did not fully deliver on the MDGs, we need to think innovatively – together – about new development pathways. Our various communities, too often separated in silos, need to form new alliances, innovative public-private partnerships and social entrepreneurships for an effective and socially accepted development agenda. This involves building bridges between traditional sectors and communities, such as water, food, energy, health, and environment, as well as across public, private and civil society stakeholder groups. This may be a tall order, but the last few years in Stockholm have shown that it is possible to build and expand such new bridges and alliances.

The global to local change perspective

The Post-2015 development agenda will be shaped by key drivers such as continued population growth, increased income levels in many countries, increased urbanisation, growth in the emerging economies with a fast growing middle class, conflict and post-conflict challenges, continued rapid move from agriculture-based economies to industry and services-production, and accelerating impacts of climate change. These drivers will pose serious challenges to our water, food and energy security. Water will be affected both in terms of availability and quality. Building resilience to climate change, whether in the form of long term temperature and hydrologic change, sea-level rise, or more frequent and severe floods and droughts and water-related disasters, calls for new approaches to mitigate risk and manage uncertainties. Such approaches must also consider how to best promote coherence and synergy between climate change adaptation and mitigation. While these challenges are universal, they obviously manifest themselves differently in different countries, contexts and hot spots, with regions and countries characterised by poverty and a fast growing population calling for a special focus. However, while many global drivers may be seen as challenges, there are also important positive aspects to consider, such as the information revolution with new and powerful tools and ways of communicating, as well as technological development to increase water and energy efficiency.

The human and social perspective

A growing disparity in access to water, food and energy, from the affluent top billion to the poor, hungry and disadvantaged bottom billion, and an increasing demand from a rapidly growing global middle class calls for new ways to manage water and improve service delivery. Awareness about losses and waste in the value chain, as well as recognition of the value of the water and energy we consume, need to translate into changes in human behaviour and lifestyles in high-income countries. Respecting that there are critical limits to human transformation of the biosphere and natural resource use, i.e. that there are planetary boundaries, a more efficient use of scarce natural resources to tackle the increasing global demand calls for an increasing shift from supply to demand management. The human dimension of land and water resources allocation, as exemplified in the increased demand for arable land, and the social distribution of water and goods and services produced from water, needs more attention. More focus is also required on water equity and the concept of equality/justice in access to resources, be it between people in the local setting, or between countries and regions. The basis is the human right to access to safe drinking water and sanitation. We also need to see, in a broader perspective, how smallholder farmers and other relevant and disadvantaged social groups can get secured access to water.

The political economy of growth and development

In addressing growth, a quality perspective is needed: emphasising growth that is environmentally sustainable and socially equitable. In the face of rapid per capita income increase globally and growing urbanisation, this perspective must also be fundamental to long term water security. The growth agenda poses several challenges: we need to properly understand who pays and who benefits, how water related trade-offs are dealt with, and how we share, re-distribute and trade water and water related benefits within and between countries. It also calls for improved governance across scales and societal sectors. For these issues special focus on arid-climate growth countries, particularly low income countries and post-conflict countries is required, including a special consideration of how to optimise subsidies for water services for the poor.

The ecosystem and pollution perspective

A sustainable Post-2015 development agenda needs to put the human development in relation to the ecosystems and the planetary boundaries, taking a holistic perspective. Development decisions must more accurately reflect the full value of ecosystems services to enhance livelihoods, reduce poverty, and maintain critical resource stocks and flows – from land and fish to water and climate regulation – and to conserve biodiversity. The environmental dimension of the water, energy and food security nexus, and the green growth concepts, need to become explicit. In a changing and uncertain world we need to increasingly learn to build resilience by living with nature, and make optimal use of natural storage before and when engaging in infrastructure development. Considering the high proportion of untreated wastewater in many countries today, we need to increasingly base growth on accelerated pollution prevention and abatement efforts. Changing from 'business-as-usual' to a much more ecosystem conscious development path requires a paradigm shift and recognition of the need to build public awareness and political will to make such a transition.