

Background Note
Special Event of the Economic and Financial Committee of the United Nations General Assembly: “Enhancing governance on water”

Water issues are a pivotal factor in any of the key development efforts – from achieving food security and sustainable development, adapting to climate change, ensuring basic education, reducing child mortality, empowering women – the list can be continued ad infinitum. Evidence shows that water is in all of these areas a crucial feature of success. Therefore equitable, efficient and ecological sound management of water resources has been addressed as a key factor by the international community, local communities and other actors alike.

As experience by many governments illustrates, it is not enough to create a Ministry of Water or simply draw up so-called integrated water resources management and water efficiency plans. Evidence strongly points to the fact that water management needs to be embraced as a cross-cutting sustainable development issue, where actors from different fields - agriculture, industries, energy, health and the environment - together with national security experts within and across countries need to come together. Sound policies need to build on a truly integrated approach to water management and include ecological, economical, social and political aspects. These policies need to be backed up and implemented by responsive and pro-active institutions.

It is difficult and politically challenging to achieve this cooperation among sectors and beyond borders. Integrated management of water also needs to consider numerous external drivers such as population growth, changes in consumption and production patterns, climate variability and change and also aspects such as lack of capacity to manage the demand for water. The absence of effective financial support to finance new and rehabilitate existing water infrastructure further exacerbates the challenges. The absence of political will to act resolutely seems to be frequently an underlying theme of why these challenges are not dealt with decisively.

Taking these challenges into account and realizing that water and sanitation issues cut across many of the mandates of the UN system, the UN has established UN-Water. UN-Water is a light mechanism, backed up by a small Secretariat, through which the UN system comes together to devise effective strategies to support countries in the integrated management of water resources to eradicate poverty, promote public health, enable equitable economic growth and sustain the environment. UN-Water is producing important inputs to policy debates and processes and is increasingly proactively shaping the water agenda to spur action on the ground. These efforts are backed up by various targeted activities including substantive reports such as UN-Water’s triennial World Water Development Report (the third edition was launched in March 2009), the Global Annual Assessment on Sanitation and Drinking Water (GLAAS) and the biannual reports of the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP).

The expert panel in this special event of the economic and financial committee of the United Nations General Assembly will explore how to achieve solutions to the manifold challenges to the truly sustainable management of water resources. Experts will explore the underpinning governance reforms that need to take place at all levels to ensure access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities, ensure food security, strengthen cooperative management of shared waters, avoid water wars, strengthen capacities to adapt to climate change, increase the resilience to water related disasters and build an effective institutional architecture from the international/watershed to the local level adapting to and respecting the cultural and socio-economic context.

1. How can the institutional architecture around water issues be made more effective at the international level? What role do different actors play: the governments, the private sector, civil society, the UN system? How can these actors work together more effectively?
2. Climate change impacts people mainly through water. Climate change adaptation has much to do with sustainable water management. What are the challenges which climate change poses for national institutions responsible for management of water resources? How can institutions' capacities to adapt to climate change be strengthened?
3. Sector integration and joint planning will be essential to cope with water related challenges. Food security is particularly urgent and will require institutional and policy changes which promote the integration of land and water issues and recognize the role of water resources in agriculture policies. What water demand management measures in agricultural sector can contribute towards meeting increasing food demand by producing more with less water? What have been the issues and challenges in scaling up these measures? How could an improved international institutional architecture help to address these challenges?
4. What are the necessary institutional changes required to better integrate water related aspects in disaster mitigation strategies? How can we ensure that we are better prepared for water related disasters? How can the response of the international community, particularly through better water governance, be made more effective?
5. With increased water scarcities in parts of the world, can we avert water wars also in the future and strengthen cooperation in management of shared waters? What are the important factors to achieve cooperation over water resources? What institutional architecture works at the national and at the watershed level?
6. To what extent do policies aimed at economic growth and poverty reduction damage water resources? Are appropriate measures build into the existing Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) to ensure that high economic growth is not achieved by destroying the natural capital?