

## **Background Paper**

### **High-Level Interactive Dialogue on “The International Decade For Action, ‘Water For Life’: Progress Achieved And Lessons Learned for Sustainable Development”**

30 March 2015  
UN Headquarters –Trusteeship Council

#### **Introduction**

The international community has acknowledged the indispensable role that water and sanitation play for human health, well-being and sustainable development. During the ‘Water for Life’ Decade (2005-2015), significant progress was achieved in promoting access to water and sanitation and fostering cooperation on water issues<sup>1</sup>. Despite progress, serious water challenges still persist, with as many as 1.8 billion people living in countries facing water scarcity by 2025<sup>2</sup>. Global water crisis has been listed as one of the top global risks by the World Economic Forum in recent years and has hit the number one spot in 2015. Ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all is going to require a comprehensive and ambitious approach to water issues in the new development agenda.

In December 2014, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution on the “International Decade for Action, ‘Water for Life’, 2005-2015” (A/RES/69/215) which invites the President of the General Assembly to convene a one-day high-level interactive dialogue “on a comprehensive review of the progress achieved in the implementation of the Decade, including the best practices and lessons learned relevant to the achievement of sustainable development”.

At the crossroads between the end of the Decade and the beginning of the Post-2015 Development agenda, the convening of the High-Level Interactive Dialogue on The International Decade For Action ‘Water For Life’: Progress Achieved And Lessons Learned for Sustainable Development” provides a timely opportunity to review the achievements and gaps of the ‘Water for Life’ Decade and have an in depth discussion on how lessons learned can be translated into concrete actions for sustainable water management in the new development agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/>

<sup>2</sup> UN-Water GLAAS Report, 2014

## **Morning Session: Review of the progress achieved in the implementation of the Decade**

With the aim of furthering efforts to achieve internationally agreed water-related goals, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the period 2005-2015 as the International Decade for Action, 'Water for Life' in December 2003 (A/Res/58/217). The Decade has strived to promote greater focus on water-related issues, the participation of women in water-related development efforts, and the strengthening of cooperation at all levels.

With regards to the MDG safe drinking water target, a major achievement was reached in 2010 when the UN Secretary-General declared the target to have been met five years ahead of schedule.<sup>3</sup> Between 1990 and 2012, 2.3 billion people gained access to an improved drinking water source, raising global coverage to 89 per cent in 2012<sup>4</sup>. Yet, significant obstacles remain to realize the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. Today, 800 million people are without access to an improved water source and many more remain without safe and sustainable water supply. In addition, disparities continue to exist between and within countries.

There was also progress in the MDG sanitation target, with almost 1.8 billion people gaining access to improved sanitation facilities since 1990, but more remains to be done. Access to sanitation is today the most lagging of the MDGs with 2.5 billion people without improved sanitation and 1.1 billion still practicing open defecation<sup>5</sup>.

Another important achievement of the Decade was the declaration by the General Assembly, in 2010, of the human right to water and sanitation. It represented a landmark in the pursuit and awareness of the Decade goal of shifting to a rights-based approach on water and sanitation issues and lead to the establishment of the mandate of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. During the Decade, considerable efforts were also made to mainstream gender in water and hygiene management, both by UN-Water's activities, but also in the creation of UN Women and pilot projects carried out throughout the Decade by different UN agencies and partners.

### **Issues for consideration/ Guiding questions:**

- What are the major achievements of the 'Water for Life Decade? What are the remaining

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<sup>3</sup> WHO/UNICEF, Joint Monitoring Programme, 2012

<sup>4</sup> WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

obstacles for achieving universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation services, and what do we still need to do in order to make further progress?

- What factors lie behind the increase in safe drinking water and sanitation access achieved during the Decade?
- How has the recognition of the human right to water and sanitation contributed to promotion of the MDG targets?
- Why is involving women in decision making at all levels crucial for ensuring access and sustainable management of water and sanitation?
- When the General Assembly declared the International Year of Water Cooperation, it recognized that “cooperation is essential in order to strike a balance between the different needs and priorities” related to water. In that regard, what conditions and measures can facilitate transboundary cooperation?

#### **Afternoon Session: Carrying the lessons learned from the Decade into the Post-2015 Development Agenda**

The Outcome Document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), Member States recognized that water is at the core of sustainable development as it is closely linked to a number of key global challenges. They also underlined the critical importance of water and sanitation within the three dimensions of sustainable development.

In July 2014, the report of the United Nations General Assembly’s Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed a stand-alone water goal for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, entitled “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”. The proposed goal addresses aspects beyond the drinking water and sanitation targets of the MDGs and includes issues such as water resources management and protection, water quality, water efficiency and wastewater management. Moreover, the proposal for the SDGs includes targets related to water in the context of other goals, underlining the cross-cutting impact of water management to the promotion of sustainable development.

Global water requirements are projected to exceed sustainable water supplies by 40% by 2030<sup>6</sup>. The situation could be worsened by climate change and environmental degradation. Being able to manage water resources in a sustainable way will be a key to ensuring food production, energy supply, human health and well-being. An integrated management of water resources that balances access, quality and water efficiency is necessary to ensure that the complicated and inter-related decisions on water allocation will take into consideration the impacts on society, the economy or the environment.

Learning from the achievements and shortcomings of the Decade can provide invaluable lessons to move forward and succeed in the promotion of the new, more ambitious agenda. It can also shed some light on which means of implementation can secure concrete progress.

**Issues for consideration/ Guiding questions:**

- What key measures are needed to ensure water for sustainable development in a holistic manner?
- What are the linkages between water, energy and agriculture and how can different interests related to water, energy and agriculture be best consolidated in order to ensure sustainable development?
- How can we reduce the risks of water-related disasters and mitigate the water-related effects of climate change?
- What measures (e.g. finance, infrastructure, technology, human capacity, institutional reforms etc.) must governments, their international partners and other stakeholders undertake to ensure concrete and lasting outcomes?
- What can governments do to address water pollution and improve water quality? What is the role of the private sector and other stakeholders? Where are the opportunities for partnerships?

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<sup>6</sup> “Charting Our Water Future. Economic frameworks to inform decision-making”, 2030 WRG, 2009.