THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

4 May 2015

Excellency,

I have the honour to transmit herewith a Summary of the key messages and recommendations from the High-level Interactive Dialogue on "The International Decade for Action, 'Water for Life': Progress achieved and lessons learned for sustainable development," which I convened on 30 March 2015.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Sam K. Kutesa

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

PRESIDENT'S SUMMARY

High-level Interactive Dialogue
"The International Decade for Action, 'WATER FOR LIFE': Progress achieved and lessons learned for sustainable development"

30 March 2015
United Nations Headquarters

In accordance with General Assembly resolution 69/215, the President of the General Assembly convened a High-level Interactive Dialogue on The International Decade for Action, 'Water for Life': Progress achieved and lessons learned for sustainable development, on 30 March 2015. The following is a summary of the key messages and recommendations from the Dialogue.

Morning session: Review of the progress achieved in the implementation of the Decade

It was noted that water is not only a prerequisite for life itself, but must also be seen as one of the highest priorities for sustainable development. The need to enhance cooperation on water management, "hydro-diplomacy" was emphasized.

The session acknowledged the achievements of the International Decade for Action, which enhanced cooperation and focus on the achievement of international water-related goals.

During the International Decade for Action, progress was made in promoting international agreed water-related goals, in particular meeting the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) safe drinking water target. In spite of the progress made in the area in sanitation, significant challenges persist, such as the need to end open defecation.

Presented as one of the milestones of the Decade, the declaration of the human right to water and sanitation was underscored as an important shift from the idea that its provision is a "favour" or charity from governments, to the understanding that governments have an obligation to ensure access to water and sanitation.

With regard to gender access to water and sanitation, important steps were made towards understanding and considering the impact of water and sanitation issues on women and girls, including the dangers and vulnerability faced when gathering water and the impacts on education of a lack of sanitation or hygiene management in schools. The need to address the burden on women's life for the time lost in collecting water was presented as a priority.

It was noted that the provision of safe water and sanitation access is critical for poverty eradication, and that water is essential in efforts to develop national economies.

Evolving from the approach adopted during the Decade, sustainable water resources management in the new development agenda should encompass a comprehensive and broader perspective to water management, which includes, inter alia, access, water quality and efficiency, wastewater, integrated water resources management, disaster risk reduction, and environmental concerns.

The lessons learned from the International Decade shall be valuable in the years to come, as increasing population growth, urbanization and climate change will present additional challenges to sustainable water management. By 2025, two-thirds of the world's population may live in water-stressed conditions and global water demands are expected to increase by 40%. The special situations and challenges of Small Island Developing States, which are surrounded by water but face challenges related to potable sources, were highlighted.

Several speakers, in their interventions, stressed the cross-cutting nature of the water challenge, including the impact of water management to food and energy production and diseases control. The inclusion of a stand-alone goal in the Report of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was welcomed. In recognizing the importance of sustainable water management for the attainment of other goals, the need for enhanced cooperation, capacity building and adequate technologies was emphasized.

Many success stories of the provision of drinking water access and water cooperation during the decade were shared. In Africa, the Sharm-el-Sheikh Declaration brought water and sanitation to the highest political level and its internalization at the country level will further strengthen the promotion of international goals and targets. There was a call for increasing funding for water priority areas in Africa, and in this regard greater coordination and dialogue between water and finance ministries was recommended.

In Europe, the fact that water resources are often shared, contributed to the importance of regional cooperation in water management. At the European Union (EU) level, the legal framework put in place since 2000 introduced integrated water resources management. Slovakia underscored its readiness to share their national experience in water purification; and Georgia indicated how it is developing a law to promote an integrated river basin management approach.

Further good examples were provided from several countries, such as Singapore, which, without any of fresh water sources, has achieved water self-sufficiency and nearly 100% access due to integrated planning of water infrastructure, effective use of technology such as rain collection and water recycling, and working with community and key stakeholders.

Brazil mentioned a partnership with UNEP to host a centre for building water monitoring capacities in Latin America and the Caribbean, and also in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). In Panama, the management of the Panama Canal in the past decade included a local governance structure in place for the watershed, overseen by an inter-institutional commission between government and civil society which contributed to coordinating efforts and resources.

The case of Central Asian states, which are experiencing a strain on water resources, was also highlighted, in particular how trans-boundary water cooperation is important in the case of small and medium-size hydropower stations.

The panelists noted that lessons learned from the Decade included the recognition of the cross-cutting character of water management to sustainable development and the need to make sophisticated, better quantifiable and clearer indicators within the framework of the Sustainable Development Agenda, and the importance of disaggregated data. Other important messages included the human rights-based approach to water and sanitation, and the need for increased investment in water.

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

The first interactive round table focused on a dialogue on water resource management, including trans-boundary cooperation, integrated water resources management (IWRM) and the linkages between different water uses such as agriculture, industries, energy, cities and domestic use.

It was noted that the Mekong River Commission provides a robust and successful legal framework and fosters a multidisciplinary stakeholder approach to water resources management which promotes the sustainable use of water resources, preserves biodiversity and increases access to safe drinking water in the 10th largest river basin in the world.

IWRM is a multi-sectoral approach which considers all uses of water and encourages the making of smart choices about how to develop, manage and share water in order to maximize economic and social welfare in an equitable manner.

National IWRM planning was a key goal of the Decade, and the number of countries with IWRM plans has grown steadily, with nearly 80% of the countries now adopting integrated approaches. Despite this, the implementation of reforms is slow and integrated water resources management still often has a low profile in most governmental actions. Major investments are also needed to improve data. Leadership is needed at the highest level, including the necessary dialogue between different relevant ministries.

The panel also discussed the relation between water and economic growth, and the impact of agriculture and energy in water usage, related not only to population growth, but also to patterns of consumption and production. It was noted that all actors should work together to solve problems in a multidisciplinary way. Multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together representatives from government, private sector and civil society may facilitate collective action to improve water management and efficiency. This will foster economic growth and improve peoples' livelihoods.

Disaster risk reduction is an integral element of sustainable water management. Water-related disasters are responsible for 90% of all people affected from disasters, with the damage to human lives and assets expected to become more severe in the future due to climate change and urbanization. In this regard, the implementation of the outcome document of the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai is critical for the reduction of water-related disasters and promoting disaster risk reduction.

The second round table discussed issues such as the means of implementation, including finance, infrastructure, technology, human capacity and institutional. It was emphasized that while water issues are global in nature, much of the action that is required is local. However, local capacity is often limited and available resources are insufficient and inefficiently used.

Many speakers stressed the need to also strengthen capabilities in the civil society, which should be an active actor in the discussions on sustainable water management. Myanmar provided a good example where a women water professionals group discussed the importance of an IWRM participatory approach with government officials and contributed to the establishment of a Sustainable Water Resources Development Standing Committee (SWRDSC), composed of government representatives and representatives from a non-governmental Water Advisory Group.

Furthermore, participants underscored that ensuring adequate resources for sustainable water management requires good understanding and application of the differences between full cost and sustainable cost recovery. It was noted that in order for the burden of water and sanitation access to be spread fairly and sustainably, project costs need to be recovered over sufficiently long periods of time from a sufficiently wide basket of contributors. Moreover, cost systems cannot be based on only what the poorest can pay – almost everyone can pay something, and those who cannot, need to be identified and helped financially.

It was noted that statistics indicate that 80% to 90% of used water being discharged to the natural environment is without treatment, which demonstrates how vital water quality will be in the new agenda.

Efforts to raise awareness about the effects of water pollution, such as in the Earth Security Index's dashboard of risks, contributed to the discussions.

The engagement of private sector in the achievement of sustainable water management was also highlighted. Good examples were shared, such as PepsiCo, which together with the Earth Institute has aimed to apply sound science with academic rigor in support of policies that make a difference to water users worldwide. It was noted that in a recent survey of issues important for the private sector, the first priority listed was the provision of safe drinking water.

In the area of international cooperation, the International Hydrological Programme (IHP) of UNESCO promotes international collaboration on hydrological research, and capacity building to enhance water resources management and governance. International cooperation is necessary to share and sustainable manage water between upstream and downstream users, reiterating the point that called for water as source of cooperation than conflict.

Concluding highlights of the session included the importance of participatory governance, the need to address financing and pollution, and the importance of monitoring and data collection. Science and appropriate policies also play an important role, and lessons can be learned from methods to encourage water cooperation, which has been successfully happening for hundreds of years.