



70th General Assembly Second Committee Meetings

Side Event:

Challenges and Initiatives for the Implementation of the Water-related SDGs in Water-scarce Countries: Learning from Mediterranean and Latin American Countries

Organised by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA; DSD and IDfA), in close coordination with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

Date/Time: Friday, November 6 / 10:00am-1:00pm

Place: United Nations Headquarters, New York (Conference Room #2)

Background

Water is crucial for development, but it is also a scarce renewable resource. This is particularly true in the Mediterranean Basin region of West Asia and North Africa where per capita water resources continue to decline beyond the security thresholds. The geography of water scarcity also coincides with that of desertification, land degradation and drought. In the coming years, water problems are expected to exacerbate further, particularly in developing countries, as the needs for water for economic development arise. A severe consequence of climate change is predicted to be the increased frequency, severity and duration of drought, which is already the most costly type of natural disaster, affecting more people than any other natural hazard. Drought is not a charismatic disaster like a tsunami or earthquake that happens overnight and is hence hugely underestimated. Drought affects all economic sectors, with the greatest impacts being loss of agricultural production and reduced water resources, thus exacerbating physical water scarcity.

Addressing water scarcity and the impacts of water-related disasters (including droughts) is prominent within the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Water is at the foundation of both SDG 2, titled “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” and SDG 6, titled “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”. The indispensable relationship between agriculture, land and water resources also highlights the centrality of water within SDG 15, titled “Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”.

Reducing the number of people suffering from water scarcity by 2030 requires sound policies that integrate both supply-side and demand-side options, conducive to improved water use efficiency and productivity across all sectors and balanced withdrawals and supplies of freshwater. It also necessitates sound land management with the objective of restoring the capacity of land to retain and restore ground water supplies, thereby alleviating water stress, building resilience to climatic shocks and contributing to enhancing agricultural productivity and food security. Similarly, reducing the number of drought-affected people, drought-related deaths and the percentage of economic losses relative to GDP by 2030, with a particular focus on the poor and vulnerable, will require decisive policies and the related actions.

Achieving these closely linked goals calls for a paradigm shift from the prevailing structure of ‘reactive’ and ‘crisis-based’ water scarcity and drought management approaches towards more ‘proactive’ and ‘risk-based’ approaches. Addressing water scarcity and managing drought in a proactive manner also serves the achievement of other objectives and is linked to strengthening national efforts related to sustainable agriculture, food security, economic growth, human health and climate change.

Increasing societal and environmental resilience to drought and water scarcity, and improving the ability to better adapt to and cope with them, call for the enhancement of response and recovery capabilities of various pertinent stakeholders at all levels. Integrated approaches are required in order to implement solutions that reflect cross-sectoral trade-offs and build on synergies.

This will also require expanding international cooperation and capacity-building support to promote the adoption of these policies, the establishment of partnerships, the participation of stakeholders and the implementation of specific water and drought management measures.

Objectives of the side event

The event will focus on the specific challenges, solutions and role of international cooperation to support capacity development for the implementation of water scarcity and drought-related goals and targets under the SDGs.

The specific objectives of the side event are as follows:

- a) Contribute ideas and expert knowledge to inform the Committee's deliberations on specific challenges for implementation in water-scarce countries;
- b) Analyze the proposed system of indicators for monitoring water scarcity and water-related disasters, and their implications in water-scarce countries;
- c) Identify the capacity development needs for developing and implementing national drought management policies and water scarcity solutions;
- d) Identify and map the current UN system initiatives on strengthening national capacities to manage drought and water scarcity;
- e) Make recommendations on how to move forward, including the support needed from the UN and international cooperation.

Structure

The side event will take the form of a three-hour expert panel presentation and interactive discussion. Presenters will be drawn from government, academia, civil society, and the United Nations system.

Suggested questions for discussion

- What are the specific challenges for implementing the water-related SDGs in water-scarce countries, and will the existing indicators proposed trigger action that will help to deal with these challenges?
 - What examples of specific policies/approaches/tools to address water scarcity and drought have been promoted, and what experiences can be learnt from? Examples include:
 - Mediterranean Drought Preparedness and Mitigation Planning (MEDROPLAN)
 - United States Drought Monitor (USDM)
 - Chapter 5 of University of Nebraska USDM Report: "Drought Preparedness Planning: Building Institutional Capacity"
 - University of Nebraska and FAO Report: "The Near East Drought Planning Manual: Guidelines for Drought Mitigation and Preparedness Planning"
 - United Nations Scientific Report: "Best Practices on National Drought Management Policy"
 - FAO's Regional Initiative on Water Scarcity for the Near East
 - High-level Meeting on National Drought Policy (HMNDP): Policy Segment, Scientific Segment and Declaration (WMO, FAO, UNCCD)
- What obstacles impede implementing drought and water scarcity management policies, and addressing land degradation and desertification, and what kind of support, including capacity development, can help lift these obstacles?
- What new initiatives and approaches would be recommended to promote increased and improved planning, awareness, preparedness, resilience, cooperation, information-sharing and adaptation to drought, land degradation, desertification and water scarcity?
- How to move forward: what support would be needed from the UN and international cooperation?

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