

WATER ON THE ROAD TO RIO

by the UN-Water Programme for Advocacy and Communication¹

The conference 'Water and the Green Economy in Practice: Towards Rio+20' of 3-5 October in Zaragoza, Spain is part of the preparatory process for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), Rio+20. It serves to exchange experiences and prepare a toolbox as an input to the Rio+20 conference.

Global challenges calling for global leadership

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) is one of the most important events in the UN agenda. The first conference or 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 catapulted sustainable development into the mainstream. Several conferences later and twenty years on, governments and participants from around the globe will gather again in Rio de Janeiro on 4-6 June 2012 to mark the 20th Anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit.

It is not hard to see the motivation for an international conference such as Rio+20. One out of five people in the world – 1.4 billion – currently lives on \$1.25 or less a day and almost a billion go hungry every day. The world is facing major and overlapping global crises – the economic and financial crisis, accelerating environmental degradation, water scarcity and pollution, and

emerging impacts of a changing climate. All of these challenges impede efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve an equitable society. Global leadership and cooperation is critical for addressing these challenges which are in their very nature of a global scale. The Rio+20 Summit therefore represents "a historic opportunity to define pathways to a safer, more equitable, cleaner, greener and more prosperous world for all".

Rio+20 in focus

The Rio+20 Summit will bring together thousands of participants – including governments, NGOs and the private sector – to generate momentum towards sustainable development. The objectives of the conference are three-fold. First, the event aims secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development. To this end, there will be attendance at the highest level from Heads of States and Governments worldwide. Second, the conference will be an opportunity to stake stock of progress made towards previous internationally agreed commitments, for example from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Lastly and importantly, there will be a special focus on new and emerging challenges.

"Rio+20 will be one of the most important global meetings on sustainable development in our time. At Rio, our vision must be clear: a sustainable green economy that protects the health of the environment while supporting achievement of the Millennium Development Goals through growth in income, decent work and poverty eradication."

United Nations Secretary-
General
Ban Ki-moon

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Rio+20 will focus on two themes: (1) how to build a green economy which delivers sustainable development and lifts people out of poverty; and (2) how to improve the institutional framework and international coordination for sustainable development. Everyone is talking about the green economy – from environmentalists and economists, to corporate PR executives and Heads of States. At the crux of the concept is the idea of a model of economic growth which also results in improvements to people's well-being and tackles environmental challenges. While it is evident that 'business-as-usual' is not working, fleshing out the details of the vision for a green economy and identifying possible steps required to get there will be a major task for the Rio+20 Summit. The conference aims to carve a way forward, building on successes already achieved in many parts of the world, and building a bridge to the future.

The long and winding road to Rio

The roadmap to Rio+20 involves an extensive preparatory process led by an 11-member Bureau of UN Ambassadors and supported by United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA). The formal preparatory process involves a number of meetings already underway for governments and stakeholders to engage and contribute to the development of the conference.

The major outcome of the Rio+20 Summit will be a "focused political document" on the objectives and two themes of the conference. This as yet vaguely defined output will be the subject of intense discussion and negotiations in the months to come, and of course during the conference itself. Incorporating the views of all UN Member States and multiple civil society and stakeholder groups is no easy task.

Discussion got underway at the second (of three) of the major preparatory meetings for the conference in March this year. In a groundbreaking move, the conference Bureau issued an invitation *to all stakeholders* to provide comments and input for a working document which will form the basis for the outcome document of the conference. Everyone with an interest in the Rio+20 agenda therefore has an opportunity to influence the outcome.

Of critical importance to the success of Rio+20 will be the way in which the needs and concerns of developing countries are addressed. A reoccurring and valid concern relates to the provision of support to enable these countries to advance towards a green economy and avoid the mistakes developed countries have made. 'Common but differentiated responsibilities' is the official line from the UN to encapsulate the respective roles involved. Notably, developed countries must support the less developed countries in making the transition, through financing, technology transfer, and reforms to the global economic and financial structures.

Above all, it is hoped that the conference will energise governments to adopt focused practical measures which secure the prosperity and well-being of its citizens, and protect the environment and natural resource base upon which the future of humanity depends.

Putting water on the Rio+20 agenda

Water is one of the most pressing challenges facing society today. It is fundamental to the green economy because it is interwoven with so many sustainable development issues – health, food security, energy, poverty, to name a few. Water is the common thread that connects the three critical issues of food, energy and the climate. Yet, if we continue along

the same path, experts predict that the amount of water needed by humans could exceed the amount available by as much as 40 percent by 2030. This reality would have devastating consequences for economies and the lives of people worldwide.

The need to improve the management of the world's water resources has been underlined at previous international conferences on sustainable development. Both Earth Summits in Rio (1992) and Johannesburg (2002) called for actions to improve the way water is managed and used. Rio+20 provides a unique opportunity to boost the commitment from governments to implement these actions. To this end, UN-Water has undertaken a global survey of 122 countries to take stock on the progress that has been made so far and to identify implementation gaps. A global status report on the 'application on integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources' will be delivered to Rio+20. Preliminary findings from the survey indicate that most governments have made progress with water sector reform; but that the implementation process which sees principles turned into policy, laws, strategies and plans is slow. Some countries have difficulty moving beyond the first political steps and targeted support is needed to help bring all countries up to speed.

Momentum is building to highlight water as a priority issue for Rio+20. In the preparatory process, Brazil has supported the idea of water being a key emerging issue to be addressed at the conference. As host of the event, Brazil has significant influence, and this voiced intention is an encouraging sign for those keen to see water feature prominently at Rio+20.

At World Water Week 2010 in August this year in Stockholm, a joint statement was made and directed to the Rio+20 Summit. The Stockholm Statement represents a consensus from the international water community and strives to place water firmly on the Rio+20 agenda; "water is the bloodstream of the green economy", it begins. A number of specific targets are proposed for participants of the Rio+20 Summit, such as a "20% increase in water use efficiency in agriculture" and a "20% decrease in water pollution" by 2020. More general outcomes for Rio+20 are also proposed. For instance, the statement urges that "economic and social incentives are created to promote water use efficiency and protect freshwater ecosystems", and for a commitment "to policy and institutional reforms that create an enabling environment for the coherent and integrated management of water, energy and food".

The UN is become more vocal on the water issue as the preparations for Rio+20 unfold. On 26 September 2011, the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation released its official contribution to Rio+20. The message is clear: "good management of water and sanitation is a precondition for sustainable development". The Board urges for decisive objectives and targets on (a) access to safe drinking water and sanitation; (b) wastewater management; and (c) more productive water use in agriculture.

Although the challenges related to water are unquestionably great, there have been many examples of successful sustainable water management which delivers benefits for both people and the environment. It is crucial to share these experiences and the preparatory process leading up to Rio+20 provides an opportunity for such an exchange. The conference "Water and the Green Economy in Practice: Towards Rio+20" on 3-5 October in Zaragoza, Spain will highlight case studies from around the world which promote water in a green economy. One major output from the conference will be a toolbox to provide input to the Rio+20 conference, illustrating key tools which can be used to make the transition towards a green economy. The success of the conference will hinge on its ability to shift the discussions

around the green economy from theoretical ideas to practical implementation guidance that countries can use to generate real change on the ground.