

Chapter 1: Water on the Road to Rio+20



ESCWA



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The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development: 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 summoned representatives of almost all the nations of the world to create a shared vision for reconciling economic growth with environmental protection and building a more equal world. Sustainable development was officially launched 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 20-22 June 2012 to mark the 20th Anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit.

The motivation behind an international conference such as Rio+20 is abundantly clear. One out of five people in the world – 1.4 billion – currently lives on US\$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.

Today we all recognise that the environmental crisis is intimately connected to the economy and society; any solution must simultaneously address development challenges and social exclusion. Similarly, no long-lasting economic gains or solutions to poverty can be achieved without the support of natural assets and the multiple services provided by healthy ecosystems.

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.

The Rio+20 Summit and the emerging concept of a 'green economy'

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

“ 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**

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. 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 they depend.

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. The emerging concept of the green economy has shaped much of the discussions in the preparation for Rio+20.

The green economy is, simply put, the practical and operational framework that will serve to implement the three pillars of sustainable development (environmental, economic and

social). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) define a green economy as one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. The green economy concept has already served an important purpose: acting as a catalyst and rallying individual, national and international actors to work together towards a common vision. While it is evident that 'business-as-usual' is not working, articulating the details of a green economy and identifying possible pathways to get there will be a major task for the Rio+20 Summit.

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

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 legitimate 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. The capacity of national governments to deal with adverse impacts of green economy adjustments (such as the loss of jobs in some sectors) vary greatly. There is need for a strong social component to accompany the transition to a green economy, which considers the impacts of adjustments on broader social outcomes such as access to education, health and basic services. There are also concerns about the introduction of new conditionalities that might restrict trade, financing and official development assistance. The principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' was enshrined as a cornerstone of sustainable development at the 1992 Rio Declaration and provides a framework for sharing fairly the costs of global environmental protection. 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.

“ We all have a joint responsibility to progress to a different economic model. We must not miss this opportunity. ”

**Josefina Maestu,
UN-Water Decade Programme
on Advocacy and Communication**

Water in the green economy

Water is one of the most pressing challenges facing society today. 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.

Water is fundamental to the green economy because it is interwoven with so many sustainable development issues, such as health, food security, and poverty. In developing countries, access to water and sanitation services is a fundamental precondition for poverty reduction and economic progress. The multiple benefits of providing access to water and sanitation in terms of health, life expectancy, and the freeing of time for education and economic activities, are well known.

“ We need to rethink the future we want, and one without water cannot be envisaged ”

Caridad Canales, UNECLAC

Water is the common thread that connects the three critical issues of food, energy and climate change. Sustaining economic growth is only possible if we recognise the limited capacity of ecosystems to supply the water needed for agriculture, industry, energy generation and the production of the many goods and services demanded by society. The green economy implies managing water in a way that catalyses social and economic development, whilst also safeguarding freshwater ecosystems and the services they provide. Water management must be improved in order to achieve food security, conserve ecosystems and reduce risks from water scarcity and pollution, natural disasters such as floods and droughts, and from climate change.

Addressing the water challenge requires the removal of barriers and the creation of institutional mechanisms to facilitate the transfer and adoption of technology, water conservation, improved irrigation methods, the promotion of water reuse and efficiency improvements. To reverse the degradation of freshwater ecosystems, improved gover-

nance is needed which defines property rights, incorporates the full cost of water into decision making, and allocates water to the environment. There are many barriers to achieving a green economy, including lack of institutional capacity, information, and access to finance. A range of approaches for overcoming these barriers will be needed, from investments, capacity development, and structural reforms, to technology policies and incentive systems.

Putting water on the Rio+20 agenda

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 presents a unique opportunity to boost 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, as governments and organisations dedicate activities and events to themes related to water and the green economy. 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 2011 in August this year in Stockholm, a joint statement was made and directed to the Rio+20 Summit. The Stockholm Statement declares that "water is the bloodstream of the green economy" and represents a consensus from the international water community, striving to place water firmly on the Rio+20 agenda. 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".

At the seventh 'Environment for Europe' Ministerial Conference in Astana, Kazakhstan on 21-23 September 2011, Ministers of the UNECE region gathered to discuss pathways for greening the economy and sustainable management of water and water-related ecosystems. Ministers made the declaration "save water, grow green!" and confirmed their com-

mitment to improving water and environmental systems and policies, and to enhancing intersectoral and multilateral environmental cooperation. There was broad agreement to implement principles of integrated water resources management, an ecosystem approach and the integration of ecosystem values in economic accounting. With recognition of the need for increased investment in water, Ministers called for greater use of economic instruments, the provision of incentives for water efficiency and the generation of revenues to finance water services aiming at full cost recovery prices while making provision for vulnerable social groups.

On 26 September 2011, the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB) released its official contribution to Rio+20, arguing that "there are many compelling reasons to take on water and sanitation challenges in Rio". The Board contends that good management of water and sanitation is a precondition for sustainable development and 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.

The Preparatory Conference 'Towards the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20): Water Cooperation Issues', on 19-20 October, represented another important milestone on the Rio+20 roadmap. The conference was organised by the Government of Tajikistan in cooperation with UN-Water, the UNDP and OSCE offices in Dushanbe. Participants discussed current issues and challenges in water cooperation, identifying ways to strengthen cooperation and dialogue, demonstrating best practice, and showcasing effective approaches for the joint management of transboundary water resources. An output of the conference was a concept note for the thematic session on water cooperation of Rio+20 which highlighted the importance of 'water cooperation for peace and security', 'water cooperation for sustainable development', 'water cooperation for poverty alleviation', 'water cooperation for environmental sustainability', and 'cooperation for universal water access'.

The important issue of water policy reform was the focus of the OECD 'Global Forum on Environment: Making Water Reform Happen' which took place on 25-26 October. The forum sought to identify the challenges of designing and implementing water policy reforms and strategies to address them. There was ample opportunity for both developing and developed countries to share experiences about past and on-going water policy reforms and to identify key factors for success.

The Zaragoza Conference: 'Water in the green economy in practice: towards Rio+20'

Although the challenges related to water are unquestionably great, there have been many examples of successful sustainable water management which delivers the so-called 'triple bottom' benefits for economies, people and the environment. It is crucial to share these experiences and the UN-Water conference "Water and the Green Economy in Practice: Towards Rio+20" on 3-5 October in Zaragoza, Spain, provided an opportunity for such an exchange.

The Zaragoza Conference identified four priority water-related issues where change needs to take place in the transition to a green economy: agriculture, industry, cities and watersheds. Six tools were proposed which can be used to facilitate change and support the transition towards a green economy: (1) economic instruments; (2) green jobs; (3) cost recovery and financing; (4) investments in biodiversity; (5) technology; and (6) water planning. These tools can enable us to 'do more with less', overcome barriers, harness opportunities and change behaviours in order to achieve a green economy. The sessions of the conference were dedicated to the proposed tools, with an additional two sessions with a regional focus on Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Asia.

The conference brought together stakeholders, representatives of regional and international organisations, journalists, and representatives of successful initiatives in water and the green economy from five continents to share lessons learnt from practical implementation experiences. The aim was to showcase projects, policies and initiatives that have successfully implemented the tools to generate economic, social and environmental benefits. A total of 34 cases were presented and discussed over the course of the three days. One major output from the conference was a toolbox to provide input to the Rio+20 conference, highlighting approaches for promoting water in the green economy and lessons learnt from implementation.

“ It's up to us to identify the messages to get water on the Rio+20 agenda. This conference is quite unique in that it is looking at specific case studies. Instead of just talking about concepts we are actually looking at how to implement the green economy. ”

**Zafar Adeel,
Chair of UN-Water**