

UN Conference on Sustainable Development (RIO+20)

Thematic Session on Water Cooperation

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

1. It is quite logical that lately the world leaders and governments have often focused on the issue of water, as this strategically important resource is crucial for addressing the issues in all areas of sustainable development, crucially interacting with its environmental, social, economic and cultural dimensions.
2. The major task, which the international community is facing today in the field of water resources, is the transfer of committed obligations into concrete actions that need to be implemented on the ground for the benefit of the people.
3. Population growth, urbanization, economic growth, technological change and changing consumption patterns are recognized as the main factors influencing shifts in water use. Climate change brings in an additional stressor – on water as well as on these factors. Predicting the likely combined impact of these forces is daunting however, especially as the world's population is projected to grow from 7 billion to 9 billion until 2050, with demand for food and other goods increasing significantly. There is still substantial uncertainty about the scale of future demands.
4. Competition for water already exists at all levels and is forecast to heighten in most countries along with mounting water demand.
5. In 2030, 47% of the world's population will be living in areas of high water stress. Yet water management around the world remains deficient in terms of performance, efficiency and equity, while implementation of environmental safeguards and measures to improve water use efficiency and to mitigate pollution are falling short in most sectors. Many regions, and particularly poorer communities, are already vulnerable to floods, droughts and similar water-related disasters that can destroy lives, assets and incomes. Access to basic water services for drinking, sanitation, and food and energy production remains insufficient across developing regions – with some estimates suggesting that more than 5 billion people (67% of the world population) may still be without access to adequate sanitation in 2030.
6. In September 2010 at the High Level Plenary Meeting of UNGA “*Promoting Sustainable Development*” many leaders noted the importance of water resources for achieving the MDGs.
7. It is known that global climate change, financial and food crises, low rates of economic growth and shortage of water resources negatively impact and undermine the efforts of the states at achieving the internationally agreed goals on water and sanitation.

A Multilevel, Inclusive Approach

8. Water resources management issues must be addressed at the local, national and, as appropriate, regional and international levels. All stakeholders, including those in government, international organizations, the private sector, civil society and academia, should be engaged, taking into account social, economic and environmental factors and paying special attention to the livelihoods of the poor and most vulnerable people. In this context, stakeholders must also strive to fully integrate gender equality and ensure the participation of women in water-related development efforts, to work together towards achieving the MDGs on water and sanitation and the goals of the International Decade for Action “Water for Life”, 2005-2015, as decided by the General Assembly in its resolutions 58/217, 64/198 and 65/154.

9. Water management choices must also be consistent with other government policies. Decisions should emerge from informed consultation and negotiation, taking into account interconnectedness and relationships among different land and freshwater resources, and weighing the costs and benefits of all options.

10. There are many challenges to overcome. Action is needed to improve water resources planning, evaluate availability and needs within watersheds and aquifers, reallocate or expand existing storage facilities where necessary, emphasize the importance of managing water demand, develop a better balance between equity and efficiency in water use, and overcome inadequate legislative and institutional frameworks and the rising financial burdens of ageing infrastructure.

Creating a New Dialogue

11. Mobilizing political will and commitment to address water issues worldwide remains crucial. Equally important is forward thinking and a willingness to consider innovative ways to approach local, regional and international cooperation.

12. Sectoral conflicts often hamper cooperation among groups with different water-use priorities (water for domestic uses, hydropower, irrigation, industry, recreation and so on). These conflicts also affect ecosystems, whose sustainability depends on environmental flows. When a river or aquifer crosses a political boundary and there is competition among sectors or countries, these problems become more complex and can lead to conflict.

13. Water is becoming an international issue not only through transboundary water resources, but also through the ramifications of trade and international business holdings. Production and consumption choices in all countries have water footprints and affect the use of water everywhere. A country can import or export water scarcity, pollution and degradation through its trade policies.

14. All transboundary water bodies create hydrological, social and economic interdependencies between societies. They are vital for social and economic development, reducing poverty and contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

15. Open discussion of the issues shaping our water resources today and strong citizen participation in decision-making (which is a key to fostering good governance and a climate of accountability and transparency) can stimulate cooperative action and political commitment. Promoting a culture of consultation and increasing consultative and participative capacities will help deliver benefits in all areas, including collaborative water management.

16. The challenge is to build a new dialogue on the role of water management in sustainable development. Countries should work together to identify socioeconomic priorities and to invest in and use water to sustainably power the engines of development.

Necessity for Water Cooperation: Joint Activities and Next Steps

17. Access to adequate supplies of freshwater is a challenging issue in interstate water relations. However, cooperation rather than conflict is becoming the norm. Conflicts occur, in particular, between users sharing the same resource - a situation that often requires the mutual understanding of the diversity of traditional values, customs and practices, historical factors and geographical vagaries.

18. However, in an increasing number of cases, treaties, agreements and the principles of international water law help crystallize mechanisms for the prevention and peaceful resolution of disputes over water resources.

19. As decision-making processes in water governance and management become more complicated, legislative and institutional developments, as well as guidelines for and capacity-building of all stakeholders in sustainable transboundary water management have become increasingly critical for ensuring equitable and efficient water sharing.

20. History has often shown that the vital nature of freshwater is a powerful incentive for cooperation and dialogue, compelling stakeholders to reconcile even the most divergent views. Water more often unites than divides people and societies. Cooperation must be fostered through investments in adapted education and enhancement of capacities of decision-makers and all others stakeholders involved in the management of transboundary waters.

21. Riparian countries should strengthen dialogue and cooperation and take measures for the mutually beneficial and efficient use of transboundary water resources on the basis of recognized norms, principles and legislation. In accordance with existing and future agreements, water cooperation can lead to specific and tangible steps to be taken by riparian countries. It is possible for parties with divergent interests to benefit from such resources by means of specific arrangements tailored to a given basin's and/or aquifer's characteristics.

22. Water issues involve many stakeholders with conflicting and competing needs and cross multiple physical, political and jurisdictional boundaries. Transboundary water cooperation needs to be guided by regional and international agreements, based on international principles, and should be fostered among countries within existing mechanisms for water cooperation.

23. The existing 276 transboundary lake and river basins cover nearly one half of the Earth's land surface with 40 per cent of the world's population, and cross the borders of two or more states. As for transboundary aquifers, 273 have been identified on the planet so far. There are 148 countries which include territory within one or more international river basins, and the well-being of their populations largely depends on sound water cooperation. In the absence of such cooperation many problems remain unresolved and may sometimes become more pressing. Ultimately, all of this affects the economic and social situations in each country, which shares an international river basin and/or aquifers.

24. Peace, stability and development of many countries sharing water resources almost entirely depend on the nature of their relations with other states. In many regions of the world, the strengthening of transboundary water cooperation promotes and facilitates the enhanced integration processes that are a principal factor in harmonious development.

25. Water cooperation must be based on the principles of sustainable development and must contribute to equitable economic growth and strengthening of human potential in all the countries of a shared water body. It must enhance confidence building among all the stakeholders involved in transboundary water management and contribute to implementation of integrated water resources management at all levels. Given the above, the UNGA in its resolution 65/154 proclaimed the year 2013 as the "International Year of Water Cooperation".

26. In this resolution the UN General Assembly *invites* the Secretary-General, in cooperation with UN-Water, and mindful of the provisions of the annex to Economic and Social Council resolution 1980/67, to take appropriate steps to organize the activities of the Year and to develop necessary proposals on activities at all levels to support Member States in the implementation of the Year. Besides, the UNGA *encourages* all Member States, the United Nations system and all other actors to take advantage of the Year to promote actions at all levels, including through international cooperation, as appropriate, aimed at the achievement of the internationally agreed water-related goals contained in Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation as well as to increase awareness of their importance. UNESCO will be the lead in the preparation of the International Year of Water Cooperation, with the support of UNECE, UNW-DPC and UNW-DPAC as well as other UN-Water members and programmes, as decided at the 15th UN-Water SPM meeting, held from 19 to 21 August 2011 in Stockholm (Decision 16). UN-Water members also decided that UNESCO will take the lead for the preparations of the World Water Day 2013 on Water Cooperation, in cooperation with UNDESA and UNECE. The 2012 Zaragoza Conference will serve to prepare for the 2013 World Water Day.

Water Cooperation for Peace and Security

27. At the global scale, the effective and mutually beneficial solutions of water-related problems underlie peace, security and stability of our nations. Fortunately, as per an objective index, our planet has actually sufficient water resources to provide 'water security' for all. But this can become a reality only if we, according to the currently new requirements, will change the conceptual approaches to management of water resources. Throughout history, nations have learned how to share the benefits of transboundary water. The key issue here has always been and remains the development of rules of conduct to

handle disputes peacefully. It is known that legal agreements on water sharing have been concluded and strictly observed even among bitter enemies and maintained even as conflicts have persisted over other issues. There are a few examples that can prove this statement.

28. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, supported by the United Nations, have been able to cooperate since 1957 within the framework of the Mekong River Commission. Vietnam War did not hinder them regularly to have technical exchanges. Since 1955 Israel and Jordan, with the United States involvement, have held regular talks on sharing the Jordan River, even when they were *de jure* in a state of war. The Indus River Commission, established with World Bank support, survived two wars and continuing unrest between India and Pakistan. A framework for the Nile River Basin, home to 160 million people and shared among 10 countries, was agreed in 1999 in order to fight poverty and spur economic development in the region by promoting equitable use of, and benefits from, common water resources. This initiative, with a Council of Ministers and a three year program to involve civil society: the Nile Basin Discourse, supported by the World Bank and USAID, is a transitional arrangement until a permanent framework is put in place. As one of the results so far countries agreed on a joined work plan and 6 countries signed a new Nile Basin Agreement (CPA).

29. At the same time it is necessary to remember that the last 60 years have seen only 44 acute water disputes involving violence. Though some analysts and the media tend to focus exclusively on negative scenarios, predicting that in future conflicts over water will persist, many countries by their actions refute this thesis and successfully negotiate water resources issues. By doing so they vividly demonstrate that an effective response to the challenges in this area can contribute to uprooting the sources of conflicts and be a powerful catalyst for international cooperation for the benefit of the people of all the nations involved.

30. In Africa alone by 2020, 75-250 million people may be exposed to increased water stress due to climate change. If coupled with increased demand for water, this will hurt livelihoods and exacerbate water related problems. The forces at work, global in scale, are the aggregate result of the behavior of countries. Dealing with them will require international cooperation and coordination. Yet at the same time national leaders must continue to act and take decisions at the national level.

31. The regional importance of groundwater as a source of water supply is well known. Resources in many aquifers are shared by adjacent states and require transboundary management. Still, when it comes to considering regional and global water policy issues, the physical status and quality trends of groundwater resources have not been adequately taken into account. The collection and sharing of groundwater data must be improved and groundwater issues must rank higher on the international agenda. A world inventory of transboundary aquifers is called for and wise practices and guidance tools concerning shared groundwater resources management must be developed.

Water Cooperation for Sustainable Development

32. Water should be seen as a multifaceted resource that provides opportunities for creating new benefits to be shared, for solving stakeholders' problems and for meeting their respective interests.

33. Depleted and degraded freshwater supplies, caused by population growth, poorly managed development and weak governance, hamper sustainable development and underscore the need for cooperation between the major water-use sectors such as agriculture, industry, energy, navigation and water supply and sanitation.

34. The water-related goals of sustainable development are, *inter alia*, adequate clean drinking water for all citizens, adequate waste disposal and sanitation systems and the elimination of water-borne diseases, adequate water flow to maintain wetland and other water-dependent ecosystems, water laws that harmonize with our scientific understanding of hydrology (especially groundwater and rainfall variability), capacity-building and enhancement of skills for the successful management of transboundary water resources, promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, and an equitable share of water resources to allow nations to share a water source to supply agriculture, the energy sector, industry, etc. These goals have been severely challenged by: population growth, economic development; global climate change; migration to megacities; lack of mutually agreed upon rules for water sharing; costs for water-related facilities and infrastructure.

35. In urban areas all over the world, water is lost through leaks, wastage and illegal connections. Efficiency levels of water use in agriculture of the Central Asia region are around 50%. Industries and agriculture degrade surface and groundwater resources with toxic pollutants, and as a result degrade entire ecosystems.

36. Beyond meeting basic human needs, water contributes to sustainable development in other important ways. It is indispensable for ecosystem services, a major source of energy, and is necessary for agriculture, many industrial processes and often an integral part of transport systems.

37. Thus, as a key to sustainable development, water has value from a social, economic and environmental perspective and needs to be managed within a sound, integrated socio-economic framework.

38. Upstream and downstream "water stakeholders" need to be involved in the management decisions.

Water Cooperation for Poverty Alleviation

39. In developing countries water is crucial for economic development and poverty alleviation. Today it is early to talk about the implementation of the internationally agreed water goals. Many problems demand immediate solution, such as:

- about 1 billion people in the world do not have access to fresh drinking water, and 2.6 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation;
- more than 80 countries experience water shortage;
- every week 42 thousand people die of diseases caused by low quality of water and unsanitary conditions, among them 90 percent are children up to 5 years of age ;
- drought and desertification threaten the access to means of subsistence for over 1.2 billion people in the world;

- according to the UN data, by 2025 two thirds of the Earth's population will experience shortage of water resources;
- providing water for environmental flows and industry will tax water resources even more.

40. Solving water-related problems contributes to poverty alleviation in many ways – through sanitation services, water supply, affordable food and enhanced resilience of poor communities to diseases, climate shocks and environmental degradation. About 13 percent of the world's population – over 800 million people – do not have sufficient food and water to live healthy and productive lives. Providing water to meet the needs in food for a growing population and balancing this issue with all other demands for water, is one of the great challenges of this century.

41. Water of appropriate quantity and quality can improve health and enhance the productivity of land, labor and other inputs.

42. Reaching these goals is achievable and would cost far less than required by the health care for treating people suffering from preventable diseases caused by poor water and sanitation.

43. Cooperation at the national and international levels is required to achieve the MDGs related to poverty alleviation and water. While it is essential for the countries themselves to take ultimate actions to meet the MDGs, the richer countries must be prepared to share their wealth and exchange knowledge to meet the goals. The lower-income countries are obliged to deliver the promised policy changes and make improvements to governance; the industrialized countries must meet their commitments to increase Official Development Assistance (ODA) and technical assistance. However, it should be noted that even if the MDGs are achieved, still a significant segment of society will remain behind, and they will probably be the poorest of the poor.

Water Cooperation for Environmental Sustainability

44. Depleted freshwater supplies and degraded water supply infrastructure caused by a rapid population growth and poorly managed development already cause serious tensions among major water users in many countries – farmers, industry and urban consumers. Conservation and good stewardship of water resources have become more critical to our survival in recent years.

45. Our capacity to achieve environmental sustainability has improved but still is constrained by inadequate comprehension of the impact of pollution and resilience of ecosystems, irrelevant monitoring of negative impact of water use on the environment, and institutional weakness, which in many developing countries does not allow to effectively develop and/or implement legal instruments.

46. It is essential to fully realize the obvious truth: one cannot use all the river water before it flows to the sea. Using the entire flow of a river *inter alia* causes land degradation and cuts off inflow of nutrients to the sea, which causes the decline of fish populations. Better care should be applied in protecting the coastal regions that are among the most productive

ecosystems on earth and depend on the inflow of freshwater in the estuaries, deltas and wetlands. This can be achieved by cooperation between the respective freshwater basin commission and the marine ecosystem commission addressing common ecological issues. Freshwater that crosses the national borders acquires even larger strategic importance. It is important to establish efficient interaction among the nations to avoid pollution of international waters caused by industrial and agricultural uses and other types of activities. The same applies to international aquifers.

47. It is impossible to maintain the integrity of a balanced ecosystem without an overall strategy on integrated water resources management. We all have a shared responsibility for protecting the environment interacting with the river and lake basins and aquifers. It is our common concern to conserve freshwater, flora and fauna, and protect these resources for future generations.

Cooperation for Universal Water Access

48. Good governance is at the heart of sustainable water use management. Each responsible government should provide a solid regulatory framework and implementation structure to manage the use of its water resources. Regional cooperation could be very instrumental in dealing with these issues.

49. The dialogue of all those concerned should continue within the framework of integrated water resources management, involving discussions on economic, environmental, technical and social policies and related measures. To reach solutions acceptable to everyone, the involvement of all parties, i.e. the governments, the United Nations agencies, regional organizations, civil society and other interested parties is required.

50. It is essential to take into account the necessity to efficiently utilize and protect the entire river basin and/or aquifers and its water resources. It concerns productivity and value of freshwater used for various purposes, with due consideration to ecosystem needs.

51. Cooperation on international water bodies is crucial for reaching all the above objectives. Management of international rivers, lakes and aquifers is a very politically sensitive issue. To address the issue it is necessary to ensure adequate access of the entire population and economies of the transboundary basins/aquifers to water resources.

The Main Goals of the Thematic Session

- To discuss different aspects of strengthening cooperation and dialogue to resolve current water issues, towards achieving the MDGs and IADGs;
- To demonstrate best practices – in water cooperation among water users at local and national levels, in improving access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and in promoting rational use of water resources for development and environmental sustainability; the presentations could be focused on illustration of the best practice on economic valuation and valuation of other non monetary benefits; science based

cooperation; Data Management Systems in transboundary waters; the cases that show the importance of cultures and religions in cooperation; financing cooperation and what financing package is most adequate at different levels;

- To demonstrate effective approaches and mechanisms towards joint use of water resources in transboundary basins of rivers, and lakes, and aquifers;
- To develop recommendations and effective approaches to the strengthening of water cooperation among users and countries and for the implementation of the International Year of Water Cooperation, 2013.

During the Preparatory Conference participants also suggested the following topics that could be also addressed within the framework of the Thematic Session:

- Ensuring engagement of all stakeholders, especially women, participatory approaches, including Water Users Associations, at all levels of cooperation;
- Key ingredients of effective cooperation, including planning, creating motivation to cooperate, and making sure that people realize that there are benefits from cooperation;
- How to progress with knowledge sharing and creating dialogue platforms;
- The role of promoting concrete actions and preparatory common projects.

Expected Outcome

A summary of the thematic session will be prepared. It will present key messages, proposals and remarks of the speakers and other participants. The summary will be distributed to all participants of the Rio+20 Conference, as well as to the Permanent Missions of the member states to the UN, UN-Water, and other interested and relevant organizations.