

Rio+20: Water Security for Growth and Sustainability



Key messages

- **Water security for a green economy:** Water is a vital ingredient for the transition to a green economy, for poverty reduction and for sustainable development in all countries. It is crucial that the Conference outcomes include a sustainable development goal for water security as part of an agreed green growth agenda. Continued effort is needed to improve cross-sectoral integration: in particular the linkages between water, food and energy. This task transcends sectors and sectoral interests.
- **Institutional effectiveness:** Coordination between the different layers of authority – international, national and sub-national – are critical for effective decision-making. Institutional reforms and integration must proceed in parallel with, and mutually reinforce, investment in sustainable infrastructure and protection of the environment. To achieve green growth, institutions have to be strengthened and partnerships formed to ensure collaborative solutions. Particular focus is needed on regional cooperation between states on transboundary water resources.
- **Integrated approaches:** The positive response to the call for integrated water resources management and water efficiency plans, as agreed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, needs to be translated into implementation. This includes increased focus on water productivity and climate adaptation to ensure every drop of water contributes as much as possible to inclusive economic growth. Rio+20 should adopt a target (rather than resolution) calling for *“each country to develop, by 2015, its specific targets and timeframes for preparing and implementing a programme of action and financing strategy to implement integrated water resources management plans”*.
- **Leadership:** The Conference must build on and upgrade the conclusions of the 1992 Earth Summit and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. It will be a success if a set of Sustainable Development Goals are accepted by governments and other stakeholders under a green growth framework. Political leadership is critical to overcome institutional fragmentation and the lack of focus on water resources. The single most important step is to ensure ownership of the future development agenda by national decision-makers and international organisations.
- **Future strategy:** There is a three-year window from Rio (2012) to the end of the Millennium Development Goals (2015); the Conference should kick-start a process for setting a green growth agenda through to 2030. The agenda must take account of financial and economic realities, climate change and adaptation, demographic shifts, and the impact of emerging economies. Green growth requires ensuring water security for future generations and providing solutions that achieve more growth with less resource use.

► Why are these messages critical?

The Rio+20 Conference takes place in a period of mounting insecurity due to unprecedented pressures from economic recession, poverty, escalating population growth, rapid urbanisation, climate stresses and other factors. But the Conference should not ignore the considerable progress made since 1992 and should reject any defeatist 'limits to growth': human ingenuity can be harnessed so that sustainable growth and environmental security are not mutually exclusive.

The Conference provides an opportunity to advance a sustainable form of economic growth – one that recognises the importance of growth as an engine for poverty reduction and also recognises the finite nature of many natural resources and the need to avoid waste – whether of natural, human or financial resources. This is reflected in the core theme of the Conference: establishing a green economy and appropriate institutional frameworks. Politicians and policy makers must find a way forward that increases well-being for all, now and for the future.

What do we mean by water security?

Water security has been defined as the availability of an acceptable quantity and quality of water for health, livelihoods, ecosystems and production, coupled with an acceptable level of water-related risks to people, environments and economies.¹

A water secure world is vital for effective green growth and a sustainable future in which there is enough water for social and economic development and for ecosystems. It thus incorporates a concern for the intrinsic value of water, with its diverse uses for human survival and well-being. Water security is becoming increasingly critical in many countries, which is why the Global Water Partnership's vision is for a water secure world.²

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Brazil in June 2012 marks 20 years since the Earth Summit in Rio, and 10 years since the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa. It is an opportunity to reflect on progress and set the future directions for sustainable development. Key to this is achieving water security, a pre-condition for meeting many challenges. Whether it is drinking water supply, sanitation, food, energy, health or industry, freshwater resources are fundamental for helping the poorest people move out of the poverty trap. High-level decision-makers must recognise this, take the necessary tough decisions and follow through with the implementation of water resources management and the financing of appropriate infrastructure development.

► Sustainable growth and a green economy

The evolution towards a green economy is a shift that reinforces the sustainable development message from the Earth Summit: indeed, it is an 'upgrade' of the sustainable development paradigm. Significantly, it addresses two legitimate concerns:

1. economic growth is driving an unsustainable degradation of resources
2. economic growth may be hampered by excessive concern for the environment.

Green growth is thus a means for countries to achieve green economies that provide well-being for present and future generations. This means that we all have to manage our economies differently, in a way that shows we know the future matters: inter-generational economic equity rather than short-termism. Most people intuitively understand that what we decide to do now directly affects the lives of future generations. Decision-makers at the Conference should avoid wasting time in rhetorical debates and do their utmost to focus on practical actions and sustainable development goals.

Managing our natural resources for future generations, while harnessing them for necessary use now, is a balancing act that is increasingly recognised as fundamental for sustainability. Climate change has made even the highly industrialised countries (those responsible for the problem) realise that their economies are not sustainable and they now have to rethink the way they work. The increasing frequency and severity of extreme climate events (droughts and floods) is now bringing home to many governments the need for proactive management of water resources to cope with these threats.

1 Grey, D. and Sadoff, C. 2007. 'Sink or Swim? Water security for growth and development'. *Water Policy* 9: 545–557.

2 The Global Water Partnership (GWP) was created in 1996 in response to the Rio Earth Summit. It supports countries in the sustainable management of their water resources through its unique network of locally driven and staffed Regional and Country Water Partnerships. Following the 2002 resolution at World Summit on Sustainable Development, GWP has worked with numerous governments worldwide to develop Integrated Water Resources Management and Water Efficiency Plans.



▷ Water security

We read a lot about how the financial crisis is due to the irresponsible use of finance; the irresponsible use/misuse of natural resources, especially water, is in many ways far worse. Mismanagement and waste of natural resources has long-term impacts on the economy and unemployment, and can also reverse poverty gains made under the Millennium Development Goals. Paying off any 'natural-resource debt' is much harder than financial debt, and affects everyone everywhere. Innovative solutions for overcoming the financial crisis are highlighted every day; likewise, we need smart solutions to avoid natural-resource debt and thereby build a green economy.

The need to manage energy consumption and reduce carbon emissions is now unquestioned by most policy makers – energy impacts are easily understood, immediate and visible. Water resources problems on the other hand are complex, silent and often invisible, and thus easily shelved. This complexity must not become an excuse for inaction.

Furthermore, poor water resources management is a classic example of a negative externality that is disowned by those who cause the problem, leaving others to pick up the cost. Everyone must take responsibility for achieving water security.

No country can meet its development objectives without improving the way its water resources are managed. Water flows through the veins of the whole economy and society. The major users of the resource (energy, agriculture and industry) have to become much more water-efficient, adopting new technologies and smart practices: reduce, recycle, and reuse.

▷ Institutions and integration

At the Rio Earth Summit 20 years ago, sustainable development was acknowledged as the overarching goal for institutions at the international, national and regional levels, and this is still valid today. The Summit recommended integrated approaches to water resources development, management and use, and these remain a critical element for sustainable development as embedded in the green growth concept.

'Integration' recognises the horizontal inter-linkages among sectors (water, food, energy, industry and environment) as well as the need for protection against water-related conflicts and disasters. It recognises the need for cohesion across institutions at the numerous tiers of authority (vertical integration) that are involved in decisions on water resources management and use. Continued effort is needed to strengthen

the institutional framework at all levels to address the inherent complexity of water resources and ensure effective management. Moreover, given the diversity and fragmentation of water resources management involving many actors, partnerships are an essential ingredient to secure cohesive and collaborative solutions.

Since the Earth Summit, there has been progress in developing integrated approaches, especially in terms of improving policies, laws and governance systems (the 'enabling environment') that make for better decision-making and wise investment. GWP has supported the UN-Water Task Force in assessing the present status of water resources management, development and use; their report will be presented as an official input to the Rio+20 Conference.

▶ **Wanted: Leadership**

Leadership has been lacking, and previous commitments have often been disregarded. Establishing co-management of water resources across different institutions now needs to be part of a green growth framework. This will focus minds on more realistic infrastructure and ensure loans can be repaid and quality of life improved.

Water resources development and management requires joined-up thinking and institutional cohesion to decide on the re-allocation of water resources among users and to encourage more efficient use by all economic sectors. Whilst this is difficult for politicians, the lure of populist politics must be resisted: promising the undeliverable cannot continue. The role and mandate of environment ministries need to be strengthened so they are proactive in promoting green growth investments and not perceived only as regulators or as obstacles to economic growth. In November 2011, a high-level conference in Bonn, Germany, to prepare for Rio+20 again emphasised the importance of an integrated approach, linking water to the key development areas of energy and food.

2011 Water Resources Survey for Rio+20

The survey³ of over 130 countries reports that about 80% of countries have developed more integrated water laws and policies, and 64% have developed Integrated Water Resources Management plans as agreed at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. However, implementation is slow and difficult, with only 34% reporting significant progress.

GWP considers that the survey indicates integrated approaches are improving the enabling environment and bringing in the voice of stakeholders (those closest to problems and solutions) thus improving governance and the likelihood of sound decisions. For example, integrated approaches help to overcome institutional 'silos' and avoid inappropriate and uneconomic infrastructure projects. This should reduce the risk of 'white elephant' projects typical of the 1970-80s, which contributed to a debt crisis and painful structural adjustment programmes for many developing countries.

In particular, leadership is needed on managing rivers and aquifers that cross political boundaries. In many developing regions the lack of transboundary cooperation is a barrier to investments in green growth solutions, such as low-carbon hydropower, flood management or inter-basin transfers. Cooperation on transboundary waters is always sensitive and contentious but needs to be at the top of the list of regional actions in many parts of the world. Diplomats, working with water experts, should engage in regional dialogues, providing smart solutions that benefit all parties.

³ UN-Water. 2012. Status Report on the Application of Integrated Approaches to Water Resources Management.

The Global Water Partnership is an intergovernmental organisation of 13 Regional Water Partnerships, 80 Country Water Partnerships and more than 2,500 Partner Organisations in 161 countries. Our vision is a water secure world. Our mission is to support the sustainable development and management of water resources at all levels through Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). IWRM is a process that promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximise economic and social welfare in an equitable manner, without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems and the environment.

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