

The work of the United Nations in freshwater: Assessing, monitoring and setting targets

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We live in a world of inequality. There is a huge divide between the very rich and the very poor – and the poor are far too great in number. Our first aim must, therefore be to greatly alleviate – preferably to eliminate – poverty.

There are many threats to society affecting the basic human condition, social and economic development and human security. Each of these threats – linked to each other - can be regarded as an element of poverty and most of them are intimately related to the availability and usefulness of water.

Basic human health is directly related to the availability and quality of food and to the prevalence of disease. Clearly water is of fundamental importance. Its availability for food production and its adequacy in both quantity and quality for drinking, for sanitation and for hygiene underpin basic quality of life.

Social development includes the provision of education and health care. Without clean water supplies and good sanitation facilities in schools and hospitals social development is stymied. And for education – in schools without sanitation facilities – it is girls who suffer most and are therefore disadvantaged, introducing an important gender element into the equation.

Economic development – underpinned, of course, by basic human health and social development – is dependent on water supplies for energy production and for industrial expansion. Water is needed for many forms of energy production – hydro power and the water for cooling of thermal and nuclear power stations. And energy in turn is needed for pumping, including extraction of water from underground aquifers. Water is needed for many industries and those industries in turn have effect, through pollution and abstraction, on water quality that affects both downstream users and natural ecosystems.

Security from floods, droughts and spills of pollutants into our water systems is of growing importance. Not only does there seem to be an increase in the frequency and intensity of floods, droughts and, with increasing industrialization, pollution spills, but, with increases in population, more people are living in zones prone to disasters.

All these elements are poverty-related, they are intertwined and they are all related to water.

The Natural Environment. Our concern must not stop at human considerations but must be extended to the natural environment. Natural ecosystems are of fundamental importance to human well being and development. Indeed humankind is an integral part of the natural systems. The loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystems mean loss of basic habitat for humans. We destroy or degrade these natural systems at our peril, and so social and economic development and basic human betterment must go hand in hand with preservation of the natural environment.

The Challenges of Governance. How we approach all of the challenges presented to us depends to a very great extent on the resilience and adaptability of the societies in which we live. The combination of challenges is different in different parts of the world and the ways in which societies organize their responses to crises differs greatly from country to country and from region to region. Attitudes of people towards each other and to the environments in which they live depend very greatly on the cultures, the religions and the ways in which the societies are organized. Thus the effectiveness of institutions, the types and effectiveness of legislation the financial instruments available and the ways in which different levels of government communicate with each other vary tremendously from place to place. Thus when we come to developing solutions to problems we must realise that those solutions must be tailor-made to fit the circumstance – no one size fits all.

These are the issues that are examined within the World Water Development Report. The Report is comprehensive, balanced and authoritative and attempts to cover all freshwater issues of importance. It recognizes the very different situations between countries and tries, therefore, to give local examples whenever possible. It is a Report involving all UN agencies and also draws on the expertise of NGOs, the academic communities and the private sector and thus represents inputs from the widest possible variety of sources.
