

# UNFPA

Committee Background Guide

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# UNFPA

## About this Committee

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, delivers a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person's potential is fulfilled. UNFPA partners with governments, other agencies and civil society to advance UNFPA's mission.

The goals of UNFPA - achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health (including family planning), promoting reproductive rights, reducing maternal mortality and accelerating progress on the ICPD agenda and MDG 5 - are inextricably linked. UNFPA also focuses on improving the lives of youths and women by advocating for human rights and gender equality and by promoting the understanding of population dynamics. Population dynamics, including growth rates, age structure, fertility and mortality and migration have an effect on every aspect of human, social and economic progress. And sexual and reproductive health and women's empowerment all powerfully affect and are influenced by population trends.

## Issue Information

The escalating water crisis constitutes a major threat for global progress towards sustainable development in the new millennium. There is growing recognition that the urgent and deepening crisis in water management worldwide is a particularly serious problem in countries of the developing world. Water is essential for all aspects of life, yet one billion people worldwide are denied access to clean water supplies and half of the world's population lacks adequate water purification systems. The supply of safe drinking water is of vital importance because of the high risk of contracting life-threatening diseases from polluted or contaminated water sources and absence or improper use of sanitation facilities

The global consumption of water is doubling every twenty years, and it is estimated that in 2025, if present rates of water consumption are maintained, five billion out of the world's 7.9 billion people will be living in areas where it will be difficult or even impossible to meet basic water requirements for drinking, cooking and sanitation. The impact of this growth will be focused mainly in less developed countries, where currently some 1.2 billion people, the majority of whom are women and children, are living in extreme poverty.

Even at the most fundamental level of human survival and sustainable development, water not only has life sustaining qualities, but strongly influences economic activity (both production and consumption) and social roles.

Fresh water is distributed unevenly, with nearly 500 million people suffering water stress or serious water scarcity. Under current trends, two-thirds of the world's population may be subject to moderate to high water stress in 2025. In the period to 2025, it is expected that the world will need 17 per cent more water to grow food for the increasing populations in developing countries, and that total water use will increase by some 40 per cent

At the Millennium Summit world leaders set a target of halving by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water. And the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development coupled this with a similar target relating to sanitation. Although the number of people with access to water sanitation services increased in the 1990s, the proportions of global population lacking access to an improved water source (17 per cent), and sanitation services (40 per cent), remained practically the same due to the growth in population numbers.

Halving the proportion of people without safe drinking water and sanitation will contribute to the achievement of each of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Fewer children will die from water-borne diseases, more women will have time to engage in productive activities, reducing income poverty and enlarging their social and economic opportunities. The availability of safe drinking water will also help in achieving the goal of gender equality and empowerment of women, as time spent on water collection can be devoted to more productive pursuits. In many localities this task is undertaken by school-age girls, so this measure should have a positive impact on girls' education.

The most immediate impact of measures to protect water sources and increase access to clean water will be to reduce social and environmental vulnerability. By so doing, reductions in child and maternal mortality and improvements in child and maternal health are to be anticipated, as well as reductions in the incidence of malaria and other water-borne diseases.

Water is an essential resource for sustaining health, yet both the quantity and quality of available water supplies are declining in many parts of the world. In developing countries, lack of access to safe water, especially in rural areas and among poor communities, obliges women to spend hours every day collecting water for their families' daily needs, causing enormous drain on their energy, productive potential and health.

## **The Challenges:**

### **Declining supplies of quality water sources increase poverty through declining employment and opportunities for the poor**

The combination of rural poverty, population pressures and dwindling water supplies is a powerful force driving rural to urban migration, as well as cross border movements. Rapid urban growth often leads to people establishing slums where there are serious problems with, for example, water supply, sanitation and industrial waste. The rapid pace of urbanisation further hinders the development of adequate infrastructure and regulatory mechanisms (such as laws) to cope with water pollution and the by-products of population and economic growth (Hunter, 2001).

#### **Sustainable Development**

The water crisis threatens global progress towards sustainable development in the new millennium. There is growing recognition that the urgent and deepening crisis in water stewardship worldwide is a particularly acute problem in countries of the developing world.

## **Access to Water**

#### **Potable water**

Gaining access to drinking water is often time consuming and difficult. All possible sources are likely to be utilised – wells, streams, lakes and even canals. The poor are frequently excluded from basic services, such as piped water, sewerage and electricity and live under threat of, for example, flooding, fire and contagious disease. Commonly in squatter settlements, residents buy water from peddlers or fetch it from a public standpipe or well. Whatever the source, collection from far or near is commonly one of the onerous tasks designated as women's work. The continual lifting and carrying of endless containers of water is extremely burdensome and commonly damaging to health while the product conveyed, from whatever source is conveniently available, may be of poor quality.

#### **Water shortages**

The ever-increasing demand for water, especially in cities, is caused by the increased demand by large populations in the expanding urban areas. Urban sprawl and residential development draw off increasing quantities of water, reducing water recharge. Where this occurs concurrently with the extraction of groundwater, subsidence and saltwater intrusion are commonly the result. This can accentuate flooding problems and, again, it is the poor living on flood-prone lands that are most vulnerable to these effects. Where water rights are traditional or unclear, water shortages could often be reduced by better regulation of well-drilling in urban areas; reforestation of denuded watersheds to increase infiltration of rainwater; the building of large dams or reservoirs in urban watersheds; and the development of pumping stations to deliver quality water to urban populations.

#### **Gender and Women's Empowerment**

Women play a central role as producers of food, managers of natural resources and as income earners and caretakers of household food, water and nutrition security. Women and children, especially those living in rural areas, play a particularly significant role in taking care of household water needs. Gender differences in property rights and access to natural resources, such as water, hinder sustainable development (Quisumbing et al., 1999). A review of 271 World Bank projects by IFPRI shows that when the needs of both men and women are addressed, sustainability of projects increased by 16 per cent (IFPRI, 2000).

## **Managing Water Use**

#### **Water and food security**

The goal of achieving food security, in an environment of growing population and limited land and water resources, cannot be achieved without ensuring the sustainability of agricultural development. Agriculture is the major user of water in most developing countries, while industry is the greatest user in developed countries.

#### **Water and biodiversity**

The pollution and depletion of aquatic ecosystems has serious consequences for biodiversity and human health. During the last fifty years, half the world's wetlands have been lost and pollution impacts in coastal areas have resulted in declining fisheries and destruction of biodiversity habitats. Aquatic ecosystems, both freshwater and marine, are sensitive to pollution from industry, agriculture and human waste.

#### **Water scarcity and management**

Freshwater resources are very unevenly distributed. The arid and the semi-arid zones of the world, which constitute 40 per cent of the landmass, receive only two per cent of global run-off. The proximate causes of groundwater depletion and pollution are rooted in population growth, economic expansion, the distorting impacts of subsidies and financial incentives, and the spread of energised pumping technologies.

## **Competing Demands**

Development makes demands on natural resources and the demand for water comes from every segment of the economy and society. While access to and continuity of supply of quality drinking water constitutes the most universal and most pressing of uses, rural and urban contexts alike require flows that are predictable in quality, and reliable in quantity.

## **Agriculture and food production**

Enormous quantities of surface and ground water resources are used for crop production. Poor drainage and irrigation practices have led to waterlogging and salinisation of approximately ten per cent of the world's irrigated land and millions more hectares are under threat and already experiencing symptoms of those problems.

Agriculture is also responsible for most of the depletion of groundwater and up to 70 per cent of water pollution, and both are accelerating. Grain lands in particular are consuming groundwater at unsustainable rates. Collectively, annual ground water depletion in India, China, the United States, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, totals 160 billion cubic metres a year – an amount roughly double the total annual flow of the River Nile.

## **Industry**

Although the proportion of water drawn off for industrial purposes is estimated at about 20 per cent, the contrast between developed and developing countries collectively is extreme. In high-income countries, about 59 per cent of the water use is dedicated to industrial uses, whereas only eight per cent of total consumption is used by industry in low-income countries (UNESCO, 2001). By 2025, the collective industrial component is expected to have increased to 24 per cent of total freshwater withdrawal.

## **Water Regulation**

### **Hydro-electric power / storage dams**

Energy production is a major element in development plans and an essential accompaniment of industrialisation and modernisation. Among the options for generating energy (many of which are potentially serious environmental polluters) hydro-electricity offers a relatively clean, efficient and sustainable method of power production. Hill country peoples reluctantly witness their ancestral and productive valley and terrace landscapes submerged and lost to them for purposes in which they have little interest and from which they gain little direct benefit. Since priority of access and allocation of water rights are often arbitrary, informal or non-existent, there are major grounds for dissent and conflict.

### **International competition**

While the resolution of the diverse issues of water supply and access are demanding enough for national and local governments, supply authorities and consumers, the problems can be seriously compounded by the competing requirements of neighbouring nation states. While this is most obvious in circumstances where major rivers (such as the Mekong in countries or constitute the official boundary between countries, it can also impact on other water sources, such as aquifers and groundwater generally.

Agreements between countries on maintenance of flows and draw-off rights for predetermined levels of water are essential, but difficult to arrive at. However unilateral action, especially by upstream users (such as China in the case of the Mekong River) can have extremely severe repercussions for countries dependent on a reliable supply downstream. In the case of groundwater, excessive use can induce serious problems of saltwater intrusion, and where this results from lack of adequate monitoring or flow regulation, outcomes can be extremely inequitable.

### **Pollution**

Contamination of water especially in urban environments, is a chronic problem in most developing societies. Pollution of surface water by upstream industries, leaking septic tanks and the dumping of solid wastes by residential communities pose serious risks. Rivers and canals in large cities are often biologically dead and are a potentially dangerous source of bacteria and poisons. Environmental pollution is associated with the two main causes of infant mortality – diarrhoea and respiratory diseases – and the children of the poor, due to their residential location and lack of access to health care, are particularly vulnerable.

### **Water Access and Hazards to Health**

Water is an essential resource for sustaining health, yet both the quantity and quality of available water supplies are declining in many parts of the world. About half the world's rivers are seriously depleted and polluted, and some 80 countries with 40 per cent of the earth's population are suffering from water shortages (UNEP, 2002). This trend has contributed to the entrenchment of poverty in whole countries, and marginalised large sectors of populations in others. These people in particular are vulnerable to water-related illnesses, including those resulting from poor sanitation and hygiene. Women are constantly exposed to the risks of contraction of water-related diseases largely because of their role in collecting water, washing clothes, cleaning and cooking, and in rural areas, performing day-to-day agricultural tasks. Carrying heavy water jars over long distances puts women's health at risk, particularly during pregnancy. Bearing heavy loads can result in premature birth, a prolapsed uterus, or back injuries. Lack of sufficient quantities of clean, fresh water enabling the regular practice of proper hygiene plays a role in common lower reproductive tract infections in women.

## International Agreements

The case explicitly for rights to reliable access to water was made at the 1972 Stockholm United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and Development. The meeting endorsed the statement that 'all people have the right to have access to drinking water'.

Some twenty years later the United Nations General Assembly declared the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade to achieve universal access to water supply and sanitation.

In 2002, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, interpreting the provision of the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, asserted, '...water is fundamental for life and health. The human right to water is indispensable for leading a healthy life in human dignity. It is a pre-requisite to the realisation of all other human rights'. The 145 countries that ratified the Covenant are now committed to ensuring that their people have access to safe and adequate drinking water and sanitation facilities – equitably and without discrimination.

At the World Food Summit in 1996, leaders from 185 countries adopted the **Rome Declaration** in which it was agreed that 'the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger'.

## Millennium Development Goals: Water, Food and Sustainable Development

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, the 189 states of the United Nations reaffirmed their commitment to working towards a world in which sustainable development for present and future populations would be assured. The central role of water (intrinsically linked with food as a basic human need but also essential as a resource with a major role in production as well as consumption) is evident in any systematic appraisal of life-sustaining requirements.

Even at the most fundamental level of human survival and development, water not only has life sustaining qualities, but strongly influences economic activity and social roles, as reflected in its links to basic needs

## Summary

Delegates should consider the following challenges and how they might be addressed in committee:

Meeting basic needs of safe and sufficient water and sanitation, essential for human health, empowering people through participatory water management.

Securing food supply for food security through efficient and equitable allocation of water.

Protecting integrity of ecosystems.

Sharing water resources for different uses at all levels, including trans-boundary water resources.

Managing risks of security from floods, droughts, pollution and other water-related hazards.

Valuing water and related services, taking into account economic, social, environmental and cultural values, with equity and basic needs considerations of the poor and most vulnerable populations.

Involving all stakeholders in ensuring good governance and management of water resources.

Good luck and enjoy the conference. The website is a good starting point for issue-based research:

### Questions for Research:

1. What are the key water issues for your country and region?
2. Do all people have access to safe and reliable water supplies?
3. What actions has your country taken to ensure the quantity and quality of available water supplies?
4. How is reproductive health impacted by water in your country?
5. How is an increasing population, urbanisation or migration impacting upon your country and its water supply?
6. How is your country tackling rural poverty, population pressures and dwindling water supplies?
7. How is your country securing food supply for food security through efficient and equitable allocation of water?
8. How has your country implemented legislation that protects water supplies and ensures equitable access?
9. What action has your country taken to ensure the right to reliable water access on a national and international level?
10. Is the right to sanitation fully recognised in policy or law?
11. Which international agreements is your country a signatory to?
12. Will you meet the MDG targets by 2015?

### Country specific research database:

[http://www.unwater.org/statistics\\_KWIP.html](http://www.unwater.org/statistics_KWIP.html)

### UN Organs:

<http://www.unwater.org/>

<http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/water/>

<http://www.unfpa.org/public/publications/pid/2400>

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/enviro.html>

<http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/sanitation.shtml>

<http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/mdgs/>

### Key issues:

[Access to sanitation](#)

[Financing water](#)

[Gender and water](#)

[Human right to water](#)

[Integrated Water Resources Management](#)

[Transboundary waters](#)

[Water and cities](#)

[Water and food security](#)

[Water and the Green Economy](#)

[Water cooperation](#)

[Water quality](#)

[Water scarcity](#)

### Member States Reports:

All UN documents and agreements <http://www.unwater.org/documents.html>

[CSD meeting in Johannesburg.](#)

[MDG progress report,](#)

[GLAAS report](#)

[JMP report](#)

[UN World Water Development Report.](#)

[2012 MDG Report](#)

UNDESA report [Status of Implementation of CSD-13 Policy Actions on Water and Sanitation](#)

The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme ([JMP](#))

UN-Water Global Annual Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water ([GLAAS](#))

The [AQUASTAT](#) global information system at

The UN Water World Water Development Report ([WWDR](#))

This [water country briefs](#) offer a selection of data to better visualise the critical importance of “investments in water” for human and economic development.

### Multimedia

<http://www.unwater.org/video.html>

