

## United Nations General Assembly Resolution: International Decade for Action, Water for Life, 2005-2015

### *A Water Forum Contribution*

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**Abstract:** *Of the voluminous resolutions issued by United Nations General Assembly, the Millennium Declaration, adopted in 2000, is one of the most significant. It specifies eight development goals and sets the year 2015 as the target date for achieving such goals. Although water is not explicitly mentioned as one of those eight principal goals, it is specified as a subset under one of those goals. Three years later, the United Nations General Assembly paid special attention to water by issuing a separate resolution declaring the period 2005 to 2015 as the “International Decade for Action, Water for Life.” This article reviews and discusses the Resolution and analyzes its added value.*

**Keywords:** *Agenda 21, International Decade for Action, International Year of Freshwater, Mar del Plata Water Conference, Millennium Development Goals, World Water Day, World Water Forums*

### Introduction

On December 23, 2003, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming the period 2005 to 2015 as the “International Decade for Action, Water for Life.” This is not the first time that the General Assembly has paid particular attention to water. Indeed, the General Assembly has adopted a number of resolutions on water resources issues in the past and has even proclaimed an earlier period as a decade for water supply and sanitation. However, the significance of this resolution is that it comes as a follow-up to the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which was adopted three years earlier in December 2000 and which, *inter alia*, includes the Millennium Development Goal of reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water. The December 2003 Resolution is the only follow-up resolution issued thus far by the United Nations General Assembly dealing specifically with any of the issues addressed in the Millennium Development Goals. The resolution specifies March 22, 2005, the World Water Day, as the beginning of the Decade.

The purpose of this article is to briefly review the earlier main General Assembly resolutions on water related issues, to discuss the resolution on the International Decade for Action, Water for Life, and to analyze the extent to which

it may contribute to the advancement and achievement of the Millennium Development Goal with regard to water.

### Earlier General Assembly Resolutions on Water

Since its inception in 1946, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted a large number of resolutions relating to water resources issues. It is beyond the scope and intention of this article to review all of them. Instead, this article will be limited to the resolutions that relate directly or indirectly to actions for the advancement and expansion of water availability to the needy sector of the population in the developing world and for highlighting the basic water issues.

The first such resolution was issued by the General Assembly on December 19, 1977 and adopted the report of the United Nations Water Conference held in Mar del Plata, Argentina, March 14 to 25, 1977 (United Nations, 1977). The Mar del Plata conference was the first United Nations conference to deal exclusively with water and was indeed a milestone in that regard. The Action Plan adopted by the Conference addressed a number of issues including a call on governments to reaffirm their commitment to adopt programs that provide water for urban and rural areas by 1990. The plan also called on the United Nations agencies to coordinate their efforts in helping member states prepare and implement such plans. The Gen-

eral Assembly resolution reaffirmed the need for priority action for implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan. The resolution also urged the member states and all United Nations organizations to take intensified and sustained action for implementation of the agreements reached at the conference.

As a follow-up to this conference, the United Nations General Assembly adopted another resolution on the Mar del Plata Conference in November 1980. This resolution underscored the importance and significance of the Action Plan and the agreements reached at Mar del Plata and proclaimed the period 1981 to 1990 as the “International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade.” During that period, the member states of the United Nations agreed to assume a commitment to bring about a substantial improvement in the standards and level of services in drinking water supply and sanitation. The resolution called upon the member states to develop the necessary policies, set targets, and to take all appropriate steps to mobilize the necessary resources for implementation of such policies and targets.

However, after assessing the results of the Decade, the United Nations General Assembly was not satisfied with what was achieved. In December 1990, the General Assembly expressed its deep concern that, notwithstanding the achievements, the rate of progress remained slow and would leave a very significant number of poor people in urban and rural areas without suitable and sustainable services in water and sanitation by 2000. A number of factors were cited for the unsatisfactory outcome of the decade. The most important of those factors were the significant increase in population, the top-to-bottom approach, the lack of public participation in many countries in the design and implementation of the plans, and the failure to adopt and implement actions to consolidate, sustain, and expand the limited outcome of the Decade (Salman, 2003).

Another resolution worth noting is the one on “Observance of World Day for Water,” which was issued by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 12, 1992. The resolution was adopted following the recommendation of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992 (the Earth Summit). Agenda 21, which was adopted by the Earth Summit, included a separate chapter (Chapter 18) on water resources that included a detailed action plan for implementation of the recommendations of Chapter 18 (United Nations, 1992). As a sequel to the Rio Conference, the General Assembly resolution of December 12, 1992 declared March 22 of each year as the “World Water Day.” It invited the states to devote the day to concrete activities such as promotion of public awareness through publication and diffusion of documentaries and organization of conferences related to conservation and development of water resources. Since that year, all the important conferences on water, including the three world water forums (Marrakech 1997, The Hague 2000, and Kyoto 2003), would be held around mid-March and would end on March 22, the World Water Day (Salman, 2004).

In December 2000, the United Nations General Assembly issued a resolution declaring 2003 as the “International Year of Freshwater.” The resolution was meant to give prominence to the year 2003, and indeed water, because the Third World Water Forum would be held during that year in Kyoto, Japan. The General Assembly called on all member states, the United Nations system, and all other actors to take advantage of the year to increase awareness of the importance of freshwater, to promote action at the local, national, regional, and international levels, and to make contributions in accordance with the guidelines for international years and anniversaries.

It is also worth mentioning that the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recognized in November 2002, a few months before the Kyoto Water Forum, water as a human right. The Committee that oversees compliance of the member states with their obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, elaborated this right in its General Comment No. 15 “The Right to Water.” The crux of the General Comment is the second paragraph, which states that the human right to water entitles every one to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic uses (Salman and McInerney-Lankford, 2004). The timing of this General Comment could also be seen as closely tied to the Kyoto Water Forum that took place in March 2003, four months before the comment was issued. The Committee, through this comment, has, no doubt, brought the issue of the right to water to the forefront of the global agenda and has added to the momentum for meeting the Millennium Development Goal with regard to water.

### **The International Decade for Action, Water for Life**

Of all the resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, the Millennium Declaration, which was issued on December 8, 2000, has been by far, one of the most significant. One reason for its significance is the fact that the Declaration was signed by the 147 heads of states, governments, and delegations that attended the session of the General Assembly. Although the signature does not make the Declaration a legally binding instrument, it nevertheless strengthens its political context and gives it more prominence. The Declaration addresses eight goals, which together are termed the “Millennium Development Goals,” and sets the year 2015 as the date for achievement of those goals. These eight goals establish yardsticks for measuring improvements in the lives of impoverished people in the developing countries. The goals comprise eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development. The goal

dealing with ensuring environmental sustainability includes, as one of three items, reducing by half, by the year 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water. However, the goal does not deal with sanitation. That unfortunate oversight was corrected at the United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2002. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation added a similar goal with regard to basic sanitation: reducing by half, by the year 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to sanitation. The relevance and importance of the Millennium Development Goal with regard to water and sanitation are underscored by the fact that more than 2 billion people are affected by water shortages in over 40 countries, 1.1 billion people do not have sufficient drinking water, and 2.4 billion people have no provision for sanitation (United Nations, 2003).

It is worth noting that the resolution on the International Decade for Action, Water for Life, was issued in 2003 and is to be implemented during the Decade 2005 to 2015, commencing on World Water Day, March 2005, five years after the Millennium Development Goals were adopted. The resolution recalls the General Assembly resolution declaring the year 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater, Agenda 21, as well as the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. It emphasizes that water is critical for sustainable development, including environmental integrity and the eradication of poverty and hunger, and is indispensable for human health and well-being. It reaffirms the internationally-agreed development goal on water and sanitation, and restates the determination to achieve the goals of halving, by the year 2015, the proportion of people who are unable to reach or afford safe drinking water, as well as halving the proportion of people without basic access to sanitation. The resolution proclaims the period 2005 to 2015 as the International Decade for Action, Water for Life, and states that the goal of the Decade would be a greater focus on water-related programs and projects to achieve the internationally-agreed, water-related goal.

The resolution welcomes the decision of the Commission on Sustainable Development to consider water, sanitation, and human settlements as the thematic clusters in the first cycle, 2004 to 2005, and invites the Commission to work to identify possible activities and programs in connection with the decade. It also invites the Secretary-General of the United Nations to take the appropriate steps to organize the activities of the decade, taking into account the results of the International Year of Freshwater and the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development. The resolution further calls upon the relevant United Nations bodies, specialized agencies, regional commissions, and other organizations of the United Nations system to deliver a coordinated response to make the Water for Life Decade, a decade for action.

Thus, the resolution underscores and highlights the relevance, and indeed the importance, of water, not only

as a component of the Millennium Development Goals, but also the centrality of water to the achievement of the other goals. The United Nations Millennium Project which has been set up to oversee the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals has itself highlighted the challenges for the Decade. Analyzing the achievements since the Millennium Development Goals were adopted five years ago, the project stated in 2005 that rural access to improved water supply remained limited in most regions, with sub-Saharan Africa, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Oceania countries specifically off-track. It also stated that access to sanitation remained stagnant in West Asia and the CIS countries, and fell in Oceania and that coverage in Sub-Saharan-Africa and South Asia remained extremely low, at 36 and 37 percent, respectively, with the problem being particularly severe in rural areas. The project observed that this low coverage contributed to widespread and preventable diarrheal diseases (United Nations, 2005).

Lack of funding has been cited as one of the major reasons for this unsatisfactory situation. The main recommendation of the World Panel on Financing Water Infrastructure was that financial flows for the water sector need at least to double from the current figure of \$75 billion to \$150 billion (World Water Council, 2003). This panel was sponsored by the World Water Council and the Third World Water Forum to suggest ways for identifying the financial resources for addressing needs in the water sector and for meeting the water-related development goal. To address the issue of financial needs, the Secretary General of the United Nations established the Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation to help mobilize actions and funds for water and sanitation and to encourage new partnerships and coordination between multilateral and bilateral donors (United Nations, 2004). However, the challenge of financing water remains a real one, particularly in light of the overall decline in overseas development assistance in recent years, whether from bilateral or multilateral donors, for water and sanitation (Gleick, 2004).

### Conclusion

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution "International Decade for Action, Water for Life 2005-2015" is certainly a welcome step. The resolution has highlighted the special place of water, both as a part of the Millennium Development Goals, and for the achievement of some of those goals themselves. The resolution has been strengthened further by General Comment No. 15, declaring a human right to water, and by the establishment of the Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation. However, one immediate question that arises is whether this resolution may have any added value for achieving the Millennium Development Goal with regard to water.

Although the resolution does not have a special measurable and monitorable action plan for gauging the

progress during the decade 2005 to 2015, it reiterates the internationally-agreed, water-related goal contained in the Millennium Declaration, as well as the sanitation goal added by the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. Highlighting the water-related goal from among all other Millennium Development Goals and requiring action from a large number of actors certainly underscores the challenges facing the water sector and confirms the increasing attention given to it by the world community. This should be seen particularly in light of the fact that the goal related to water is not an explicitly specified one within the Millennium Development Goals, but rather is part of the main goal related to ensuring environmental sustainability. Thus, the resolution, being the first follow-up resolution with regard to any of the goals specified in the Millennium Declaration, confirms the emphasis that water issues urgently need. Furthermore, it provides the different actors in the field – international and civil society organizations and local communities – with a renewed momentum for planning and implementing activities towards achieving the goal of reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation. However, the challenges of political commitment to attaining the goal and of funding for water projects remain real, pose a grave threat to the achievement of the goal, and could be exacerbated by the failure of the resolution to include measurable and monitorable indicators for gauging progress during the decade. Another challenge is translating the added value of the resolution into concrete and coordinated efforts and actions by all the relevant actors during the decade. Such efforts and actions will need to take into account the shortcomings of the previous decade, particularly the top-to-bottom approach, the lack of public participation in the design and implementation of the proposed water plans in many countries, and the failure to generate actions to sustain, consolidate, and strengthen the outcome of the decade. Thus, without adequate funding, political commitment, and public participation, the resolution will have limited, if any, added value.

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Laurence Boisson de Chazournes), The Hague Academy of International Law, and Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank.

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