

# The SDGs for water and sanitation; what is new? What is different?

## Background note to the IRC event on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2015

### The proposal and process

This year, the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be agreed upon by the UN Member States. The Open Working Group of the United Nations General Assembly led a consultative process for the SDGs, and developed a set of recommended goals and targets. In this proposal, water and sanitation issues are addressed by a dedicated Goal, with six targets.

#### Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

6.1 by 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all

6.2 by 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations

6.3 by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater, and increasing recycling and safe reuse by x% globally

6.4 by 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity, and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity

6.5 by 2030 implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate

6.6 by 2020 protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes

#### There are two additional targets, which are focused on the means of implementation:

6.a by 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water and sanitation related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies

6.b support and strengthen the participation of local communities for improving water and sanitation management.

This year will see the completion of the political process of adopting these goals and targets, as well as the processes to define the mechanisms to finance the achievements of these. In addition, there is the process of defining the indicators to track progress against these targets. The final adoption should be 25-27 Sept at the Heads of State summit.

These goal and targets will hopefully become a leading orientation for the WASH sector for the next decades to come. As sector organisations we need to understand what the adoption of this framework implies for what we do and how we work, particularly as compared to what has been guiding the sector for the past 15 years, i.e. the MDGs.

## What is different?

As first sight, there are many similarities with the MDGs, which also focused on access to safe water and sanitation services. But several differences are also observed, some of which may have widespread implications.

The most obvious difference is that the focus is no longer on reducing the percentage of the population without access, but achieving universal coverage, so reaching all. That implies that water and sanitation services need to be expanded to all, particularly to the most hard-to-reach populations. Those are the ones who currently still lack access: the poorest, in the most remote rural areas, in the most fragile states. Serving these populations will be successively more expensive and difficult – as witnessed by many middle- and even high-income countries that have reached near-universal access, but take many years to reach the last few percentages of the population.

A second difference is that the emphasis is no longer on access only, but on the service that people receive. This is expressed through several attributes of the services, including the equity, the safety and affordability. Access should be equitable – with particular emphasis on the needs of the most vulnerable – and in the case of water, also to affordable services. The Joint Monitoring Program has started monitoring equity in access over the last years and these analyses show that this is an area that merits much more attention as performance of countries in addressing equity in access is very mixed. Safety of water supply is an element of the service that was already in the MDGs and is repeated here again. Though many WASH organisations consider affordability of services, it has so far not been part of any global target framework or monitoring effort.

## What is new?

The SDG targets also contain many new elements. There are four targets now that focus on the availability, quality and sustainability of the water resources themselves. The reasoning behind these is that for access to water and sanitation to be sustainable, the primary materials, i.e. the water resources, need to be managed sustainably, as do the wastewater flows coming from sanitation. It is considered that these additional targets will also be of more interest to middle and high income countries, where access to basic water and sanitation may be (near)-universal, but where there are big challenges around wastewater treatment, pollution reduction, conservation of ecosystems and sustainable water resources management.

Though many WASH sector organisations may have been working on some of these challenges, e.g. through wastewater treatment or catchment management programmes, the SDGs put these into a more comprehensive and ambitious framework. These targets cannot be achieved by WASH sector organisations on their own, as they may require changes in the way of working of other water sub-

sectors, such as agriculture or energy, or in river basin management organisations. But, it will require that WASH sector organization will increasingly coordinate with the other water sub-sectors, under IWRM frameworks.

## Questions

The big question on the table is now no longer one of whether we agree with the SDG and targets or not; they are in the process of approval and we need to start getting to grips with them:

- Does this goal and set of targets provide us with a coherent framework to address the unfinished business of the MDGs, whilst also providing new challenges that will speak to all in the water sector?
- What do the different and new targets imply for the way of working in the water sector? What do we need to retain and what will need to change?

## About IRC

IRC is an international think-and-do tank that works with governments, NGOs, entrepreneurs and people around the world to find long-term solutions to the global crisis in water, sanitation and hygiene services. At the heart of its mission is the aim to move from short-term interventions to sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services.

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### Sources and further reading

A Sustainable Development Goal to strengthen national sector monitoring systems!

<http://www.ircwash.org/blog/sustainable-development-goal-strengthen-national-sector-monitoring-systems>

The different world water crisis

<http://www.ircwash.org/blog/different-world-water-crisis>