

Water in Rio+20

July 2012

Interview with
and article by
Olimar Maisonet
Guzmán



Major Group of
Children and Youth

By UNW-DPAC

UNW-DPAC: Rio+20 is about sustainable development, how does water and sanitation fit into this picture?

Olimar Maisonet Guzmán: Water is crucial for sustainable development and economic activities. It is needed to meet multiple demands such as human consumption, sanitation, agricultural and energy production. Rio+20 offered the opportunity to recognize the linkages between water and other productive resources as land, and thus its importance for development.

What do governments need to do to ensure access to water and sanitation to their populations? What are the main obstacles preventing them from acting on this issue?

Governments should guarantee that water resources are not polluted or that water and sanitation services are not disconnected, or engage in behaviors that will threaten citizens' access to water, including prohibitive prices and destruction of existing

infrastructure. In addition, countries should prevent third parties from interfering with citizens' right to water. This requires a strong regulatory regime consistent with other human rights that prioritize human consumption above other water uses. It is necessary for Member States to put in place safeguards to protect citizens' water access during the development of private-public partnerships, especially given the importance of private actors in the implementation of the Rio+20 Green Economy Framework.

In terms of obstacles, privatizing water resources poses one of the biggest threats to the water rights, and will no doubt be a contentious issue in discussions where human rights intersect with the 'green economy' policies. Additionally, institutional problems often exacerbate the water challenge. This is in large part because national strategies regarding the use of economic and natural resources often override the goals set by international agreements. Other priorities such as increasing energy access or developing agriculture often compete with water access in development countries that are forced to stretch limited financial resources.

Was there a specific goal for Rio+20 regarding water and sanitation? What needs to happen post-Rio?

Rio+20 presented an opportunity to renew Member States' water resources commitments particularly for promoting integrated water resources management and increasing access to water. However, other aspects of water management such as the disparity in the implementation of national water strategies, stakeholders' participation, and the recognition of the human right to water and sanitation, still need to take place. Now, that Rio+20 is over, the responsibility to address these gaps will fall upon civil society representatives, since they will have to push for water-sensitive policies at the national

levels. At the same, organisms as UN-Water, more than ever, will have the responsibility to increase countries' capacity so they can better manage their water resources.

Rio+20 also started the process for developing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Member States support for a water-related goal was visible during the conference. Consequently, our task will be to guarantee that this goal addresses the integration of the social, environmental and economic dimensions of water management. For example, improving water quality (economic dimension) must be accompanied by water quality indicators (environmental dimension) while improvement of access must be accompanied by clean water and sanitation (social dimension).

Can you give us an example of a project that is already working in ensuring access to water and sanitation to an area that previously lacked these services?

In terms of management, women play a central role because they are often responsible for collecting water for household chores. Some governments have recognized the need to consider how water policies might impact women.

In Peru, the Water and Sanitation Program and partners implemented the Small Town Pilot Project in 2006. The project fostered gender-responsive governance in communities of between 2,000 and 30,000 inhabitants. Local governments had been running these services, characterized by deteriorating infrastructure, weak management and poor communication with stakeholders, in particular with women. The project created a public-private partnership through an alliance between the municipality, a private operator and an overseeing neighborhood community board. By creating the neighborhood community board, a permanent mechanism for citizen oversight

in the management of services by the new operator was put in place, with members appointed through a transparent election process. A gender component assessed and deployed appropriate communication channels between women and men, the operator and the municipality. It also established a quota of 50 percent women on the neighborhood community boards, institutionalized by a municipal order.

How can ordinary people contribute to ensuring universal access to water and sanitation?

Citizens have the responsibility to make their governments accountable for providing them with sufficient and regular access to water resources. At the same time, they need to value the access to the resource by not overusing it, and they must protect our finite water sources. For example, they can participate in programs to keep rivers clean and promote good hygiene practices within their own community.

They as well need to fight for the right that they have to participate in decision-making processes, and understand the importance of using these opportunities to give voice to concerns that are often forgotten such as traditional water uses.

In which activities are you and your organization involved in Rio+20

I was one of the Rio+20 facilitators for the MGCY. The Major Group of Children and Youth (MGCY) is the official constituency for people younger than 30 years in UN Commission for Sustainable Development. The MGCY advocated for the water-energy-food security nexus, the implementation of the human right to water, and the participation of stakeholders in water-related policies. Our organization also drafted a

Water Guide to provide a basic understand of the Rio+20 process to young water experts.

How was your overall experience at Rio+20?

Rio+20 was a learning opportunity. I got to see first-hand the negotiation sessions between Member States. Beyond the negotiation rooms, the side events provided a space for the exchanges of ideas between all those that were participating in the conference. Although, the outcome document of the conference was not as ambitious as expected, I believe that these newfound partnerships will be the ones to define the future of sustainable development.

The Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY) is the official voice for young people in the UN sustainability negotiations, namely Rio+20. Through networking and collaborating, the MGCY has strong teams that contribute to the policy negotiations. The MGCY also works to inspire and platform youth activism through a series of working groups, aimed at bringing people together to help build the global youth voice.

Formally established in 2003, ***UN-Water*** as UN-System wide mechanism coordinates and provides a coherent response to challenges related to all aspects of freshwater and sanitation among the 30 members out of all UN entities and external partners. It has evolved out of a history of close collaboration among UN entities and was created to add value to UN initiatives by fostering greater co-operation and information-sharing among existing UN agencies and outside partners. It supports Member States worldwide, in their efforts to achieve water and sanitation goals and targets.

Since 2008, ***UN-Water Decade Programme on Advocacy and Communication (UNW-DPAC)*** is implemented by the United Nations Office to Support the International Decade for Action 'Water for Life' 2005-2015.

Article –disclaimer: Statements and opinions expressed in the following article are those of the author.

Rio+20s Winners and Losers: The Thoughts of a Youth Policy Tracker

By Olimar Maisonet Guzmán, Major Group of Children and Youth

The final negotiations of Rio+20 ended at midnight on June 19. At exactly 12 a.m., the Brazilian Secretariat announced that an updated version of the “Future We Want” was ready to be adopted by Member States. During the previous days, Member States were rushed by the host country to reach an agreement in key areas such as: UNEP mandate, women’s reproductive rights, sustainable development goals (SDGs), water management, and means of implementation. When no agreement was reached, the hosts decided to delete all contentious topics from the outcome document.

An ill-defined process

The final outcome document was less ambitious than expected. This came as no surprise for those of us who sat on negotiation rooms during that week. We witnessed an ill-defined facilitation method that did not give space for the organic development of conversations between negotiators. “You talk about it now, or we will resolve it for you. You give us no choice.” – was the most common

phrase used by the facilitator of the session. The words reminded me of my high school years instead that a high level negotiation between grown-up negotiators.

As I sat in the room, I saw how the possibilities of including important water issues as the water-energy-food security nexus and transboundary cooperation vanished. While some member states advocated for the recognition of basin-wide cooperation to improve water management, while others, particularly G-77, refused to recognize transboundary matters due to it being politically controversial. However, that negotiation of interests was often rushed and gave no other option than to accept the text proposed by the Secretariat.

Similar scenes were talking places in other negotiation rooms. As I read the updates provided by my fellow youth trackers, I instantly reached a verdict: “Rio+20 is over”. More than a year of work had led to this moment and it was not living up to our expectations. Although, I mostly tend to have pragmatic expectations about these multilateral events, it was interesting to see the reaction from different sectors of civil society.

Reactions to the summit

Due to increasing frustrations with the negotiation process, many decided to walk out of the conference, reject the outcome text, and join the people’s summit. However, at a time when the outcome text was already adopted, walking out and rejecting the text did not have any impact at all. The act of walking out seemed to put on a show for the media rather than influence the outcome of the conference. It would have caused an impact if it was done a week earlier, when the actual negotiations were talking place.

At the same time, in the plenary hall, many Heads of State called for an increase of the ambitions of the “Future We Want” while others kept praising their ability to promote sustainable development within their own countries. I personally decided to stay behind and sit at the plenary hall listening to the remarks made by the Heads of State and Ministers. This was not because I was happy with the process, but rather I was reflecting upon all the different and contrasting scenes that were taking place at Rio+20 that day. I kept thinking that it was too late. Where were these words a couple of days ago, when the actual outcome document was being negotiated? Who were the real winners and losers of Rio+20?

The Winners

The first winner of Rio+20 was Rio de Janeiro. According to reports by media outlets, the city tourism revenue reached USD 132 million during the days of the Summit. In addition, local talents and artists were able to present their work to an international public. Second, the supporters of SDGs should be happy about the fact that an initial process was defined by Member States to develop these new goals by 2015. However, civil society representatives are still worried about their role in the process. Third, the Jonathan Pershing fan base increased during Rio+20. Some youth groups from United States commended his efforts for having constant briefings with the US youth to answer their questions about the process. Fourth, civil society and governments found a space to hold conversations about sustainable development initiatives outside of the negotiation halls of Rio+20. Personally, I consider this to be the most significant outcome of the conference.

The Losers

The United States expressed their desire for a short, five-page document that was aspirational and universal. Nonetheless, the final document is 50 pages long, and its aspirations are being called into question. The European Union wanted an action-oriented outcome document that clearly

strengthened the role of UNEP in sustainable development. Although the document called for strengthening the voice of UNEP, many caveats “where feasible and appropriate” were included in the final text. Civil society members were visibly unhappy with the outcome document and the overall Rio+20 process. Some groups decided to walk out from the conference center and join the People’s Summit that was being held at the other side of the city. Simultaneously, those that were involved in the process for almost a year were disappointed about how badly broken the process turned out to be. Fans of the water-energy-food security nexus were disappointed that the outcome document did not include references to the nexus as an emerging issue for the green economy. Finally, the host country’s ability to manage the logistics of a conference this size was called into question. Delayed transports, inefficient venues, and overall complicated logistics seemed to increase people’s discomfort with the conference.

How shall we move forward?

Despite the imperfections of the process, it is still too early to define the overall impact of Rio+20. This was the first time that countries came together to discuss issues related to climate change, economic development, water management, sustainable development goals, and ombudsperson for future generations, in a single conference. This by itself, it is a significant achievement.

The consultation process with civil society was deeply flawed. However, this is not surprising, since the opportunities for the engagement with civil society representatives were limited at the international level. To improve the effectiveness of civil society engagement, it would be necessary to improve the way governments interact with them at the national level. To do so, we would have to develop national consultations before UN summits and move beyond conferences calls. This is crucial since at the end of the day, Member States are the ones that dictate what is included on the final document. Additionally, it should be mandatory to have civil society representatives in each country’s delegation from the preparatory stages. This will most likely improve the information flow between civil society and national delegates.

Finally, it was pretty obvious that the whole “consensus” approach of the UN system does not allow the discussion of contentious issues as climate change or fossil fuel subsidies. Consensus-based negotiations tend to be extremely slow, since every person in at the table needs to support the same ideals and policies. Additionally, these types of negotiations often lead to “lowest common denominator” type of agreements. Even if we increase civil society participation and the process of reaching an agreement remains unchanged, we will end up again with a weak document. It will be necessary to rethink how agreements are reached within environment and sustainable development negotiations.

Rio+20 will not be the last opportunity of my generation to create lasting impact for sustainable development. I still believe that the solutions for global problems should involve all relevant stakeholders including governments and civil society. However, if we do not learn from the mistakes made in Rio+20, we will be doomed to repeat the same mistakes as this generation, thus guaranteeing Rio+30 or even Rio+40 to be a failure.