

Reporting from Sustainable Development Dialogues Session on Water

By UN-Water Decade Programme on Advocacy and Communication (UNW-DPAC)

18 June 2012 – Sustainable Development Dialogues session focuses on ten recommendations emanating from a public online vote, and provided a platform for refining and proposing additional recommendations, with the objective of the sessions to produce three final recommendations to be delivered to the Heads of State and government.

The water dialogue was attended by about 2000 people. The panelists, in the Water Dialogue, moderated by Lucia Newman from Al Jazeera, included Myrna Cunningham Kaim, Director, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Nicaragua; Dyborn Chibonga, National Smallholder Farmers Association of Malawi (NASFRAM); Jeff Seabright, Coca-Cola Co; Ania Grobicki, Executive-Secretary, Global Water Partnership; Albert Butare, Former Minister of State, Rwanda, CEO, Africa Energy Services Group; Muhammed Yunus, Nobel Laureate, Founder, Grameen Bank; David Boys, Public Services International, Canada; Santha Sheela Nair, Former Secretary, Department of Fresh Water, Ministry of Rural Development, India; Loic Fauchon, President, World Water Council (WWC); and Benedito Braga, President, International Water Resources Association (IWRA).

Panelists welcomed this exercise of on-line democracy and highlighted recommendations need to be transformed into commitments leading to solutions. The moderator highlighted that it was clear that water has become a political priority as shown by the fact that the session was also attended by the King of Sweden and the former President of Brazil.

Several panelists supported the recommendation of implementing water and sanitation as a human right (recommendation 3). It was discussed that we may need to consider more ambitious goals and targets for water in relation to proximity, safety and the most vulnerable. There is a very important gender component on this. People have access to water that is polluted with arsenic or other contaminants. Many emphasized that it is not only about the “basic” right of people to have access to basic water and sanitation services but about “implementing” the right. Much of this depends on local solutions, creation of community partnerships and social business, and insuring financial capacity at local level and appropriate technologies. It was argued that, in many developed countries, the water consumption is too high and so their technologies are not efficient or appropriate for developing countries. There were discussions on the need to avoid commoditization of water and ensure that water remains managed publicly. To do this it is important to improve efficiency of public services and facilitation of cross-learning among utilities. It was discussed that paying for water services does not mean a commoditization of the

resource and is not contradictory with water as a human right. It is in fact necessary to implement it always ensuring affordability for the most vulnerable.

The panelists also gave priority to water security given the cross cutting nature of water as a means to achieve the health agenda, the environment agenda and the economic agenda (for productive uses). There were discussions on implementing IWRM reforms (recommendation 5) and integrating water policies into national development plans, encouraging transnational cooperation and solidarity on water. This needs to include reduction of pollution and use of water to dispose of waste. The panelists emphasized the need to integration of policies on water, land use and food and the proposal for setting a target for improving efficiency in some sectors. Preventing misuse and overexploitation of the resource for private/profit making activities requires a combination of government and stakeholder action supported by appropriate legislation. Some considered that the recommendations reflect that water goes well beyond ecological issues and it is cross-cutting in economic development. There is an impact of climate change in the management of water resources and this requires solutions that help us become more resilient.

Questions and issues raised by the audience included stories of success in improving water and sanitation services with impressive impacts on the reduction of waterborne diseases and child mortality; how to insure lakes, rivers and groundwater remain in the public domain; how to deal with migrations caused by water scarcity, etc. During the follow-up press conference Journalists raised questions such as the possible development of an international law for the right of water and if there is financing/a fund to implement this right.