

United Nations
World Water
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Programme



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WWDR4 – Regional Press Release – AFRICA

Water indispensable to economic growth in Africa

Marseille, France, March 12 2012

After decades of poor economic growth, several African countries have recently been experiencing prospects of robust growth. But without innovative and concerted efforts to develop the region's water resources, the United Nations says this trend will not be sustained.

According to the latest edition of the United Nations World Water Development Report (WWDR4), released today at the 6th World Water Forum in Marseille, most of the social and economic challenges faced by the African region are related to water. However, the critical problem is not one of water scarcity, but rather one of *access*.

“Although sub-Saharan Africa uses barely 5% of its annual renewable freshwater, access to improved water supply in both urban and rural contexts is still the lowest in the world” says the Report. “The lack of access to adequate and safe drinking water and food and energy security is not necessarily tied to the availability of water itself but rather to low adaptive capacity, lack of effective development strategies, lack of effective regional and subregional institutional frameworks, inadequate infrastructure and economic and financial constraints.”

Overall, Africa is endowed with relatively abundant water resources. It has vast wetlands and limited but widespread groundwater resources. In addition, it has a huge potential for energy production through hydropower, and an equally important potential for increasing agricultural production and productivity. However, there are political and economic challenges that make it difficult to capture the inherent benefits and the full potential in Africa's water resources to support sustainable developments in the region. According to the Report, the solution begins with a greater focus on (and investments in) the development, maintenance and operation of water infrastructure, coupled with training, education and building the institutional capacity to properly manage the resource.

The report identifies drinking water and sanitation, food security and energy security as being among the most critical water-related sectors requiring the greatest amount of attention:

- “The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for water are to ‘halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation’. It is estimated that only five countries in sub-Saharan Africa have more than 75% of what is needed to achieve the target for drinking water and only two countries, Kenya and South Africa, have more than 75% of what is needed to achieve the sanitation target. The lack

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of safe water and proper sanitation affects not only human health and well-being, it hampers economic growth and security too.”

- “Electricity provision is often unreliable as a result of a lack of investment, growing demand, conflict, unpredictable and variable climatic conditions and aging equipment – all of which hampers economic activity. Hydropower supplies 32% of Africa’s energy, but it is underdeveloped. Only 3% of its renewable water resources are exploited for hydroelectricity. Boosting hydropower will stimulate the economy, improve human welfare, help the move away from biomass, produce less greenhouse gas than fossil fuels and provide a reliable base load that could enable other renewable energy resources.”
- “Africa needs to increase its agricultural output at a rate of 3.3% a year if it is to achieve food security by 2025. Water is a key component of its ability to feed its population because irrigated cropland accounts for only 20% of its irrigation potential. In fact, in all but four countries in the region, less than 5% of the cultivated area is irrigated – so there is considerable scope for expanding irrigation to increase food security.”

In spite of deep and widespread poverty endemic to much of the African region, far-reaching economic reforms adopted across the continent have begun to yield positive results in many countries. Analysis has revealed that in the ten years up to 2010, six of the world’s ten fastest-growing economies were in sub-Saharan Africa. However, according to the report, the recent positive trends in economic growth, and the accompanying social benefits, will not be sustained unless a concerted effort is made towards developing the regions water resources.

Information Brief on the 4th edition of the United Nations World Water Development Report (WWDR4)

The United Nations World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) is hosted by UNESCO and brings together the work of 28 UN-Water members and partners in the triennial *World Water Development Report* (WWDR).

This flagship Report is a comprehensive review that gives an overall picture of the state of the world's freshwater resources. It analyses pressures from decisions that drive demand for water and affect its availability. It offers tools and response options to help leaders in government, the private sector and civil society address current and future challenges. It suggests ways in which institutions can be reformed and their behaviour modified, and explores possible sources of financing for the urgently needed investment in water.

The WWDR4 is a milestone within the WWDR series. This 4th edition directly reports from the regions, highlighting hotspots, and has been mainstreamed for gender equality, which is addressed as a critical issue. It introduces a thematic approach – ‘Managing Water under Uncertainty and Risk’ – in the context of a world which is changing faster than ever in often unforeseeable ways, with increasing uncertainties and risks. It highlights that historical experience will no

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longer be sufficient to approximate the relationship between the quantities of available water and shifting future demands.

The WWDR4 also seeks to show that water has a central role in all aspects of economic development and social welfare, and that concerted action via a collective approach of the water-using sectors is needed to ensure water's many benefits are maximized and shared equitably and that water-related development goals are achieved.

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