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TO SAFE DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION

68th session of the General Assembly
Third Committee
Item # 69 (b,c)

28 October 2013
New York
Mr. Chairperson [H.E. John W. Ashe (Antigua and Barbuda)]

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here today to present my annual report before the Third Committee.

Before presenting the report, I would like to take a moment to inform you about the work that I have been undertaking on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. I believe that the biggest blind-spot of the current global development agenda – the MDGs – is the silence regarding inequalities. I have been devoting focused efforts on how to integrate and operationalize the elimination of inequalities into the new Post-2015 development framework that is starting to emerge.

Experience from past decades has shown that equality is not an automatic outcome of conventional development practices. Benefits delivered to the better-off do not naturally “trickle down” to the most marginalized.

To integrate the elimination of inequalities across the new development framework, I have worked with hundreds of experts over the past two years under the UNICEF and WHO Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation and have developed a practical tool to monitor the progress made in progressively eliminating inequalities in access to water and sanitation. This tool, however, can be also applied to any other sectors.

The tool compares progress between a range of groups as we progress towards the future goals and targets: between poor and rich, women and men, rural and urban, those in informal and formal settlements. Essentially, between any disadvantaged group and the general population – and countries and populations themselves should identify what “disadvantaged” means for them through a broad, inclusive process. Only when the gaps are closed or progressively reduced, can the goals and targets be considered “achieved”.

On this issue, I am organizing a side-event on Measuring Inequalities in the Post-2015 Development Agenda: A new global tool for WASH and beyond at lunchtime on 30 October. A cross-regional group of Member States – The Friends of Water – will kindly host the event, and the Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Jan Eliasson, who is a strong water and sanitation advocate, will deliver opening remarks.
I would like to urge all Member States to ensure that human rights and equality are integrated into the post-2015 development agenda. We cannot and must not pave the way to the coming fifteen years where disparities will become even greater and the most disadvantaged will be missed out.

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

My annual report addresses the topic of “Managing Wastewater, Curbing Pollution, and Improving Water Quality for the Realization of Human Rights”.

Every year, approximately 1500 km³ of wastewater, corresponding to the volume of over 300,000 Maracanã football stadium filled up to the top, are generated worldwide through domestic, agricultural and industrial discharge. Contamination of water by agricultural, industrial and domestic wastewater has a significant impact on the realization of human rights, including on the human rights to water and sanitation, the rights to health, food, a healthy environment among others. Introducing the human rights framework and the practical guidance it provides into policies and practice for managing wastewater and controlling pollution is imperative.

The domestic, industrial and agricultural sectors all produce wastewater and contaminate water resources. Sewage, sludge and other wastes from toilets and latrines are all too often not confined nor treated, presenting a major health hazard, especially in densely populated urban areas. Approximately 80 per cent of wastewater is discharged untreated into the environment. Yet, in most of the world, wastewater management has not been prioritized.

In 2008 I defined sanitation, from a human rights perspective, to include the treatment and disposal or reuse of excreta and associated wastewater – such interpretation was later endorsed by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Such a broad understanding is warranted as sanitation not only concerns one’s own right to use a latrine or toilet, but also the human rights of other people, who can be negatively impacted when wastes are not appropriately treated, disposed of or reused. This year, I have again taken up these issues, looking “at the other side” of the water cycle and taken it further to examine what needs to be done to integrate human rights in wastewater management and pollution control.
The human rights framework demands that ensuring access to sanitation must remain a priority. Yet, efforts need to go beyond ensuring access to basic sanitation, in particular in countries that have already achieved (almost) universal coverage, but lack adequate wastewater management.

Human rights principles and standards provide a framework for a phased approach of progressive improvements in managing wastewater. States must give priority to the elimination of the most urgent and serious challenges, which vary from country to country and within countries.

The human rights framework does not demand that everyone should be connected to sewage treatment, nor that adequate wastewater management must be achieved overnight. It calls for measures and technologies that are appropriate for a given context and requires such measures to be taken progressively.

Human rights demand a shift in priorities. The safe disposal and management of faecal sludge and septage is largely neglected in current policy and practice and requires greater attention. Similarly, finding solutions for wastewater management in informal settlements, where dwellers are often exposed to contamination, must be prioritized. States must reverse patterns of exclusion and improve the lives and livelihoods of the most disadvantaged people, who are usually worst affected by contamination.

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

To conclude, in the efforts that I am making together with the Member States, international organizations, civil society and other partners, I am developing a Handbook for realising the human rights to water and sanitation. This is practical guidance for States at national, regional and local levels to assist in overcoming the challenges presented in realising the rights.

This Handbook will examine what States should be considering to ensure that water and sanitation services are available, affordable, accessible, safe and appropriate, and delivered without discrimination, through participatory approaches, and with accessible and relevant information available to all. It will provide ideas, checklists, recommendations and case studies that will be helpful to States and other stakeholders working towards fulfilling their human rights obligations.
I will be publishing this Handbook at the end of the second term of my mandate, in September 2014. During the next six months I will be seeking your support and input to ensure that this Handbook addresses the concerns and needs that States face in realising the rights to water and sanitation.

I am looking forward to your inputs and contributions to make this Handbook a living tool to realize the human rights to water and sanitation. I am also looking forward to working with all of you to pave the way to eliminate inequalities and realize universal usage of water and sanitation.

Thank you for your attention.