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The Office of the Director-General of the World Health Organization presents its compliments to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and has the honour to refer to the communication of 13 February 2013 in which the Organization was invited to contribute to the Human Rights Council resolutions 16/2 of 2011 and 21/2 of 2012 entitled “The human right to safe drinking water and sanitation”.

Attached herewith is the Organization’s comments to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water.

The Office of the Director-General takes this opportunity to renew to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurance of its highest consideration.

GENEVA, 29 April 2013



ENCL: as stated.

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World Health Organization comments in response to the request of 13 February 2013 from the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation for information on issues of water resources and wastewater management from the perspective of human rights, to inform a report to the General Assembly

Some brief background information is provided, followed by specific responses to the questions posed by the UN Special Rapporteur to Member States. WHO's responses provide an overview of the Organization's recent insights on these questions from engagement with Member States primarily in relation to wastewater management, and offers reference resources as information sources for the report.

Background

WHO addresses issues of water resources and wastewater management primarily from the perspective of water quality and its impact on human health. The right to water is a key aspect of WHO's work on access to safe drinking-water, however, to date we have not undertaken specific work on wastewater and water resources through a human rights lens.

Water quality, including drinking water quality, wastewater management and recreational water quality and its impact on human health is an important aspect of WHO's mandate. Resolution WHA64.24, adopted in 2011 on Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Health, clarifies WHO's role to support Member States to "strengthen the intersectoral policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms for integrated management of water- and sanitation-related health hazards and risks, including (...) environmental management to protect health in water resources and wastewater management projects".

WHO's key initiatives in relation to management of wastewater and recreational water is through its normative role and the publication of the 2006 WHO third edition of the WHO Guidelines for the Safe use of Wastewater, Excreta Volumes I – IV and the 2003 Guidelines for Recreational Water Quality Volumes I - II (refer key resources).

These Guidelines propose a flexible approach to risk assessment and risk management, linked to health-based targets that can be established at a level that is realistic under local conditions.

1. What conflicts exist in your country between different types of water uses? What are the main challenges in your country concerning water resources and wastewater management that impact on the realization of human rights?

Over 2012-13, WHO has partnered with UNEP, FAO, UNW-DPC, IWMI and UNU-INWEH under the UN-Water umbrella to deliver five regional workshops reaching

over 70 countries on Safe Use of Wastewater in Agriculture. Each country prepared a summary report on the status of wastewater management and use which may be a valuable resource to the Special Rapporteur. However, countries were not asked to comment specifically on human rights dimensions. Country reports can be found at www.ais.unwater.org/wastewater.

WHO organized the 5th regional workshop for Southern and Eastern Asia including Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. Some summary insights are provided here:

- In the Philippines, issues raised included lack of knowledge and skills on the safe use of wastewater, and of the effects on health.
- In Thailand, the major constraints to wastewater treatment highlighted were the high cost of investment, and lack of continuous operation and maintenance.
- In turn, Cambodia was reported as lacking fundamental wastewater treatment plants, therefore a few central wastewater treatment plants were found to be under operation and/or construction in some provinces but only for urban areas. In this context, Cambodia noted high investments, the maintenance costs required for sophisticated wastewater treatment systems and the need for high-skilled personnel as key challenges.
- Indonesia reported that artificial fertilizers were often causes for land, water and food contamination in communities, causing significant health problems. In this respect, technology on wastewater treatment and reuse, correct handling of treated wastewater for agriculture and selection of food crops were identified as crucial elements to meet public health needs and acceptability and sustainability of schemes.

2. How are different water uses prioritized in national legislation and policies? How are these priorities implemented in practice? Are there any implementation challenges? If yes, please elaborate on them and on measures taken to overcome them.

We refer the Special Rapporteur to the country reports on the various regional workshops at www.ais.unwater.org/wastewater.

3. What strategies, approaches and mechanisms guide water resources and wastewater management? How do these ensure that the basic needs of the entire population are met?

The WHO Guidelines for the Safe Use of Wastewater, Excreta and Greywater put forward a multiple-barrier approach to wastewater management. This is a departure from more rigid effluent discharge standards for wastewater treatment. While effluent discharge standards are straightforward, the reality is that up to 90% of wastewater in developing countries is discharged untreated or only partially treated. In many countries only a small fraction of wastewater is collected and directed to a treatment plant and many treatment plants are providing little treatment due to inadequate operation and maintenance despite large capital investments. Therefore, strict effluent standards would

address only a small proportion of total wastewater and ignore the majority and most vulnerable sections of the population, who are routinely exposed to wastewater through direct or indirect use and are not covered. Instead, the 2006 Guidelines recommend a more realistic strategy for managing wastewater. The multiple barrier approach uses a selection of barriers to prevent human exposure to wastewater, such as partial treatment plus safer irrigation practices and market hygiene, for example by involving a full range of actors in the process wastewater production and final use to implement health protection measures.

The Guidelines put forward a policy and regulatory framework to support this approach. A key feature is the concept of intersectoral collaboration to support the achievement of health based targets (also refer to 4 below). In Volume II, the Guidelines also introduce health impact assessments of new wastewater projects, which can inform the development of international and national approaches (including standards and regulations) to managing the health risks from hazards associated with wastewater use in agriculture, as well as providing a framework for national and local decision-making. An analysis of the health risks associated with the use of wastewater for irrigation identifies different groups exposed, and the type of health threats they may face as a process of incremental improvement to reduce risks.

WHO is currently scaling up capacity development for Member States to implementation of the 2006 Guidelines and the multiple barrier approach as a priority area within water sanitation, hygiene and health. WHO also continues to promote health impact assessments.

4. How does your organization ensure transparency, access to information and participation in decision-making regarding water resources and wastewater management?

The WHO Guidelines elaborate on the need for intersectoral collaboration (Vol. I), for example highlighting the impact on health outcomes of decisions made outside the health sector, such as in the use of wastewater. It also outlines options to create specific institutional arrangements between relevant public sectors (in principle, agriculture, health and environment) to coordinate the safe use of wastewater, excreta and greywater.

Volume II of the guidelines also discusses the issues of public perception and acceptance of wastewater use schemes, further elaborating on tools for increasing public participation in the decision to use wastewater. Recommendations surrounding the development of a strategy for increasing public participation feature: setting up a plan of study with involvement of the public, identifying and evaluating alternatives through public meetings, user surveys and workshops, involving the public in the selection of plans and engaging in public dialogue as a part of the decision making process.

5. In your view, should water resources and wastewater management be reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals / post-2015 development framework?

Yes, WHO strongly supports the view that wastewater should be part of a broader water goal as part of the post-2015 development agenda on the basis of the following drivers and rationale:

- Improper disposal of wastewater is leading to increasing degradation of freshwater resources, both surface and groundwater. Improved management of wastewater from domestic, industrial and agricultural sources is needed to safeguard the quality and quantity of water available for domestic use, central to the achievement of universal access to safe water.
- Safe use of wastewater in agriculture, industry and non-potable domestic and civic uses reduces competition for fresh water and treated potable water and reduced pollution levels in source waters.
- Population increase, especially rapid urban growth, and related increased demand for food and fiber in cities will drive the paradigm shift of viewing wastewater as a resource to be safely managed.
- Wastewater management has potential to impact on the achievement of other potential Sustainable Development Goals thematic areas – most notably health; environmental sustainability; hunger, nutrition and food security.

Given the increased use of wastewater, and its underlying drivers outlined above, WHO emphasizes the need for increased attention to wastewater management from a health perspective on the global agenda. In addition, implementation of the WHO guidelines could be considered as an indicator for measuring progress in achieving a target on wastewater.

WHO thus strongly encourages the UN Special Rapporteur to highlight issues of direct and indirect reuse of wastewater as key topics for discussion in the report.

Key resources:

- WHO webpage on Wastewater use:
www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/wastewater/en/
- WHO Guidelines for the safe use of wastewater, excreta and greywater (Volumes I-IV) www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/wastewater/gsuweg2/en/index.html
- WHO Guidelines for Safe Recreational Water Environments Volume 1 Coastal and Fresh waters. www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/bathing/srwe1/en/
- Wastewater Irrigation and Health – Assessing and Mitigating Risk in Low-Income Countries – Edited by Pay Drechsel, Christopher A. Scott, Liqa Raschid-Sally, Mark Redwood and Akica Bahri (Robert Bos contributed to this publication, which contains many references to the WHO Guidelines and the need to control the health risks of

wastewater use)

www.iwmi.cgiar.org/Publications/books/pdf/Wastewater_irrigation_and_Health_book.pdf

- UN-water activity information systems (UNW-AIS)
www.ais.unwater.org/wastewater/ws5