

Water in a green and fair economy

Rio+20: A Progressio briefing

Rio+20 must be a step towards sustainable development that's truly 'waterproof'

"I hope for a good future for my children, in a healthy environment; I hope we will have enough water in the future."

María Yolanda Rojas Ávila. Antioquia, Peru. November 2011

"Water problems will figure prominently at the forthcoming UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, in 2012 – Rio+20."

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. World Water Day, 22 March 2011

Rio+20

The world meets in June 2012 for Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development to be held in Rio de Janeiro. It marks 20 years since the Rio 'Earth Summit'. 1992's original Rio conference was a landmark event, founding key political processes including the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) climate talks and the Agenda 21 action plan.

But much has changed around the world. Over the last 20 years problems have become crises. There are pressing challenges of environmental degradation, increased competition over scarce resources and the growing impacts of climate change. These challenges must be addressed urgently; failure to do so will come with a high cost.

Rio+20 is not the end of the road, but a crucial opportunity to reignite progress towards sustainable development that has the needs of the poorest at its heart. It should serve as a catalyst to start off new initiatives and processes that build on outcomes from previous Earth Summits, coupled with new awareness, learning and knowledge built over the last two decades. World leaders must rise to the challenge to provide essential political will and commit to immediate and long term progress towards sustainable development.

But old thinking also needs replacing. At the heart of Rio+20's idea of sustainable development must be poverty and equity. We must be dissatisfied with a world in which survival is the only measure of success. Instead, human flourishing must drive our renewed political will. We need to consider the social, cultural and environmental policies that support the ability of communities to flourish. The Millennium Development Goals and suggested Sustainable Development Goals provide some of the building blocks for human flourishing.

Rio+20 and water

Water is an essential part of sustainable development; a fundamental resource that underpins both life and livelihood. Water is essential to human flourishing. Yet, environmental stresses such as water insecurity and scarcity affect a large proportion of the world's population and are felt most keenly by poor people and communities.

2.8 billion people live in areas facing water scarcity. The poorest are often at particular disadvantage when there is competition over water resources. Balancing the need for water among the poorest, including the small-scale farmers who feed a third of the world's population, must be at the heart of decision-making.


Women count. They are generally the main water managers on a household level in developing countries, both for consumption and for productive use. Women's knowledge and participation must be acknowledged, and women must be provided with adequate support according to their needs.

The Green Economy has to be a fair one. The 'Green Economy in the Context of Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication' is one of the main focus areas of Rio+20, and is particularly relevant to the communities around the world that Progressio works with. The social dimension of sustainable development needs to be given greater emphasis, particularly human flourishing and social equity.

A Green Economy cannot function without water. Water is a fundamental part of agriculture and energy production. It's essential that Green Economy policies ensure water-related impacts are fully understood and accounted for, including knock-on impacts. Community- and ecosystems-based management, recognising local knowledge and with poor people involved in decision-making, will go a long way to ensuring local sustainability. In short, the Green Economy must be truly 'Waterproof'.

María Yolanda Rojas Ávila is 35 years old. She lives with her husband, Germán Santos Gómez Cuadros, and their three children, Eduardo (8 years old, pictured), Wilson (5), and Silvia Rosalina (3). They live in the district of Antioquia, in the watershed of the Lurín River near Lima, Peru. Yolanda is active in her community as the president of the local committee of the governmental social assistance programme *Vaso de Leche* (Glass of Milk). She has lived in Antioquia all her life.





"I use water basically for two things. For my household I need water for domestic tasks such as washing and cooking, and for personal hygiene. I also give water to the animals I have around my home. Each month we pay a small fee for our drinking water system. It works alright, the only problem is that the water is not yet drinkable, so we have to boil it before drinking it. But at least almost every household is connected now.

"Besides this, my husband and I use water for irrigating our land. The local irrigation committee also charges a fee for that. However, in this area, farmers use irrigation water very inefficiently and every time we have less water available. Sometimes this causes conflicts between neighbours.


"To me, water means life. Without water the people, animals and crops cannot live. If we didn't have water for irrigation, we would depend on the rainy season and only have one harvest per year, which would mean less income for my family.

"The kind of world I would like to leave for my grandchildren is a world where everybody has access to good education and where everybody can get a decent income. In my community we live very close to Lima, where there are a lot of rich and middle class families, but although we are only a few hours away, we are completely ignored, especially by the State. Only some NGOs work with us to improve our lives.

"I'm taking some practical steps to make sure my grandchildren inherit a better world. Through my work in *Vaso de Leche* I help the poorest families to receive better nutrition. I also try to participate in activities such as the *Concejo de Cuencas* (the water users' organisation at watershed level). This organisation gives small water users an equal voice in the management of our watershed, because until now it is the big companies and the State who make all the decisions, and we are not even told about what they decide.

"My hopes for the future are for a good future for my children, in a healthy environment; I hope we will have enough water in the future. This is something that keeps us all worried because we hear about climate change and we know that there is a lot of pollution of our water as well, caused by big companies but also by other farmers. The problem is that we don't know how to use our water in a healthy way.

"World leaders meeting in June should really listen to all the poor people in the world and not ignore us, because I think everybody in the world should have the same chance to have a good and decent life."



Progressio's recommendations for Rio+20

- ↓ Rio+20 must have clear political support at every level: local constituencies, Parliament, UK government and Europe.
- ↓ A clear poverty and equity focus must be at the heart of Rio+20, including the role of women.
- ↓ The impacts of climate change must be taken into consideration at all times.
- ↓ Human flourishing must be built in to the ambitions for Rio+20.
- ↓ The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present a viable proposition that deserves further attention and elaboration.
- ↓ Water should be a key focus area that cuts across and is included in every aspect of Rio+20, because it is a fundamental resource that underpins both life and livelihoods, and impacts on multiple sectors and users.
- ↓ A core focus should be sustainable and equitable water resources management, with clear poverty and equity objectives, and active involvement of people in poor communities who depend upon water, especially women.
- ↓ The Green Economy must be a fair one, where the social dimension of sustainable development is given greater emphasis, and one that acknowledges key environmental limits and planetary boundaries.

What you can do

Take action for sustainable development that's truly 'waterproof'

Please go to:

progressio.org.uk/waterproof



Published December 2011 by Progressio

Progressio
Unit 5, Canonbury Yard
190a New North Road, London N1 7BJ

Registered charity number 294329

Progressio is an international charity with Catholic roots that works in 11 developing countries

PROGRESSIO