

# No better time to act for sustainable development

Erik Ullenhag, World Water Day, March 22 2017

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends of water and sustainable development.

I am truly honored to address you today on this for so many people so important day, World Water Day.

This year's Water Day theme is "why waste water?" Every day of my life I have had clean water and the possibility to take a shower every morning. I have never worried about that the water my children are drinking or the food they are eating could make them sick.

Growing up in Sweden, a country that is rich in natural resources, I never really considered the importance of water. Whenever I turned on the tap, out flowed an unlimited supply of clean, healthy drinking water. And therefore I never really knew or cared about what happened to the used water when it went down the drain.

Being one of the lucky people born in a rich and free country, I have the moral obligation to realize that not everyone has had the same luck as me. Every day in this region and around the world people are struggling to access clean water. And I am sad to be forced to state an obvious fact: Climate change is here and it will affect poor people in poor countries much more severely than rich people in rich countries.

Sweden aims to be a leader in the implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, not only nationally but also in supporting other countries in the collective global effort to reach these goals. UN SDG 6 is about access to clean water and sanitation, which includes the effective handling and recycling of wastewater. We also strive to be a leader when it comes to the Paris Agreement on climate change. The world really needs to work together to meet probably the biggest challenge of our time.

For the MENA region, the Swedish government has adopted two new development cooperation strategies – one for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and one for the Syria Crisis. The strategies are implemented during 2016-2020 with a combined financial commitment of 420 MUSD.

The fact that Sweden has had regional strategies for cooperation with the MENA Region since 2006 gives us a strong platform for continued engagement.

The overall objectives for Sweden's MENA-strategy are:

- i) to support sustainable development that promotes peace, stability and freedom and;
- ii) to strengthen democratic processes and respect for human rights.

The topic of today's event, "Why Waste Water?" addresses both of these objectives. Of course, the proper handling and treatment of wastewater is a significant issue around the world. Currently, over 80 percent, of wastewater globally is released back into the environment untreated and unrecycled. When water is a scarce resource, as it is in much of the MENA Region, the need to minimize wasted water, including understanding and treating

wastewater as a recyclable resource, is all the more important. Rainwater and wash water (grey water) can be used for green spaces and gardens. Properly treated wastewater can be used in industry and agriculture, and can even be made safe to be a source of drinking water. Various projects are currently underway in the MENA Region to address these and related issues, and more are being planned every year. Proper treatment and reuse of wastewater decreases its negative impact on aquifers, lakes, rivers and other sources of freshwater, and decreases our need to over-exploit these important resources.

Water resources and the impact of wastewater is more than a local issue. This is why the Swedish MENA strategy takes a regional approach, meaning that we see the need for countries and neighbours in the region to cooperate. Such cooperation leads to mutual understanding, respect, common solutions to challenges, and ultimately to economic prosperity sustainability and peace.

Investments – financial and human – within these areas require trust, but also the inclusion of economic and entrepreneurial opportunities for women, men, boys and girls. Young men and women in the MENA region are well educated and act already as change agents. There is great potential in allowing them more responsibility and further engagement in development efforts.

Sweden has a Feminist Foreign Policy and it is guiding our work also when it comes to sustainable development. Women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men—primarily as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change.

In this region, from a water, energy and food perspective, the responsibility of managing these resources on a personal and household level often falls heavily on women and girls. More often than men, women and girls have to carry water to the household as well as manage water in the household. Time spent on fetching water means less time spent on education and formal work. Thus, women and girls are more often faced with unpaid jobs and less education than men and boys. But despite that fact, most of the decisions that can lead to sustainable development, at the household, community, national and international levels, are currently made by men. We need to make sure that women are represented in the rooms where the decisions are taken.

To conclude – it is encouraging to see you all here today – representatives from government, the private sector, communities and NGOs, together with other local and international stakeholders.

One of us can't do everything but all of us can do something. We all have a role to play in the way forward, be it as politicians, decision makers, researchers, experts, energy/water/food suppliers or users. A sustainable and more equitable future based on the "nexus" approach is in our hands and there is no better time to act than now.

I hope that we all can gather together to work for better waste water treatment.

Thank you!