Intervención Uruguay

“Water, Energy and Human Rights” – WATERLEX side event

Geneva, 22 September 2014

On behalf of Ambassador Laura Dupuy, I wish to thank Waterlex for organizing this event to study the linkages between human rights, water and energy.

In Uruguay the human right to water and sanitation is recognized by the Constitution, after a popular initiative.

The amendments in 2004 to article 47 of the Constitution implied a new definition of the National Water Policy, providing that “water is an essential resource for life” and that “access to drinking water and sanitation are fundamental human rights”. The article also includes other specifications, like the reference to affordability, priority given to the human uses of water over the agricultural, industrial or energy uses of economic nature, and the Bassin perspective.

Uruguay counts with extensive coverage and access to safe drinking water and sanitation services. 98% of the total population has access to drinking water. Regarding sanitation services, in the capital city, Montevideo, –which has almost half of the total population- the coverage is of 92%, now working in the compulsory connection to the conventional sanitation network in place.

Based on these achievements, the priority of the Government now is to improve and increase access, especially for those populations that have been identified as vulnerable, such as people living in irregular settlements and small and disperse rural communities.

Although access to sanitation in Montevideo is quite high, conventional sanitation services coverage in other urban settlements in the rest of the country is much lower and the in situ solutions may not be as environmentally sound.
In addition, some small and geographically disperse rural communities have low access to sanitation services or no access at all.

Against this background, the response from the Government has focused on policies and programmes to increase coverage in the rural area. Since 2009, we have been implementing a Programme for increasing coverage in small rural communities and schools, which implies a participative management model, engaging the people from the community and the school as well. As of August 2014, this Programme has ensured water and sanitation services to 245 rural schools and communities, benefitting 10,000 persons. The aim of OSE (public enterprise) is to duplicate this coverage by the end of 2015, reaching 6,000 households, some 20,000 persons.

Our efforts have also been focused in the urban population, particularly with regards to the integration of irregular settlements.

In this sense, we are implementing a Plan for regularization of settlements, which, through a participative and inclusive model, aims at ensuring the effective realization of the rights to water and sanitation of the population living in these settlements, while raising awareness on the importance of the regularization of the service, informing the users of their rights and also of their obligations, promoting a sound use of the resources. Under this Plan, users are charged a reduced tariff for the services, and alternative solutions are found in case of non-payment, in order to avoid disconnection of the services. This Plan is set under a broader framework of integration of these settlements, which also includes remediation of contaminated sites and protection of water courses.

Also, since 2012 we are implementing a Pilot Project called “Water + Work”, with the objective of regularizing access to drinking water in ten irregular settlements, generating processes of labor inclusion through the creation of Cooperatives tasked with communitarian activities and also the maintenance of the installations. As of August 2014, 7 settlements have been completely regularized, and 4 social cooperatives have been established, and more than 150 settlements have been partially regularized, benefitting 70,000 persons.
Suburban areas - which have grew without proper planning - still lack the infrastructure. There are joint efforts between the State and local authorities, the Academia and civil society to treat residual effluents of houses (primary and grey waters) for a better quality of life (including health).

Community participation has also been promoted in the sound management of water resources. Under the Plan for Integrated Management of Water Resources, several regional commissions have been established, with a tripartite integration, including representatives from the government, users and civil society. An example is the Commission of the Santa Lucia River, the main source of drinking water in Uruguay (60%), which has decided on a set of measures to preserve the quality of the water, including the implementation of programmes to improve the disposal of domestic and industrial wastewater, advancing in the reuse of industrial wastewater, particularly from dairy farms.

Aquifers and rivers receive different effluents of solid and liquid wastes or trough soil running (arrastre). Therefore, cross cutting and holistic frameworks are needed to approach water management, with an assessment of the water, food, energy and ecosystems linkages or nexus.

After our Law 18.610 of October 2009 on National policy on waters, based on principles such as sustainability, integral and decentralized management of the resource and social participation, we are working on a National Plan of Action for integrated management of water resources to preserve its quantity and quality and ensure a responsible, efficient and sustainable participation. We are also strengthening the system of monitoring and information on water. This includes the role of users, which need to know better their own sources of water for an adequate planning and management of their production systems.

Big agro-industrial investments (like pulp mills and forestry) have more controls, based on the law on assessment of environmental impacts (number 16.466) and are applying technologies to reuse the
wastes (solid and liquid – biomass) produced in their industrial process for energy, creating even a surplus of renewable clean energy available to the general public.

Somewhat smaller agricultural activities need to be more informed and monitored in the use of pesticides which in times of drought may concentrate and then after the rains run towards a water course.

This is the focus of the Commission on the Santa Lucia river Bassin, an advisory body to the regional council, which reunites public authorities, University, research institutes, private sector and users and civil society, in a more or less paritary representation.

The Commission on the Guarani Aquifer, a trans-boundary watercourse shared by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, is looking for example on the fracking, as method for mining extraction.

On the draft Sustainable Development Goals beyond 2015, we welcome that they have a human rights based approach or perspective, since they are aiming for the universality and equality, looking that no one is left behind and they address the issue of quality, and not only the quantitative point of view.

Goal number 6 proposed asks to **Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.**

Regarding the specific proposed targets for beyond 2015 let me mention the following three:

6.3 - by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater, and increasing recycling and safe reuse by x% globally

6.5 - by 2030 implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate

6.6 - by 2020 **protect and restore water-related ecosystems**, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes

6.6.a) by 2030, expand **international cooperation** and capacity-building support to developing countries in water and sanitation related activities and programmes, including water
harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies

6.6.b) support and strengthen the participation of local communities for improving water and sanitation management

To finish, international cooperation both for sharing good practices and best available technologies and in solving common problems in transboundary water courses is then essential.

Thank you.