

# *UN-Water Briefing Note*

*A Reporting Service for Environment and Development Negotiations*

Online at: [enb.iisd.org/events/34th-un-water-meeting](http://enb.iisd.org/events/34th-un-water-meeting)

Friday, 19 March 2021

## **Summary of the 34th UN-Water Meeting: 15-17 March 2021**

UN-Water Members, Partners, and observers considered how to accelerate progress towards water and sanitation for all by 2030, especially in light of a just-released report that indicates ambitions for 2030 remain off-track.

The first day of the three-day event comprised updates on work under the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 Global Acceleration Framework and preparations for upcoming high-level events and global campaigns. The Framework was launched in July 2020 by UN-Water and provides a platform for implementation of SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation, including through the country-level engagement pilot activities in eight countries. Participants were briefed on plans for a high-level event on water-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda, which was organized by the President of the UN General Assembly and took place on 18 March 2021. They also discussed the series of meetings that the 18 March event would kick off in the lead up to the 2023 Conference on the Midterm Review of the Water Action Decade. Participants reviewed the findings of the recently released “Summary Progress Update 2021 on SDG 6,” which was produced by the Integrating Monitoring Initiative on SDG 6, using the latest data on the indicators for each SDG 6 target. Speakers noted that the report reveals that much work remains to be done to achieve SDG 6 by 2030.

A series of small group discussions on the second day considered challenges and opportunities in building momentum for implementation on clean water and sanitation. Participants shared communication and capacity-building needs and strategies, and proposed further work on linkages between freshwater and biodiversity and on transboundary water cooperation.

The meeting continued with a closed session on the third day, 17 March, during which UN-Water Members considered operational issues.

The 34th UN-Water Meeting brought together over 120 representatives from Members, Partners, and observers of this UN interagency coordination mechanism for the online meeting from 15-17 March 2021. This summary reviews the deliberations during the open sessions on 15-16 March 2021.

### **A Brief History of UN-Water**

While over 30 UN organizations carry out water and sanitation programmes, no single UN entity is dedicated exclusively to these issues. In 1977, the UN’s Intersecretariat Group for Water Resources began coordinating UN activities on water. Subsequently, in 2003, the UN Administrative Coordination Committee’s Subcommittee on

Water Resources was transformed into UN-Water and was endorsed by the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. UN-Water plays a coordinating role within the UN, to ensure that the UN family “delivers as one” in response to water-related challenges.

UN-Water meetings bring Members and Partners (see the full list on the final page) together twice a year to carry out the mandate of informing policies, monitoring and reporting, and inspiring action on water and sanitation issues. Participants include representatives of the UN Secretariat and UN agencies, funds, programmes and other entities, multilateral environmental agreements, civil society organizations, governments, and other organizations.

**Initiatives:** The overarching focus of UN-Water’s Members and Partners is to support UN Member States to sustainably manage water and sanitation. This mission is carried out through three areas of work: informing policies, monitoring and reporting, and inspiring action.

Efforts to inform policies focus on placing water and sanitation issues on the agenda of key UN agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs. SDG 6 calls for the international community to strive to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030.

Efforts to monitor and report seek to provide coherent and reliable data and information on key water trends and management issues. The Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 builds on and expands the experience and lessons learned during implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, and aims to:

- develop methodologies and tools to monitor SDG 6 global indicators;
- raise awareness at the national and global levels regarding SDG 6 monitoring;
- enhance technical and institutional country capacity for monitoring; and
- compile country data and report on global progress towards SDG 6.

Efforts to inspire action include coordination of the annual observance of World Water Day on 22 March, and World Toilet Day on 19 November. UN-Water releases the annual World Water Development Report (WWDR) on World Water Day.

**Governance Structure:** UN agencies, programmes, and funds with a water-related mandate are Members of UN-Water. Partners are international organizations, professional unions, associations, and other civil society groups that are actively involved in water and that have the capacity and willingness to contribute to the work of UN-Water and meet UN-Water’s partnership criteria.

UN-Water Senior Programme Managers (SPMs) are the representatives of UN-Water Members. They provide the overall

governance and strategic direction and constitute the highest operational decision-making body of UN-Water.

The Chair of UN-Water is chosen among the UN Executive Heads after consultations in the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. The current Chair of UN-Water is Gilbert Hounbo, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development. The Vice-Chair of UN-Water is elected among the UN-Water SPMs. The Secretary of UN-Water is a senior staff member of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA).

### **UN-Water Report**

On Monday, 15 March, UN-Water Chair Gilbert Hounbo opened the virtual UN-Water Meeting and highlighted that the midterm review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028, which is scheduled to take place in March 2023, will be the first UN conference on water since the 1970s. To contribute to the preparations for this event, he noted that UN-Water has provided new data through the UN integrated monitoring initiative on SDG 6. Hounbo expressed concern that the data confirm the world is not on track to meet SDG 6 and said the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework fosters opportunities to improve support to countries to speed up progress.

Hounbo proceeded to moderate the meeting's consideration of three agenda items: SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework; the UN Conference on the Midterm Review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028; and Global Campaigns.

On 16 March, UN-Water Members and Partners participated in an "open space" session, during which small-group breakout sessions discussed topics proposed by participants themselves.

### ***SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework***

Kelly Ann Naylor, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN-Water Vice-Chair, discussed several achievements of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, noting that it has been recognized in a UN Human Rights Council resolution on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. Results of the Framework to date include setting up the Water and Climate Coalition, launching the Hand Hygiene for All initiative, initiating the SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative, providing country-level support through a pilot initiative, and developing new ways to track and accelerate progress. On the latter, she pointed to the global data drive on SDG 6 that provided data for the SDG 6 progress report launched on 4 March 2021. She highlighted that 84 actions for SDG 6 have been logged in the UN's SDG Acceleration Actions Platform.

Naylor also reported that preparations have begun for the first annual SDG 6 Special Event, which will take place during the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July 2021 to review progress and trigger new commitments to advance action. She encouraged consideration of how to make it easier for all stakeholders to contribute to the Framework, and continuing to strengthen SDG 6 efforts in regions and countries. Commenting in the online chat, some participants indicated a preference for scaling up existing initiatives before creating new ones.

Marianne Kjellén, UN Development Programme (UNDP) and Task Force on Country Level Engagement, gave an update on the country-level engagement pilot being conducted in Bahrain, Costa Rica, Guinea, India, Madagascar, Mexico, Nepal, and São Tomé and

Príncipe. She reported that the UN-Water Technical Advisory Unit coordinates the responses to requests from governments, an SDG 6 capacity-building initiative is being developed and will be tested during the pilot phase, and the Task Force is working to scale up the process for more countries. Kjellén also said the Task Force has begun discussions on using the MAPS approach (Mainstreaming, Acceleration, and Policy Support), which provides country support on the SDGs as part of the UN Sustainable Development Group. She indicated that best practices and lessons learned from the pilot phase will be showcased during the SDG 6 Special Event in July 2021 and will inform the second outreach phase to countries.

### ***UN Conference on the Midterm Review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028***

Madhushree Chatterjee, UN-Water Secretary and Senior Programme Manager, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, described plans for the high-level meeting on the water-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda to be convened by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) President in a hybrid format on 18 March 2021. She said 86 Member States have registered for the event so far, including ten Heads of State and Government and numerous ministerial-level officials. Chatterjee said interactive panels on the five areas of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework—financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation, and governance—will showcase that the UN, governments, and key stakeholders are behind the Framework. Participating governments and stakeholders are also encouraged to announce commitments for the UN's platform of SDG Acceleration Actions and UN-Water's SDG 6 Action Space. She reported that the meeting summary prepared by the UNGA President will be transmitted to the 2021 session of the HLPF and the UN Conference on the Midterm Review of the Water Action Decade in 2023.

Maria Schade, UN-Water Global Monitoring Specialist, summarized the report, "Summary Progress Update 2021 on SDG 6," which was launched on 4 March 2021. She said the report reviews progress towards water and sanitation for all by 2030 and quantifies the work that remains, and indicated that the objective of the report is to ensure that discussions are informed by evidence. Schade said the Update was produced by the Integrating Monitoring Initiative (IMI) on SDG 6 using the latest data on the indicators for each SDG 6 target. The data was collected through IMI-SDG 6's 2020 Data Drive and processed by the custodian agencies for the respective indicators.

The report finds that billions of people have received access to safe drinking water and sanitation over the last 20 years, and the world has realized how important this is for many other areas—economic development, environmental protection, health, schools, and gender. However, specific ambitions for 2030 remain off-track, in particular on drinking water (SDG indicator 6.1.1) and sanitation (SDG indicator 6.2.1a). Schade highlighted the lack of data from many countries, meaning it is not possible to produce a global estimation of water quality (SDG indicator 6.3.2). As a result, over 3 billion people are at risk because the health of their rivers, lakes, and groundwater is unknown.

On water stress (SDG indicator 6.4.2), she reported that water use efficiency is increasing, and we are currently using 17% of global water resources, but this global average masks geographic disparities, with some regions using all of their water or using non-renewable water sources that will eventually run dry.

On water cooperation (SDG indicators 6.5.1 and 6.5.2), she said 129 countries are not on track to have sustainably managed water resources by 2030, and only 22 countries report operational arrangements for transboundary cooperation.

Schade reported that thanks to Earth observations, data are available for all countries on SDG indicator 6.6.1 (ecosystems). The data show that one-fifth of the world's river basins are experiencing rapid changes in the area covered by surface water.

On international cooperation (SDG indicator 6.a.1), the report finds that concessional loans have driven up official development assistance (ODA) commitments, but there is a growing gap between commitments and disbursements.

On participation (SDG indicator 6.b.1), the report finds that 109 countries have laws and procedures in place to involve communities in water and sanitation decisions, but only 14 are actually implementing those laws and realizing a high level of community participation in water and sanitation decision-making.

In sum, Schade said that based on available data, the report finds that we need to work four times as hard, making the case for the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework. She said more detailed, individual reports will be published for almost every SDG 6 indicator in mid-2021.

A representative of Finland informed participants that his government has created a Cross Regional Statement for the high-level meeting on water, which has been signed by 93 Member States and is still accepting signatures.

Chatterjee then briefed participants on the 2023 Conference on the Midterm Review of the Water Action Decade. The Conference will take place at UN Headquarters in New York from 22-24 March 2023 at the highest possible level, and will be co-hosted by Tajikistan and the Netherlands. Three elements of the review will form the substantive focus of the Conference:

- sustainable development and integrated management of water resources for achievement of social, economic, and environmental objectives of the Water Action Decade;
- implementation and promotion of related programmes and projects; and
- furthering cooperation and partnerships at all levels to support the water-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda.

She said five dialogues will take place in parallel with plenary sessions.

Chatterjee listed several regional and global preparatory meetings and other water-related events that will provide inputs for the Conference:

- UN General Assembly's high-level meeting on 18 March 2021;
- High-level symposium on water to be convened by Portugal during the UN Ocean Conference (date to be determined (TBD));
- High-level conference on water to be convened by Germany, drawing on technical and policy discussion series, 1 July 2021;
- 9th World Water Forum, March 2022 in Senegal;
- Asia-Pacific Water Summit, April 2022;
- High-level International Conference, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, to support preparations for Mid-term Review (date TBD in 2022); and
- Preparatory meeting, November 2022, convened by UNGA President, to finalize themes for interactive dialogues.

Chatterjee said the UN Secretary-General will prepare a report for the UN General Assembly's 77th session (2022-2023) on progress during the first half of the Water Action Decade. In addition, the

theme of the 2023 edition of the World Water Development Report will be aligned accordingly.

The Permanent Representative of Tajikistan to the UN, Mahmadin Mahmadaminov, said the UNGA's high-level meeting on water on 18 March represents the start of the preparation process for the 2023 UN Conference. He said the one-day preparatory conference to be held in Dushanbe in 2022 will be dedicated to reviewing the implementation of the Water Action Decade. It will provide a platform to discuss internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, the implementation of the decade of action for the SDGs, and supporting effective preparations for the UN Conference. It will include a focus on the key role of water, sanitation, and hygiene in addressing the "COVID-19 sanitary crisis."

Aart van der Horst, Senior Policy Officer, Water, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Netherlands, said the co-hosts will make the Conference as inclusive as possible by involving all possible stakeholders. The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework and the UNGA modalities resolution (A/RES/75/212) provide the elements of the route to the 2023 Conference.

A representative of Germany provided details on the 1 July 2022 conference it will hold in preparation for the 2023 UN Conference. Germany's event will be preceded by the Bonn Water Dialogues, a comprehensive process to generate ideas for action to achieve water-related goals and targets by 2030. She said the Dialogues are oriented to the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework and follow a cross-sectoral approach to SDG 6.

The meeting then selected the theme for water-related international observances in 2023. World Water Day 2023 and World Toilet Day 2023 will focus on the theme, "Accelerating Change." The 2023 edition of the World Water Development Report will focus on "Accelerating Change through Partnership and Cooperation."

### **Global Campaigns**

The 2021 edition of the UN World Water Development Report (WWDR) focuses on the theme, "Valuing Water." The executive summary is available in 11 languages, and the report is available in English and Italian, and is being translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese. An interactive website for the report, which was suggested by UN Water Partners, is currently being tested.

Neil Dhot, Executive Director of AquaFed, updated participants on World Water Day 2021, which also focuses on the theme of "Valuing Water." The virtual event on 22 March will feature the results of a listening exercise conducted by the Task Force on World Water Day via social media to determine what water means to members of the public. Dhot remarked that "there is no real difference" in how technical experts and the general public see the world. The idea that "water is life" was repeatedly expressed, along with the idea that it is not up to the UN or governments to respect and care for sources of water, but to all humans.

Participants then addressed a proposal for the UN to convene a Groundwater Summit in December 2022, and the SPMs endorsed the proposal. The Summit will convene at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, France, and will be organized as a contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework.

Neno Kukurić, Director of the International Groundwater Resources Assessment Centre (IGRAC), said the Groundwater Summit aims to improve the interface between science, policy, and practice. The proposed theme is "Making Invisible Visible."

UN-Water Members and Partners agreed that “groundwater” would be the theme for World Water Day and World Toilet Day in 2022. Daniella Boström Couffe, UN-Water Communications Manager, noted that having the same theme for both World Water Day and World Toilet Day increases the impact of both by reaching a larger audience, generating more interest in the related events, and fostering synergies across work in the two areas.

A Task Force will coordinate UN-Water Members’ and Partners’ efforts on World Water Day and World Toilet Day 2022, and will also organize the Groundwater Summit. In addition, a catalogue on groundwater management and governance will be developed and a groundwater session will be organized during the 9th World Water Forum (March 2022).

Participants then heard an update on the Global Dialogue on Water that will convene ahead of the 2021 Food System Summit. Charlotte Dufour, 4SD, said the Global Dialogues are highly interactive events with 80-100 participants, providing an opportunity for conversations and new connections among diverse actors in food systems. She said one Global Dialogue will focus on water to bridge UN-Water’s work with the food systems summit. It will also address the nexus between food, water, climate, and energy. Dufour invited suggestions of individuals to participate in the Dialogue, which will take place on 27 April 2021. 4SD is providing technical support for the Dialogues.

### Closing Remarks

Closing the open meeting on 15 March, UN-Water Chair Hougbo welcomed the improved support for countries brought by the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, as well as the collaborations among stakeholders both within and outside of the UN system. He said the journey to the 2023 conference is exciting and ambitious, and that a coordination mechanism will be critical.

### Open Space

On Tuesday, 16 March, over 60 UN-Water Members and Partners gathered in an online “Open Space” session. Participants were invited to propose agenda items, and then selected the sessions they wanted to attend. Two rounds of 30-minute conversations took place in Zoom breakout rooms on the following topics:

- How can we better identify and collate existing information on monitoring programmes so we can build more comprehensive datasets that provide representative spatial and temporal information on water quality?
- How do we align and accelerate UN Water’s work on freshwater ecosystems, biodiversity, and ecosystem services for improved human health, water governance, and poverty alleviation?
- How can we avoid preaching to the converted on SDG 6 and engage those working on other water-related SDGs?
- How can UN-Water and partners effectively use the tools and opportunities that are available to synthesize and amplify key messages (and accelerate progress)?
- How can we capitalize on upscaled efforts on digital transformation due to COVID-19 for accelerating SDG 6?
- How can we include the world’s 80 million displaced people in our acceleration towards accomplishing SDG 6?
- How can we make sure that we create more real action at the country level?
- How can we accelerate capacity development to accelerate SDG 6 objectives?
- How can we make the annual SDG 6 Special Event meaningful?

- How can we accelerate the transfer of knowledge from research and practice in advanced economies to where it is needed to achieve the water-related SDGs and ensure water security?
- How can we support transboundary cooperation and cooperation across borders for the acceleration framework?
- How do we adapt to climate change through managing water wisely and making society resilient from any risks including natural disasters and virus infectious diseases?

During a closing session, participants highlighted key points from the discussions. Among the suggestions for further action were to communicate with those who work on other SDGs about the importance of water for those SDGs. Speakers suggested examining funding trails and paying attention to what is prioritized in budgets. The importance of data collection, and ensuring that data gathering supports the local level in accessing, using, and working with data, was mentioned. The value of telling stories about what is happening on the ground was discussed, with some pointing to the SDG 6 Accelerator Framework’s collection of stories as a good source.

Capacity building was discussed, with some highlighting the need to consider the institutions and mechanisms that are required to build capacity and not just think about it as training courses. One group proposed creating a working group on freshwater and biodiversity to explore the connections between SDG 6 and SDGs 13, 14 and 15 (climate action, life below water, and life on land). Another group suggested prioritizing actions to address transboundary water cooperation by mobilizing political willingness at the highest level, encouraging data exchange, and involving new actors including youth.

The 34th UN-Water Meeting concluded with a closed session for UN-Water Members and Partners with special status on 17 March, during which participants considered operational issues.

### Upcoming Meetings

**World Water Day 2021:** World Water Day is marked annually on 22 March. In 2021, the day will focus on the theme, “Valuing Water.” **date:** 22 March 2021 **www:** <https://www.worldwaterday.org>

**UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF):** This forum follows-up and reviews progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A Special Event will take place during the HLPF to bring a focus on SDG 6. **dates:** 6-15 July 2021 **www:** <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2021>

**35th UN-Water Meeting:** This event will gather UN-Water Members and Partners to coordinate the UN’s approach to water and sanitation issues. **dates:** August (TBD) **www:** <https://www.unwater.org>

**World Water Week 2020:** The 30th World Water Week, organized by the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) and partners, will focus on the theme, “Building Resilience Faster.” **dates:** 23-27 August 2021 **www:** <https://www.worldwaterweek.org>

For additional meetings, see <https://sdg.iisd.org/>

**UN-Water Members**  
**(33 as of March 2021)**

**United Nations Secretariat**

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)  
United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)  
United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)

**Programmes and Funds**

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)  
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)  
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)  
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)  
World Food Programme (WFP)

**Regional Commissions**

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)  
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)  
United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC)  
United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)  
United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA)

**Specialized Agencies**

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)  
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)  
International Labour Organization (ILO)  
International Organization for Migration (IOM)  
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)  
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)  
United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)  
United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)  
United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)  
The World Bank Group (WB)  
World Health Organization (WHO)  
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)

**Other Entities**

United Nations University (UNU)

**United Nations-related Organizations**

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

**Conventions**

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)  
Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)  
Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

**UN-Water Partners**  
**(42 as of March 2021)**

AquaFed  
CDP  
Center for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology (CAWST)  
Conservation International  
Gender and Water Alliance (GWA)  
Global Water Partnership (GWP)  
Green Climate Fund\*  
IHE Delft  
International Association for Hydro-Environment Engineering and Research (IAHR)  
International Association for Water Law (AIDA)  
International Association of Hydrogeologists (IAH)  
International Association of Hydrological Sciences (IAHS)  
International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID)  
International Groundwater Centre (IGRAC)  
International Hydropower Association (IHA)  
International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA)  
International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)  
International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)  
International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC)  
International Water Association (IWA)  
International Water Management Institute (IWMI)  
International Water Resources Association (IWRA)  
Mandate of the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Disaster Risk Reduction and Water\*  
Mandate of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation\*  
Public Services International (PSI)  
Ramsar Convention  
Sanitation and Water for All\*  
Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future  
Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI)  
United Nations Global Compact\*  
United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)  
Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC)\*  
Water.org  
WaterAid  
WaterLex  
Women for Water Partnership (WfWP)  
World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)  
World Council of Civil Engineers (WCCE)  
World Resources Institute (WRI)  
World Water Council (WWC)  
World Wildlife Fund (WWF)  
World Youth Parliament for Water (WYPW)

\* Partner with Special Status