

UN 2023 Water Conference Highlights: Wednesday, 22 March 2023

The UN 2023 Water Conference started on World Water Day, which is celebrated this year under the theme, “Accelerate Change.” Delegates met throughout the day in plenary and two interactive dialogues. General debate continued in plenary into the night. Statements focuses on among others accelerating implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene.

Opening Ceremony

The opening ceremony featured Tim Kliphuis performing the song: “Water,” followed by a short video. Young representatives created a ceremonial presentation to symbolize the importance of water in the world.

Opening Plenary

UN Secretary-General António Guterres opened the conference. Delegates elected two Presidents by acclamation: Willem-Alexander, King of the Netherlands, and Emomali Rahmon, President of Tajikistan, to serve as conference co-chairs.

President Rahmon proposed that the Third Dushanbe Water Decade Conference be held in 2028 to mark the end of the 2018-2028 International Decade for Action.

King Willem-Alexander said that rarely has a UN conference made “such a splash” and stressed that water is a common denominator in health, food safety, the economy, infrastructure and climate. He called water security one of the defining concerns of our time.

Guterres highlighted four key actions to accelerate the [Water Action Agenda](#): closing the water management gap; massively investing in water and sanitation systems; focusing on water resilience; and addressing climate change.

Csaba Kőrösi, UN General Assembly President, called for making water a global common good and reflected that we “share water in space and time.” He recalled that this is not a meeting to negotiate positions, but to debate pragmatic solutions in solidarity that “will flow into” the Water Action Agenda.

Lachezara Stoevam, President of Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC), focused on: including marginalized groups; empowering women and girls; listening to youth; embedding water knowledge in every aspect of education; integrating water in all decision-making; and increasing advocacy for water.

Li Junhua, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary General of the Conference, called for accelerating the objectives of the [Water Action Decade](#), stressing the need to think how we value water to allow for sustainable development and peace.

Organizational Matters

Delegates adopted the conference’s rules of procedure (A/CONF.240/2023/2), agenda (A/CONF.240/2023/1) and organization of work (A/CONF.240/2023/3/Rev.1), agreeing to extend plenary sessions to 9:00 pm to accommodate all statements. Delegates elected as Vice-Presidents: Burundi, Egypt, and Ethiopia for Africa; Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia for Asia and the Pacific; Romania and Russian Federation for Central and Eastern Europe; Belize, Colombia and Chile for Latin America and Caribbean; and Denmark and Iceland for the Western European and Others Group. They elected Catalina

Velasco (Colombia) as the conference’s Rapporteur General. The conference appointed co-chairs for the five Interactive Dialogues to be held throughout the week.

General Debate

Luis Alberto Arce, President of Bolivia, urged shifting the current economic and development patterns towards a focus on the production and reproduction of life. He highlighted Bolivia’s Constitution, which recognizes water as a fundamental right of life.

Abdul Latif Rashid, President of Iraq, reported his country’s commitment to invest in water research, rehabilitation of water infrastructure, including modernization of irrigation, and construction and maintenance of dams and reservoirs.

Željka Cvijanović, Chair of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, called for partnerships and investment in modernization of water systems for delivering sustainable development.

Mokgweetsi Masisi, President of Botswana, committed to improving water resource infrastructure, including investment in “smart water” approaches and technology, promotion of reuse, and protection of forests, wetlands, rivers and lakes.

Nataša Pirc Musar, President of Slovenia, called for selection of a UN Special Envoy for Water, and for regular high-level UN meetings on water for stocktaking and to catalyze action. She committed to actions to improve: gender equality in water governance; management of water ecosystems; and flood forecasting.

Musa Al-Koni, Vice President of Libya’s Presidential Council, emphasized that desalinization of seawater is the only solution for arid areas, reporting plans for a joint committee for management of transboundary water resources.

Muhammad B.S. Jallow, Vice President, The Gambia, announced the establishment of the National Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme Committee in 2020 and several policies to strengthen water supply and sanitation.

Kausea Natano, Prime Minister of Tuvalu, on behalf of Pacific Small Island Developing States, stressed that water is needed for the full enjoyment of human rights and highlighted regional challenges including inadequate infrastructure, water contamination and natural disasters.

Saara Kuugongelwa, Prime Minister of Namibia, noted that equitable water access requires more investment and sharing of technological expertise, and highlighted improved access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) policies.

Inés María Chapman Waugh, Deputy Prime Minister of Cuba, highlighted policies to advance rights to water and sanitation, outlining water infrastructure development since 1959 and cooperation with countries in the African and Latin American regions.

Tran Hong Ha, Deputy Prime Minister of Viet Nam, highlighted policies for river basins management, and a vision to improve access to clean running water by all households by 2030.

Santia J. O. Bradshaw, Deputy Prime Minister of Barbados, reported several water management actions, including: a water supply network; desalination of 23% of water supply; reduction in the level of non-revenue water; upgrades in existing municipal waste treatment plants for use in irrigation; the [Roofs To Reefs](#) programme; and the preparation of a new water management plan.

Dubravka Šuica, Vice President of the European Commission, urged promotion of water as a common good and mobilization of the [SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework](#).

In the afternoon, several parties introduced national plans, policies and priorities to advance sustainability of water and equitable water services. Several shared proposals to advance global ambition and propel action towards achieving SDG 6. PARAGUAY, on behalf of the La Plata River Basin, called for increased cooperation and solidarity among shared water basins. GUYANA called for cooperative water information systems to promote evidence-based decision making. GERMANY, LUXEMBOURG and many others proposed regular conferences on water at the highest level and a UN Special Envoy for Water. AUSTRIA called for investments in awareness raising, innovation, and early warning systems.

The US announced a commitment of up to USD 49 billion in investments to support climate-resilient water and sanitation infrastructure and services. She also announced USAID's plan to allocate USD 700 million to support 22 countries under its Global Water Strategy. CAMBODIA reaffirmed a commitment to support water resource management by continuing the promotion of responsible social and green development, as well as efficient and sustainable use and management of water resources.

Interactive Dialogues

Water for Health: This dialogue, informed by a [concept paper](#) (A/CONF.240/2023/4), was co-chaired by Miguel Ceara Hatton, Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, Dominican Republic, and Zac Goldsmith, Minister for Overseas Territories, Commonwealth, Energy, Climate and Environment, UK. Goldsmith announced a new initiative focused on WASH systems for health, with GBP 18.5 million in funding.

Moderating the event, Catherine Russell, UNICEF Executive Director, emphasized WASH as a human right. She reported devastating impacts of lack of WASH services, including 700 young children dying daily from diarrheal disease.

Abida Sidik Mia, Minister, Water and Sanitation, Malawi, urged more support for her country's WASH infrastructure efforts and the need for broad partnerships and mutual accountability.

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, acknowledged the WASH needs of 103 million displaced people, appealing for increased WASH focus during humanitarian crises.

Vikas Sheel, Department of Drinking Water & Sanitation, Ministry of Jalshakti, India, spoke about investment, including becoming "open-defecation free" and expanding WASH access to tens of millions more dwellings.

Jagan Chapagain, Secretary-General, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, endorsed scaling-up practical actions and partnerships, including Water at the Heart of Climate Action.

Boluwatito Awe, Nigerian Youth Parliament for Water, reflected on the ambition articulated, with the challenge to further engage young people in advancing the Water Action Agenda.

Maria Neira, World Health Organization (WHO), encouraged increased WASH investment, inviting member states to an interactive dialogue.

Andrea Carmen, International Indian Treaty Council, highlighted Indigenous Peoples' "sacred responsibilities" to protect water resources, highlighting that "water is life."

Eva Muhia, African Sanitation Actors, underscored the role of the private sector in creating WASH infrastructure.

Laura Chinchilla, former President of Costa Rica and Global Leader of Sanitation and Water for All, said the needs of the most marginalized, including women and children, must be addressed, and welcomed support and financial commitments from the Global North.

During the ensuing discussion, delegates emphasized: partnerships, including with the private sector; gender, including leadership roles for women and girls, as well as menstrual health; vulnerable groups, including migrants and people with disabilities; climate change; WASH investment shortfalls and needs; clear public policy; rural and urban challenges; and the needs of refugees.

Water for Sustainable Development: This dialogue, informed by a [concept paper](#) (A/CONF.240/2023/5), was co-chaired by Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for

Democracy and Demography, and Li Guoying, Minister of Water Resources, China.

Moderating the event, Myrna Cunningham, Indigenous Peoples Major Group on Sustainable Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, emphasized water as relevant to all the SDGs.

Abdul Momen, Foreign Minister, Bangladesh, highlighted sustainable water management policies such as floating agriculture, afforestation, and water as an enabler of renewable energy, urging stocktaking of the agreed means of implementation for the 2030 Agenda.

Discussing the role of universities and research institutions in the water-food-energy nexus, Tālis Juhna, Riga Technical University, said solutions require technology incubation centers, improved data mining, and multidisciplinary research approaches.

Dinara Ziganshina, Scientific Information Research Center of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination in Central Asia, highlighted challenges identified by regional stakeholders and called for practical tools and instruments, sharing best practice and building on local knowledge.

Yong-deok Cho, Secretary-General, Asia Water Council, said a multi-stakeholder platform allows engagement in data mining, and development of innovative solutions to tackle a variety of water-related challenges.

Nizar Baraka, Minister of Equipment and Water, Morocco, shared best practices focused on creating agencies in charge of integrated water management, desalination of water using 100% renewable energy, and green fertilizers. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), spoke about effective urban and territorial planning to limit the footprint that cities have on water quality and quantity. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General, World Trade Organization, underscored the need to involve trade sectors in decisions on the rational use of water.

Abou Amani, Secretary of the Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme, UNESCO, called for a new water culture through education and a dedicated science-policy panel for water.

In the ensuing discussion, delegates noted, *inter alia*, the need to pivot the role of water in food systems; striving for higher ambition for global cooperation with education and research institutions; the impacts that transforming to a low-carbon society can have in exacerbating competition for natural resources; and the effects of the war in Ukraine on resources available in other regions, as well as damage to water-relevant infrastructure.

In his closing remarks, Co-Chair Li Guoying said achieving sustainable development will positively impact people's wellbeing and the future of the world. He said China supports international cooperation on water resources governance for a stronger, greener and healthier global development.

In the Corridors

The UN 2023 Water Conference opened with energy and optimism for a true watershed moment. Participants of the first high-level conference organized by the UN General Assembly on water since 1977 began with a clear diagnosis of the situation: progress has fallen severely short in achieving SDG 6 for universal access to WASH and "actions that work, exist, but must be taken to scale."

The approach of galvanizing political will by registering voluntary commitments began with somewhat of a trickle, with few Member States making decisive new pledges. With the General Debate planned to go on until 9:00 pm, one participant called this first wave "profoundly disappointing" and whispers in the balconies queried if delegations would address the need for further actions and financing. As the day ended, participants remained hopeful further pledges would surface and be incorporated into policy agendas. However, reconciling ambition and vision with the actual "how" of implementation remains a core question.

Delegates have tested the waters on this first day. Will they float towards usual comfortable positions or steer towards the difficult demands of youth, the wisdom of Indigenous Peoples, and the need to empower women and protect natural ecosystems?