

Summary of the UN 2023 Water Conference: 22-24 March 2023

Forty-six years after the last major UN water conference, the international community convened a historic meeting in New York tasked with advancing efforts to provide safe water and sanitation for humanity. By the end of the three-day conference, significant progress had been made, with agreement to establish a UN Special Envoy for Water, renewed political momentum, and approximately 700 voluntary commitments and pledges from many stakeholders.

In 1977, the first UN Conference on Water, held in Mar del Plata, Argentina, marked the first global attempt to address the world's water problems in order to avoid a crisis by the turn of the century. The situation was dire, and the meeting concluded that water stress was a serious and growing problem threatening a wide range of socio-economic activities such as agriculture, navigation, and fisheries, necessary for human well-being. Not only that, but it also puts biodiversity and ecosystems at risk. The meeting outcome, the Mar del Plata Action Plan, set out decisions to assess water resources, research and develop technologies, address the role of water in combating desertification, engage in technical cooperation, set-up institutional arrangements for international cooperation in the water sector, and build financing arrangements for international cooperation in the water sector.

Today, the situation remains fraught. Despite progress in some areas, the 2023 UN World Water Development Report presents daunting statistics of the global water crisis: 26% of the world's population, approximately two billion people, do not have access to safe drinking water, and 3.6 billion lack access to safe sanitation services. Water scarcity in urban areas is expected to worsen as projections show that projected doubling from 930 million in 2016 to between 1.7 and 2.4 billion people, in 2050.

These and other disconcerting facts set the scene for the UN 2023 Water Conference. The clear message from the onset was that “we are not on track to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on water and sanitation for all.” Furthermore, the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution has resulted in large-scale displacement of populations. This implies that a business-as-usual approach to management of global water resources simply will not work. These concerns were at the top of the agenda at the conference, with delegates sharing national and regional plans, policies aimed at sound management of water resources, and fears for the future. The urgency for immediate action was palpable as UN Member States presented daunting scenarios faced by their citizens due to extreme drought, floods, polluted water, cross-border conflicts, among other challenges.

The review of progress involved high-level meetings facilitated by the hosts of the 2023 Conference, Tajikistan and the Netherlands. These meetings provided a pathway for global dialogue for necessary actions, partnerships, and policy dialogues, and promoted interlinkages with and contributions to other relevant water-related processes.

The focus on the 2023 Conference was the Water Action Agenda, which is composed of voluntary commitments from UN Member States and stakeholders. These pledges address a broad set of themes aimed at creating partnerships and cooperation towards shared urgent, immediate, and accelerated action, and to establish a strong international mechanism to prevent the global water crisis from spiraling out of control. The Conference proceeded through general debate sessions held in plenary and five interactive dialogues designed to be solution driven: water for health; water for sustainable development; water for climate; water for cooperation; and the Water Action Decade.

As the meeting advanced towards the closing plenary on Friday, there remained a sense of determination to achieve tangible outcomes that demonstrate the universal commitment to achieving water security and provide a road map towards a water secure future. The meeting outcomes reflected, among others:

- the need to consider water as global common good and radically change the world's value for water, and thus how we manage water;

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- the water-food-energy nexus approach as a means to achieve sustainable and just development, catalyze ecosystem and water health, and mitigate risk;
- innovative finance, including public-private partnerships, as a requirement for successful implementation of water-related goals and targets; and
- the need for water-related actions to include a human rights-based approach.

During the closing plenary, in response to frequent calls by Member States to elevate water on the UN agenda, came the announcement that a Special UN Envoy for Water would be appointed by the UN Secretary-General.

The UN 2023 Water Conference, formally referred to as the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the 2018-2028 International Decade for Action, convened from 22-24 March 2023 at UN Headquarters in New York. The event brought together over 6,500 participants. By the close of the meeting, the Water Action Agenda had received approximately 700 commitments in the form of financial pledges, collaborative projects, and actions to protect the world's most precious and irreplaceable resource.

A Brief History of the UN 2023 Water Conference

The UN has long been addressing the global crisis caused by insufficient and unsafe water supplies, as well as increasing demands on the world's water resources to meet human, commercial and agricultural needs.

Mar del Plata Water Conference: In 1977, the first UN Conference on Water was held in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Its goals were to assess the status of water resources; ensure that an adequate supply of quality water was available to meet the planet's socio-economic needs; increase water use efficiency; and promote preparedness, nationally and internationally, so as to avoid a water crisis of global dimensions before the end of twentieth century. The conference approved the [Mar del Plata Action Plan](#), which was the first internationally coordinated approach to international water resources management.

Agenda 21: At the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, governments adopted [Agenda 21](#), a plan of action for the implementation of sustainable development on the eve of the twenty-first century. Chapter 18 of Agenda 21 focused on the "protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources: application of integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources."

World Water Day: Agenda 21 called on the UN General Assembly to consider the establishment of a World Water Day. The General Assembly adopted resolution [47/193](#) in 1992, designating 22 March as World Water Day.

UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention): The Water Convention was originally negotiated as a regional framework for the pan-European region. It was adopted in Helsinki in 1992 and entered into force in 1996. As a result of an amendment, since March 2016 all UN Member States can accede to it. The Water Convention requires parties to prevent, control, and reduce transboundary impact, use transboundary waters in a reasonable and equitable way, and ensure their sustainable management.

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 Inter-secretariat 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 operates with a small technical advisory unit, guided by a Joint Steering Group.

"Water for Life" International Decade for Action: From 2005-2015, UN-Water coordinated the "Water for Life" International Decade for Action, culminating in the Sanitation Drive to 2015, a campaign to meet the Millennium Development Goals' sanitation target and end open defecation.

Human right to safe drinking water and sanitation: On 28 July 2010, through resolution [64/292](#), the UN General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights.

Sanitation for All: World Toilet Day: In 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution [67/291](#), Sanitation for All. It designated 19 November as World Toilet Day to contribute to better awareness and concerted actions on different aspects of the critical issue of sanitation for all.

Sustainable Development Goals: In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs. SDG 6—"Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all"—contains the following targets:

- 6.1 By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all
- 6.2 By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations
- 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 substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally
- 6.4 By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity
- 6.5 By 2030, implement Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) 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.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.B Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management

Water Action Decade: In December 2017, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution [71/222](#) on an International Decade for Action on "Water for Sustainable Development" 2018-2028. The Water Action Decade is supposed to accelerate efforts towards achieving the 2030 Agenda and advance the sustainable

development and integrated management of water resources for the achievement of social, economic, and environmental objectives through cooperation and partnership at all levels.

UN General Assembly Resolution 73/226: In 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution [73/226](#), where it agreed to convene in New York, from 22 to 24 March 2023, the United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development,” 2018-2028, known as the UN Water Conference.

UN 2023 Water Conference Report

On Wednesday morning, 22 March, the opening ceremony of the 2023 Water Conference featured Tim Kliphuis performing the song: “Water,” followed by a short scene-setting video on water security. Youth representatives made a ceremonial presentation to symbolize the importance of water in the world.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres opened the conference highlighting 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.

Delegates elected Willem-Alexander, King of the Netherlands, and Emomali Rahmon, President of Tajikistan, to serve as conference Co-Presidents, as well as two ex-officio Vice-Presidents from both countries.

In opening remarks, President Rahmon proposed that the Third Dushanbe Water Decade Conference be held in 2024 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.

Csaba Kőrösi, President of the UN General Assembly, 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 UN Economic and Social Council (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 the 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

On Wednesday, 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](#)). Delegates elected as Vice-Presidents: Burundi, Egypt, and Ethiopia for Africa; Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia for Asia and the Pacific; Romania and the 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.

Credentials: On Wednesday, the conference established a credentials committee and appointed co-chairs for the five Interactive Dialogues to be held throughout the week. On Friday during the closing plenary, they adopted the report of the credentials committee (A/CONF.240/2023/9).

General Debate

The general debate was held on [22](#), [23](#) and 24 March 2023, with statements from over 190 governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders. Evelyn Wever-Croes, Prime Minister of Aruba, acting as ex-officio president, moderated the general debate. Speakers shared information on their plans, policies, priorities, commitments, and ideas to advance sustainability and fairness with respect to water resources and services.

Many topics were discussed, including pledges and commitments, innovative policies, infrastructure investments, challenges, holistic approaches, partnerships, data, vulnerable groups, migration, and the UN’s future role.

Several Member States announced their commitments to the **Water Action Agenda**, including:

- AUSTRALIA announced commitments, including increasing Aboriginal entitlements to water and investing USD 150 million in water infrastructure for safe and reliable access for such communities;
- BOTSWANA reported undertaking improvement of water resource infrastructure for sustainable water supply, investment in smart water approaches and technology, promotion of reuse and protection of forests, wetlands, rivers and lakes;
- DENMARK noted its commitment to provide more than USD 400 million to enhance transboundary water management and development in Africa;
- ECUADOR shared a USD 65 million national plan for irrigation and the establishment of 21 water conservation areas;
- INDIA announced investments, including USD 50 billion to provide safe and adequate drinking water to all rural Indian households before 2030;
- JAMAICA announced that it was joining the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Coalition for Nature;
- KENYA shared plans to build 100 mega, large and medium dams in the next five years;
- SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS shared several commitments, including transitioning to 100% renewable energy by 2030;
- SLOVENIA stated it would accelerate actions for gender-equal water governance, management of water ecosystems, and upgrading of flood forecasting;
- the UK announced a new initiative focused on access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems for health, with GBP 18.5 million in funding;
- the US reported it will invest up to USD 49 billion for climate-resilient water and sanitation infrastructure and services, and allocate USD 700 million to support 22 countries under its Global Water Strategy; and
- VIET NAM pledged to develop policies for major river basins management by 2025 and indicated that by 2030 all households will have access to clean running water.

In other **commitments**, the FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) committed to organizing a multi-stakeholder Global Dialogue on Water Tenure to address water allocation under scenarios of diminishing freshwater resources due to climate change. The WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION (WMO) stated it will spearhead an initiative to

ensure every person on Earth is protected by early warning systems within five years. BAYER committing to 25% reduction of water in rice production by 2030 by transforming rice growing methods.

Regarding **policy innovations**, OMAN, on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), asserted that GCC States have achieved 100% of SDG 6, mentioning several initiatives in sustainable water management. RWANDA informed delegates of studies for a collective management framework for transboundary water with neighboring countries. KIRIBATI noted its whole-of-government approach for rainwater catchment projects, desalination systems to bolster climate adaptation, and a WASH awareness programme. LATVIA said river basin management plans are useful and practical examples of linkages between SDGs 6 and 14 (life below water).

COSTA RICA called for water to be recognized as a global public good, improved tools for hydrological and meteorological information, and generation of public-private alliances, especially to provide WASH for small communities. MYANMAR mentioned community-driven development projects and pledged to provide safe drinking water to their entire population. NICARAGUA reported drinking water coverage will reach 100% this year, as well as achieving 66% of sewerage coverage. IRELAND emphasized efforts to ensure the human right to safe drinking water. IRAN mentioned policies for improving water governance, data and information gathering, capacity building, and innovation. VENEZUELA called for an end to the system of unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and stated its recognition of water as a human right.

With respect to **infrastructure**, many countries outlined dam building and others spoke about desalination. SIERRA LEONE outlined plans to build three new dams in the next five years, as well as plans for other projects, including for the protection of water catchment areas. ALGERIA reported plans to build dams and water sources in rural areas, create wells for agricultural use, and construct water treatment plants. The BAHAMAS said technological innovations needed funding and said we should view water as a public good rather than a commodity.

PERU highlighted the importance of wastewater treatment. NAURU spoke about its Higher Ground Initiative moving communities away from vulnerable low-lying coastal areas and its work on rainwater harvesting systems. LIBERIA reported launching several projects for WASH services for their entire population. IRAN mentioned a rural water network that can serve people by 2030, and that 99% of their cities have drinking water. MAURITIUS shared multi-prong strategy measures to enable access to water and sanitation, such as afforestation programmes, to increase possibility of rainfall and to strengthen resilience to natural disasters.

In terms of **challenges**, many countries highlighted the climate emergency, including extreme events like cyclones, storms, and droughts, as well as sea-level rise. Cuba, on behalf of the GROUP OF 77 and CHINA, noted concerns about lack of access to drinking water, water scarcity, pollution, and lack of capacity for IWRM. ALGERIA said the increase in water stress raises the cost of safe water. RWANDA said gaps in WASH services require a significant investment to meet SDG 6.

KIRIBATI stated that addressing climate change and water management simultaneously creates enormous challenges. BELIZE said the challenges had been exacerbated by droughts and growing water demands, supporting calls for modern technology for data gathering. SEYCHELLES said climate change compounded countries' vulnerabilities and urged "accelerated action."

NICARAGUA underlined the effects of "illegal and interventionist" policies from governments that have an impact on the enjoyment of the human right to safe water for their people. VENEZUELA noted the negative impacts in storage, sanitation, and distribution of drinking water by the "criminal" and "illegal" blockade by the US and their allies, which is impacting the full realization of human rights of their people.

On a **holistic approach**, many Member States recognized the intersectionality of water. CYPRUS urged inclusive water governance, a strong focus on human rights, a system-wide approach, and links to security, climate change, and biodiversity loss. TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO said, "We must deepen our understanding of the synergies between water and sustainable development, climate change and biodiversity." LIECHTENSTEIN welcomed the recent success of talks on marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, which he said provides a "beacon of hope" for multilateralism. IRELAND stated that managing and protecting ecosystems requires integrated and dedicated actions, such as an energy, food, and ecosystem approach.

Several countries indicated the value of **partnerships and collaboration** to work across sectors as well as regionally. PAPUA NEW GUINEA drew attention to a WASH project involving the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the European Union and the UN Office for Project Services that had supported 40,000 people. PERU highlighted South-South and triangular cooperation.

On **data**, Member States made clear there is a need to improve the collection, analysis and sharing of global water data. JORDAN urged data gathering to improve decision making, including working with government departments, academia, and the private sector.

On **vulnerable groups**, many countries highlighted the needs of rural communities, Indigenous Peoples, women, and youth. NEW ZEALAND highlighted the value of traditional knowledge and concepts of guardianship and protection. She also noted the impacts of storms, cyclones, and serious droughts across the Pacific on regional water security. NAURU noted the special needs of SIDS. TIMOR LESTE highlighted the "rural-urban divide" and needs of rural communities.

Regarding **migration**, several countries spoke about the stresses on WASH systems due to refugees and large-scale displacement. HUNGARY committed to sharing its water technologies with others because it wants to restrict migration. He claimed migration is a "dangerous phenomenon" and asserted that migrants can be "irresponsible" and "behave badly."

On the **UN's role**, dozens of speakers strongly supported the appointment of a special envoy for water. Some added that this meeting was long overdue and proposed an ongoing process within the UN focused squarely on water and sanitation. Advocates for such a process pointed out that there was a "gap" in the UN system and suggested that an "inter-COP" process be used to integrate the water-related agenda into ongoing interrelated processes such as biodiversity and climate change. The CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (RAMSAR CONVENTION) underscored the intersectionality of water with biodiversity, climate change and food. The UN INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION (UNIDO) shared a vision that industry could be harnessed to provide solutions through circular economic approaches.

The YOUTH CLIMATE MOVEMENT "presented a voice" from the year 2050 looking back at the UN 2023 Water Conference. The voice issued a wakeup call and beseeched delegates to embrace and not fight the water agenda.

A representative from GIRL RISING explained the plight of her village in Uganda that has been devastated by impacts of floods, highlighting the negative impacts of water-related climate change, exposing girls to early marriage. She urged climate justice and conservation of water resources.

Interactive Dialogues

Five Interactive Dialogues were held in parallel to plenary.

Water for health: This dialogue was held on Wednesday morning, 22 March, informed by a concept paper ([A/CONF.240/2023/4](#)), and 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. Co-Chair Goldsmith announced a new initiative focused on WASH systems for health, with GBP 18.5 million in funding. During discussions, 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.

A summary of the discussions is available at: enb.iisd.org/un-2023-water-conference-daily-report-22mar2023

Water for sustainable development: This dialogue was held on Wednesday afternoon, 22 March, informed by a concept paper ([A/CONF.240/2023/5](#)), and was co-chaired by Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, and Li Guoying, Minister of Water Resources, China. Co-Chair Li said achieving sustainable development will positively impact people's wellbeing and the future of the world. During discussions, 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.

A summary of the discussions is available at: enb.iisd.org/un-2023-water-conference-daily-report-22mar2023

Water for climate, resilience and environment: This dialogue was held on Thursday morning, 23 March, informed by a concept paper ([A/CONF.240/2023/6](#)), and was co-chaired by Hani Sewilam, Egypt's Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation, and Yoko Kamikawa, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of Japan. Moderator David Cooper, Acting Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), drew attention to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), which seeks to provide a roadmap to halt biodiversity loss and put nature on a path of recovery by 2030. During discussions, delegates highlighted various policy issues and ideas for how the UN system might address water issues in the future.

A summary of the discussions is available at: enb.iisd.org/un-2023-water-conference-daily-report-23mar2023

Water for cooperation: This dialogue was held on Thursday afternoon, 23 March, informed by a concept paper ([A/CONF.240/2023/7](#)), and co-chaired by Serigne Mbaye Thiam, Minister of Water and Sanitation, Senegal, and Christian Frutiger, State Secretary, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland. Co-Chair Thiam referred to the Transboundary Water Cooperation Coalition as an important signal of progress. In the first panel, Tran

Hong Ha, Deputy Prime Minister, Viet Nam, shared experiences from the legal framework in the Mekong River basin that delivers environmental benefits and protects livelihoods and lives. In the second panel, Hasan Nasir Jamy, Federal Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources of Pakistan, presented successful transboundary cooperation, highlighting national policies to ensure IWRM.

A summary of the discussions is available at: enb.iisd.org/un-2023-water-conference-daily-report-23mar2023

Water Action Decade: This dialogue on Friday morning, 24 March, informed by a concept paper ([A/CONF.240/2023/8](#)), was co-chaired by Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Senior Minister, Social Policies, Singapore, and Monica Medina, Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, US.

Co-Chair Shanmugaratnam framed discussions, calling for new institutional arrangements that recognize science and Indigenous Knowledge to value water, accelerating and mobilizing joint actions. Co-Chair Medina highlighted finance and governance as key areas for acceleration.

Moderator Qu Dongyu, Director-General, FAO opened the panel discussions and underscored the interlinkages of water across all production systems, sharing support for country-led and country-owned solutions. Tanja Fajon, Deputy Prime Minister, Slovenia, explained that quadrupling efforts to meet SDG 6 targets requires enhanced mainstreaming of water and political advocacy, and cross-sectoral approaches.

Basuki Hadimuljono, Minister of Public Works and Public Housing, Indonesia, said the Water Action Decade should focus on partnerships and financial strategies to support sustainable development and IWRM, noting the need for commitments in managing lakes, peatland restoration, and transboundary water resources.

Zulfiya Suleimenova, Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources, Kazakhstan, reported that seven out of eight water basins in her country are transboundary, adding that ensuring joint utilization should follow the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization. She urged countries that have not done so to ratify the Water Convention.

Usha Rao-Monari, Under-Secretary-General and Associate Administrator, UN Development Programme (UNDP), urged a focus on partnerships to ensure water quality and security. She cited the example of the 2030 Water Resources Group, which is a partnership of civil society and private and public sectors aimed at driving change and advancement in leadership of institutions. She further called for democratization of water data, a focus on water resilience, and the conservation of ecosystems.

Water scarcity activist Mina Guli, Founder and CEO of the Thirst Foundation, narrated her experience in running 200 marathons in a year to raise awareness. She reported encountering, *inter alia*: charred forests in the Amazon, signs of water overuse in Turkey, low water levels in Europe's Rhine River, and persistent drought in California. She called for concrete and immediate action, but also commitment to actions tomorrow.

Sivan Ya'ari, Founder and CEO of Innovation: Africa, reported on projects that pump water using solar energy in Africa, which have impacted 900 villages and 4 million people. She urged African countries to waive value added tax and subsidize the costs of well drilling in order to reduce costs.

Torgny Holmgren, Executive Director, Stockholm International Water Institute, recalling the Turning the Tide report, linked global

goals to local actions and a need for a polycentric governance to encourage leadership and accountability of all.

During the ensuing discussion, some Member States applauded the commitment by UKRAINE to continue progress on sustainable management of water, despite Russian occupation.

On the Water Action Decade, KENYA reported they are on track to implement SDG 6 through implementation of policies and management of water resources. GERMANY and others called for increased coherence throughout the UN system to coordinate actions for water, particularly in updating the mandate of UN-Water and convening regular water conferences.

On the future of the UN Water Conference, several parties expressed support for naming a UN special envoy for water, with GERMANY, SWITZERLAND and FRANCE pledging financial support for the role. They also called for regular high-level intergovernmental meetings on water with a mandate to galvanize support for water in the UN system.

The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework was cited as a means for systematic and integrated approach to water from all sectors. The SDG Summit was flagged as the vehicle to promote interlinkages between SDGs, freshwater and marine water, and the full hydrological cycle.

On implementing voluntary commitments made for the Water Action Agenda, TAJIKISTAN indicated that the Dushanbe Water Process provides a mechanism, underscoring the need for increased financial resources to advance technology and innovation at all levels, including information and communication efforts. XYLEM shared commitments, with 16 other private sector companies, to invest more than USD 11 billion in innovation over five years, including engagement with youth.

Delegates highlighted the need to ensure inclusivity of vulnerable persons, including women and girls, Indigenous Peoples and those living with a disability. Co-Chair Shanmugaratnam summarized discussions, including:

- consensus on the appointment of a UN special envoy for water and the convening of the next water conference in 2026;
- calls to develop a task force guided by the envoy to follow up on proposals from interactive dialogues;
- support for multi-stakeholder coalitions to empower local solutions; and
- the need for a mechanism to collect, assemble, analyze, and share water data.

Co-Chair Medina echoed the need for inclusivity and emphasized a call to the UN Secretary-General to develop a plan of water action to continue progress.

Reports from Interactive Dialogues

During the closing plenary on Friday, the Co-Chairs of the interactive dialogues presented reports summarizing key messages from the meeting.

Co-Chair Goldsmith summarized the **Water for Health** Interactive Dialogue, noting commitments for funding and institutional change; recognition of water and sanitation as human rights; and emphasis on the rights of vulnerable people, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities and refugees. He highlighted the call to reinforce political leadership and smart financing, particularly in people and institutions, to inspire a capable WASH workforce. He also reflected on the critical role of data and evidence for good decision making and accountability, innovation, and experimentation.

Co-Chair Šuica summarized the **Water for Sustainable Development** Interactive Dialogue, noting key objectives including: IWRM; resource efficiency and reuse as the new normal among all economic sectors; water smart investments, including appropriate water pricing to safeguard resources and redirection of harmful subsidies; protection of healthy ecosystems; and nature-based solutions, especially in urban planning.

Co-Chairs Sewilam and Kamikawa presented an overview of **Water for Climate, Resilience and Environment** Interactive Dialogue. Sewilam noted, *inter alia*, that the global water scarcity challenge is compounded by negative consequences of climate change, requiring a decoupling of water consumption with economic development. He also reflected a call to mainstream IWRM policies and develop a global water information system. Kamikawa reflected calls to develop early warning systems, accounting systems, and symbolic dates to help raise awareness, as well as continued integration of science and technology in decision making.

Co-Chair Thiam highlighted the outcomes of the **Water for Cooperation** Interactive Dialogue, reporting that transboundary water cooperation is a driver of peace, security, sustainable development, regional integration, and climate action. He underscored the value of legal and institutional measures, strong river basin and aquifer organizations, scientific cooperation and IWRM. He highlighted commitments made, including the Coalition for Cooperation for Transboundary Waters and the representation of youth in water decision making bodies by 2030. He shared recommendations to strengthen transboundary cooperation and basin organizations for integrated and inclusive management, as well as to increase financing.

Co-Chair Shanmugaratnam shared outcomes of the **Water Action Decade** Interactive Dialogue. He stated that the water crisis manifests locally yet must be addressed globally in that the global water cycle must be treated as a global common good. He outlined recommendations, *inter alia*: the appointment of a UN special envoy for water supported by a time-bound task force; the empowerment of UN-Water; establishment of a data collection mechanism to support national and global policy; broader mobilization of capital; support for joint actions in multi-stakeholder coalitions; and the convening of regular global meetings to sustain momentum and ensure accountability of progress, including a third water conference before 2028.

Closing Plenary

On Friday afternoon, during the closing plenary, ex officio Conference President Evelyn Wever-Croes highlighted crucial messages from the conference, including the need to consider water as a global common good and radically change the world's value for water, and thus how we manage water. She reported support for a nexus approach for sustainable and just development, adding that this is a catalyst for health instead of a risk. She reported that the meeting has identified the need for innovative finance, including public-private partnerships, and the importance of establishing a human rights-based approach. Wever-Croes announced that a Special UN Envoy on Water would be appointed by the UN Secretary-General, and that this meeting will have an inclusive follow up, including at three upcoming summits: the 2023 SDG Summit, the 2024 Summit of the Future, and the 2025 World Social Summit, as well as at the Conferences of the Parties of all relevant UN processes.

Delegates then adopted the report (A/CONF.240/2023/L.1) of the conference.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared that the Conference has demonstrated the central truth that water unites us all and needs to be at the center of the global political agenda.

Csaba Kőrösi, President of the UN General Assembly, reiterated that the global water cycle is a common good that transcends culture and borders. He commended everyone on their determination to unite for shared responsibilities, reporting that pledges made during the UN 2023 Water Conference amount to USD 300 billion.

Gilbert Hounbo, Chair of UN-Water, said the conference demonstrated the importance of cooperation across sectors, stakeholders, and borders. He also said it has affirmed the fundamental role of water as a human right and sanitation as a guiding light, adding that we all have a role in securing the change we want to see.

Following a ceremonial handing over of messages from the Conference to UN Secretary-General Guterres, Conference Co-President Emomali Rahmon gaveled the UN 2023 Water Conference to a close at 5:32 pm.

A Brief Analysis of the UN 2023 Water Conference

Forty-six years is a long time. When the last major UN water conference convened in 1977, the world was a very different place. Words like “email,” “smartphone,” “Google,” and “Facebook” would have been greeted with bemused shakes of the head. “Amazon” was simply a stunning river. The climate and biodiversity crises had barely begun to register in the public consciousness.

Over time, much has also changed in the water and sanitation world. In the 1970s, the situation was dire: less than 40% of the global population had access to safe drinking water. Almost 50% of people lived in extreme poverty. Half-a-century later, participants attending the UN 2023 Water Conference could look back with some satisfaction on decades of progress. Today, three-quarters of the world’s population have access to safely-managed drinking water and billions have lifted themselves out of poverty. Progress on sanitation may have been less stunning, with 55% of people now having safe sanitation. Still, significant advances have been made. What’s more, in 2010 the UN General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to clean drinking water and sanitation.

Those expecting the UN 2023 Water Conference to be a celebration would have been disappointed, however. Delegates arriving at UN Headquarters in New York were hardly in a festive mood. All clearly believed that serious work remains amid fears that previous progress is now at risk.

What is putting earlier gains in jeopardy? Did the 2023 Conference help advance the water agenda? And what are the next steps? This brief analysis examines the current state of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) world, assesses the impact of this conference, and looks ahead.

Progress in Peril: Holes in the Bucket

While much progress has been made in the WASH world since the 1970s, the job is far from done. In fact, some of this progress conceals many shortcomings. By some estimates, two billion people still use unsafe drinking water sources. Sanitation is a bigger problem, with an estimated 3.6 billion people living without safely-managed sanitation. A staggering 80% of wastewater is still being released into the environment without being treated or reused.

Not only that, but the WASH world now faces other threats. The climate emergency is changing the hydrological cycle, bringing extreme weather in the form of storms, cyclones, and droughts. Wars and other conflicts are causing large-scale displacement, with an

estimated 103 million refugees worldwide putting further pressure on WASH infrastructure. Population growth in some parts of the Global South is only exacerbating water stress as demand is quickly outstripping supply, while the COVID-19 pandemic has stretched the budgets of both donors and recipients. Biodiversity loss also affects freshwater systems, including through degradation and loss of water towers in forests and mountain ecosystems. These multiple challenges demonstrate that global progress on water and sanitation still faces many threats.

Bridging Troubled Waters

In response to these threats, the international community has set various goals and targets for water and sanitation. A Water Action Decade was launched in 2018, while Sustainable Development Goal 6 set the objective of safe and sustainable water and sanitation for all by 2030.

However, the latest estimates suggest the international community needs to quadruple its efforts to achieve these goals. This is why so many delegates at the 2023 UN Water Conference believed this event was long-overdue. Put simply, they hoped it would catalyze progress and get the world on track to meet these commitments.

Did the conference achieve its aim? The success of the conference can be assessed in several ways: commitments and pledges; visibility and political momentum; new ideas; and partnerships.

Commitments: How Wide, How Deep? In the lead-up to the 2023 Conference, governments decided there would be no political declaration. Instead, voluntary commitments would be strongly encouraged from all stakeholders.

Together, these commitments—known collectively as the “Water Action Agenda”—represent a major outcome of the conference. This is not the first attempt to use such commitments to inspire progress, with the UN Ocean Conference among recent examples.

In the case of the UN 2023 Water Conference, by the time the meeting wrapped up on Friday, 24 March, over 700 pledges and commitments had been submitted by governments, non-profit organizations, the private sector, women’s groups, intergovernmental organizations, and many more. Such enthusiasm is welcomed. No one can accuse the global water community of failing to heed the call. Many pledges came from non-profit organizations, but governments, multilateral institutions, the private sector, and other stakeholders also submitted commitments.

But, what, collectively, do these pledges deliver? In an initial assessment of the 400 commitments made prior to the conference, the World Resources Institute (WRI) concluded that, while some offer “major inspiration,” most are not game changers. For a start, many are small-scale, and some appear underfunded, or lacking clear financing models. A majority do not contain quantifiable targets or metrics. Early on at the conference, there were calls for more robust, groundbreaking pledges during the meeting, with UK Minister Zac Goldsmith reflecting the general mood when he urged fellow leaders to “up our game.”

It was far from clear as the three-day conference closed that this had happened. On the positive side of the ledger, some significant pledges were made. For instance, the US said it will invest up to USD 49 billion for climate-resilient water and sanitation infrastructure and services, although much of that appears to be for domestic purposes. It did, however, clearly commit USD 700 million to support 22 countries under its Global Water Strategy. Australia, Denmark, the UK and others also made funding pledges to support

other countries, while Ecuador, Kenya, Viet Nam and dozens of others reported on plans to invest significant amounts domestically in infrastructure. India's decision to invest USD 50 billion to provide safe and adequate drinking water to all rural Indian households before 2030 was particularly noteworthy. In addition, the private sector made a commitment to invest in more than 2,700 water-smart products and services by 2028, claiming a financial impact in the billions of dollars.

During the closing plenary, delegates were informed that all of these commitments collectively amounted to USD 300 billion. However, some participants appeared skeptical about this number, or that pledges would move the needle sufficiently to achieve SDG 6. "There were too few genuinely new and measurable financial commitments," one delegate said, summing up the prevailing mood. Others wondered how such commitments are to be monitored and reported in future? How are people to be held accountable for their promises?

A Poisoned Chalice? Was the focus on voluntary commitments wise? In other words, should delegates have been asked to produce a political declaration as well? Some insiders certainly agreed. After all, voluntary commitments are not legally-binding. Some opined that such pledges without conditions for delivery may be conceived as empty promises. A declaration, they said, would have forced governments to take on a political commitment to advancing water goals. This would mean negotiating a consensus-based document, which can be difficult to achieve. However, they believed it was worth investing the time and effort.

Others offered a contrary view. A political declaration, they argued, would have meant there was more at stake for diplomats and more "vested interests" on the table. That would surely have changed the mood of the meeting. In the absence of this political element, delegates were able to engage in more substantive discussions in an open and constructive manner. The result was a positive framework that allowed delegates to discuss what might collectively be gained, rather than what individual governments might lose.

When it comes to water, this outlook is important. Many diplomats privately acknowledge that sovereignty issues are a concern when it comes to water, since there are many delicate and politically fraught transboundary matters at play. Some governments prefer not to create another forum that might be used to pursue boundary disputes with neighboring countries. In the absence of pressure for a political declaration, these tensions were notably absent. Some believed the positive tone of the meeting presented a model for how any future UN process on water might look.

Visibility and Momentum: A Steady Stream: Did the conference create the hoped-for visibility and momentum? The number of participants suggests a pent-up demand for these sorts of gatherings, with more than 6,500 delegates in attendance. There were also many comments—both in plenary sessions and the corridors—that this meeting was long overdue.

Furthermore, the level of participation suggests a high level of commitment: eight Heads of State or Government, six deputy heads, one monarch, and more than 100 ministers joined the meeting—a respectable turnout. And while there was not the sort of media scrum now associated with UN climate change meetings, there was significant interest, with many major media outlets providing detailed coverage.

Some participants pointed out that access to the plenary and interactive dialogues was restricted, especially for civil society. Those from the Global South also reported some difficulties in

obtaining visas and the prohibitive costs of attending an event in New York City. Overall, however, there was a sense that this meeting succeeded in bringing greater visibility and momentum for the water and sanitation sectors.

Brimming with New Ideas: An Overflowing Cup: Perhaps it was because there has not been a major UN water conference in so long, but the conference was brimming with new ideas. More than 190 statements were delivered in plenary, with governments and other stakeholders presenting a flood of news about their policies, innovations, concerns, and needs.

This was mirrored in the interactive dialogues, which addressed water in the context of sustainable development, health, climate change, cooperation, and the Water Action Decade. There was also an impressive number of side events—more than 200 in all—held on the margins of the official meetings.

In every setting, members of the international water community seemed engaged and enthusiastic, sharing new ideas on everything from desalinization technology to infrastructure resilience, public-private partnerships to big data and early warning systems and the circular economy to the key role of vulnerable groups such as Indigenous Peoples and women. The idea of water as a "nexus" issue linked with climate change, food, energy, biodiversity, and security was clear—and undisputed.

Raising a Glass to Partnerships: Another topic on which there was clear consensus was the importance of cooperation and partnerships. More than a dozen side events dealt squarely with the benefits of partnerships, and almost every plenary presentation highlighted multi-stakeholder efforts. The corridors were frequently filled with people networking and sharing ideas and business cards. While it may be hard to quantify connections like these in terms of impact, the level of energy palpable at the meeting suggests it may be considerable. Additionally, the fact that there was representation from many stakeholder groups heightens the opportunities for cross-sectoral cooperation. Clearly, many at the conference appreciated the opportunity to link up with other passionate water practitioners and decision makers.

Navigating the Future: A New Process?

"Water is life" was a common refrain. But does the UN have enough channels for progress to be achieved? During the three-day meeting there were many calls for the UN to give more prominence to water. Many felt water deserves a process of its own, just like climate change, biodiversity, desertification, and so many others. This "gap in the UN architecture" was freely acknowledged by many insiders, with some putting it down to government sensitivities over transboundary watercourses and fears a formal process might somehow raise issues of sovereignty and boundary disputes. Such concerns did not materialize at the 2023 Conference, and the calls for a strong institutional home in the UN seemed to strengthen as it progressed.

During the closing plenary, a response finally came when delegates were informed that a new role—UN Special Envoy for Water—would be established. Since more than 150 governments had called for this, the announcement was greeted enthusiastically. Many hope the new post will catalyze multilateral progress.

But will an envoy be enough? Some would like to go further. There were also many calls for a new initiative they called a water "inter-COP" to be held alongside climate, biodiversity and desertification Conferences of the Parties (COPs), the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and other ongoing processes. The aim of an "inter-COP" would be "connect,

integrate, and fully implement water-related decisions” in other relevant processes. One government proposed holding regular meetings alongside the HLPF. Whatever the exact solution, there was clearly an appetite to engage more often in meetings where water is front and center.

Thirsty for More

During the opening plenary, UN General Assembly President Csaba Kőrösi called for transformative solutions, warning delegates that “Our chance is here and now. We may not have another.”

If the 2023 UN Water Conference represented just one opportunity for transformation, delegates would surely have left disappointed. Even taken all together, the many commitments, new ideas, emerging partnerships, and positive momentum are unlikely to be sufficient to deliver on SDG 6.

But delegates seemed buoyed, energized, and optimistic as the meeting closed late Friday afternoon. In fact, many seemed reluctant to leave, lingering in the General Assembly Hall to hug or take photographs, have one last conversation and share one more idea. Some stayed on for more than an hour.

These participants seemed to sense that rather than providing a single, isolated moment to “save the day,” this meeting was part of an ongoing journey. Some spoke of their strong desire to continue these sorts of collective conversations in a multilateral setting.

Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai once said: “There comes a time when humanity is called on to shift to a new level of consciousness.” With the announcement of a new Special Envoy for Water, continued calls for a UN water process, and HLPF discussions on SDG 6 coming up in July, the time is ripe to advance the water agenda. Judging by the mood inside UN Headquarters as the conference ended, the water policy community is determined to do just that.

Upcoming Meetings

2023 Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development: The 2023 UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) tenth Forum on Sustainable Development will take place in preparation for the 2023 meeting of the HLPF. The Regional Forum will include a review on several SDGs, including SDG 6. **dates:** 27-30 March 2023 **location:** Bangkok, Thailand **www:** unescap.org/events/apfsd10

2023 UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development: The 2023 UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Regional Forum on Sustainable Development will take place in preparation for the 2023 meeting of the HLPF. The Regional Forum will include a roundtable on SDG 6. **dates:** 29-30 March 2023 **location:** Geneva, Switzerland **www:** indico.un.org/event/1002106

Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Forum on Sustainable Development 2023: Convened by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Forum is a regional platform for assessing progress and exchanging knowledge, best practices, and policy solutions to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, in line with regional priorities and specificities. **dates:** 25-28 April 2023 **location:** Santiago, Chile **www:** cepal.org/en/events/forum-countries-latin-america-and-caribbean-sustainable-development-sixth-meeting-2023

Second UN-Habitat Assembly: The UN-Habitat Assembly was established by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2018 upon dissolution of the UN-Habitat Governing Council. The Assembly is a universal body composed of the 193 UN Member States. The theme of the session is “A sustainable urban future through

inclusive and effective multilateralism: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in times of global crises.” **dates:** 5-9 June 2023 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** unhabitat.org/governance/un-habitat-assembly

UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: The 2023 session of the HLPF under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council will take place on the theme “Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels.” It will include in-depth review of SDGs 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), and 17 (partnership for the Goals). **dates:** 10-19 July 2023 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** hlpf.un.org/2023

38th UN-Water Meeting: The 38th UN-Water Meeting will convene under the theme, “Seeds of Change: Innovative Solutions for a Water-wise World.” It will bring together UN-Water Members and Partners to advance progress on SDG 6. **dates:** 18-19 August 2023 **location:** Stockholm, Sweden **www:** unwater.org

XVIII World Water Congress: The XVIII World Water Congress will be held on the theme, “Water for All: Harmony between Humans and Nature.” The event aims to promote coordination and balance between the water needs of humans and nature. **dates:** 11-15 September 2023 **location:** Beijing, China **www:** worldwatercongress.com

SDG Summit: This summit is the quadrennial meeting of the HLPF under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. The 2023 Summit will be the second since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015 and will take place at the midpoint of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. **dates:** 19-20 September 2023 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** un.org/en/conferences/SDGSummit2023

UN Climate Change Conference: The 28th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 28) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 18), and the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 5) will continue working on climate change-related issues. **dates:** 30 November – 12 December 2023 **location:** United Arab Emirates **www:** unfccc.int/cop28

10th World Water Forum: The World Water Forum is organized every three years. The Forum provides a unique platform where the water community and key decision makers can collaborate and make long-term progress on global water challenges. **dates:** 18-24 May 2024 **location:** Bali, Indonesia **www:** worldwaterforum.org/wwf

Summit of the Future: Having welcomed the submission of Our Common Agenda, the General Assembly passed resolution 76/307 in 2022 to hold the Summit. **dates:** 22-23 September 2024 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future

For additional upcoming events, see sdg.iisd.org

Glossary

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IWRM	Integrated water resources management
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	Small island developing states
WASH	Water, sanitation, and hygiene