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UN WATER CONFERENCE 2023

May 2nd 2023

The 2023 UN Water Conference was hosted at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 22 – 24 March 2023. Over 1,100 specially accredited organisations and 193 Member States participated in the conference. Aither team members Amy Syvrud and Noah Kaiser were there in-person, supporting several important events, and have shared their reflections from the conference here.

Five themes shaped the conference dialogue: Water for Health, Water for Development, Water for Climate, Water for Cooperation, and the Water Action Agenda. The aim of the conference was to create a ‘watershed moment’ through commitments to accelerating progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By the close of the conference, over 700 commitments were submitted to the Water Action Agenda from member states, multilateral banks, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector, with even more submitted over the past month.

Within the excitement and energy surrounding the first intergovernmental water conference in 46 years, there was a sense of urgency and concern that we are not on track to achieve SDG 6¹, and by extension, many of the other SDGs linked to achieving SDG 6.

Experts and leaders expressed concern about:

- + the impacts of climate change on water, in many places resulting in too little water, and in others, too much
- + water’s intractable links to almost every facet of society, culture, economy, and environment
- + the massive investment and effort required for the water sector in the years ahead.

The prelude for many speakers was that the water sector is on a precipice, if not already over the edge. To synthesise the central theme coming from most sessions: the case for change is clear and it appears we have the technology, knowledge, and innovation to do what needs to be done. For most, the challenge is now execution, which is required at a pace and scale that far exceeds the status quo. With this as context, attention was then focused on whether we (as a global water sector) have the capacity and capability, partnerships, governance systems and arrangements, and funding and finance mechanisms, required to get the job done.

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¹ [Goal 6: Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/knowledge-platform/)

So, if the challenge for the water sector has matured from understanding the issues and defining the solutions, to considering how we accelerate progress – where do we go from here? With an eye to the future, we have summarised our reflections on what approaches and ideas can help drive improved outcomes from the water sector on SDG 6.

- 1. Governance and strategy are central to tackling water insecurity** – Choosing the right solution at the right time, and making that solution stick, requires effective governance and institutional arrangements for the water sector. Various examples of success and failure explored at the conference linked back to this simple fact. Governance is a ‘gamechanger’ for improving water resources management approaches, particularly in the face of scarcity, climate change, and conflict. We must commit resources to support stakeholders to build the necessary capability to run with new agendas and approaches. This includes supporting local-level partnerships, which are necessary for implementing more holistic and coordinated solutions.
- 2. We must recognise, understand, and maximise the value of water to deliver better outcomes** – Valuing water requires us to understand and acknowledge through our decisions the benefits water provides to all uses and for different users, today and into the future. It is the benefit that all people receive from water, including social, environmental, economic and cultural benefits. Speakers at the conference focused on water as a basic human right, and the need for all humans to have access to clean water and sanitation at an affordable price. There was an emphasis on ensuring water access for Indigenous Peoples and accounting for Indigenous values and knowledge. Achieving this requires making decisions that reflect the value of water.
- 3. We must view water as central to climate adaptation and integrate it into climate adaptation strategies and frameworks** – At the conference there was universal recognition of the critical relationship between water and climate issues, including direct acknowledgement of climate adaptation as a water resource issue. A recent IPCC report demonstrated that 80 per cent of climate change adaptation strategies relate to water (1,600 were reviewed) (IPCC AR6 case study report). The water-climate relationship was further recognised through a call for an ‘inter-COP’ summit specifically focused on water to occur in-between annual climate and biodiversity COP meetings. Aligning and integrating water and climate planning, management, and investment frameworks will be critical to address climate and water risks going forward. Directly linking water and climate is essential to creating strategic and cohesive climate adaptation solutions.

- 4. Young people represent the future leaders of the water sector, and we must invest in their capability and build their capacity to contribute** – Young people will form the driving force behind implementing actions as well as living with the impacts of falling short on SDG 6. It is important that we invest in young people to adequately prepare them to successfully lead our water future. Excitingly, youth delegates (under the age of 35) were well represented at the conference through their efforts under the Global Youth Movement for Water (GYMW). This is a campaign composed of 370 youth-led organisations, representing 68 countries. The GYMW advocates for a 30-30-30 youth target, meaning 30 per cent of people in water management processes are under the age of 30 by 2030. The Movement also advocates for dedicated funding for youth for community-based water solutions and improved education and training opportunities for youth, especially young women, to acquire knowledge and skills in water and climate-related fields. Amy actively supported this campaign through her role as the SDG 6 Global Focal Point to the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth.

The 2023 UN Water Conference aimed to create a ‘watershed moment’ for the water sector, whether this proves true, will depend on how we act in response. Getting back on track for SDG 6 is not an easy challenge, but there is cause to be optimistic. Several new processes and mechanisms are proposed for maintaining a global focus on water – In the closing plenary session, it was announced that a UN Special Envoy on water will be considered by the UN Secretary General, which will be followed up on at future meetings including the [2023 SDG Summit](#) and the [2024 Summit of the Future](#). This is in addition to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development which will connect ongoing discussions and decisions related to water. These mechanisms, as well as the GYMW, could play a critical role in spurring continued discussion and action beyond the UN Water Conference. We look forward to continuing to contribute to this conversation and driving progress through our work with clients.