

UN-Water Briefing Note

A Reporting Service for Environment and Development Negotiations

Online at: enb.iisd.org/events/35th-un-water-meeting

Friday, 8 October 2021

Summary of the 35th UN-Water Meeting: 4-6 October 2021

With the UN 2023 Water Conference on the horizon, UN-Water Members, Partners, and observers focused on conference preparations and opportunities, with the objective of ensuring it will be a “watershed moment.”

Participants in the 35th UN-Water Meeting heard from the co-hosts for the Conference—Tajikistan and the Netherlands—and the Secretary-General of the Conference to set the stage for their deliberations on possible themes to be addressed during the 2023 Conference for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of Implementation of the UN Decade for Action on Water and Sanitation (2018-2028) in March 2023. Recognizing that this conference, which will be the first discussion on water and sanitation to be held at the summit level since 1977, is a generational moment, speakers emphasized the value of an inclusive preparatory process to build momentum and create ownership.

Proposals for dialogue topics identified the need to link targets related to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (clean water and sanitation) to other objectives, including good governance, gender equality, climate action, and human rights. Participants suggested that the outcomes from the Conference would be enhanced if they included a roadmap on how global challenges related to water and sanitation could be achieved, and if the Conference strived to engage other sectors.

In her closing remarks, Kelly Ann Naylor, Vice-Chair, UN-Water, reminded participants of UN-Water’s successful collaborative efforts, including the development of a joint synthesis report on SDG 6 in 2018, the launch of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework in 2020, and efforts to engage regions and countries throughout these processes. She said the preparations for 2023 represent an opportunity to build on and consolidate the achievements of this coordinating body and inform the future direction of the water and sanitation community.

The 35th UN-Water Meeting brought together over 110 representatives from Members, Partners, and observers of this UN interagency coordination mechanism from 4-6 October 2021. Due to the ongoing global pandemic, the meeting took place online. This summary reviews the deliberations during the open sessions on 4-5 October 2021. The meeting continued with a closed session on the third day, 6 October, during which UN-Water Members considered operational issues.

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 (CEB). 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 together its Members and Partners (see the full list on the final page) 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.

Monitoring and reporting efforts seek to provide coherent and reliable data and information on key water trends and management issues. The Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-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 CEB. The current Chair of UN-Water is Gilbert Hounbo, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). 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 (DESA).

UN-Water Report

On Monday, 4 October, UN-Water Chair Gilbert Hounbo opened the meeting and highlighted that discussions would focus on the process leading to the UN 2023 Water Conference. He invited participants to reflect on how to make the most of this “watershed moment,” as it would be the first time in over 40 years that the UN will discuss water issues at the highest level. He invited representatives from the co-hosts of the UN 2023 Water Conference—Tajikistan and the Netherlands—to provide opening comments, followed by a statement by the Secretary-General of the UN 2023 Water Conference. Following these scene-setting statements, UN-Water Members and Partners discussed lessons learned from other conferences and considered preparations and possible themes for the 2023 Conference.

UN 2023 Water Conference

Sulton Rahimzoda, Chair of the Executive Committee of the International Fund for saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), Co-Chair of the Dushanbe Water Process, and Special Envoy of the President of Tajikistan to the High-level Panel on Water and Climate, said expectations are high for the 2023 review event, which will be the first dedicated water conference since the 1977 UN Conference on Water in Mar del Plata, Argentina. He said the organizers are striving for concrete commitments that create impact and set a clear agenda for 2023-2030. He outlined both formal and informal tracks that will comprise the preparatory process. Formal dialogues include the Second Dushanbe International Conference on the Water Decade, the 9th World Water Forum, and the Asia-Pacific Water Summit. In addition, he noted that other upcoming events can be used to reach wider audiences, such as the Glasgow Climate Change Conference and the UN Biodiversity Conference. He also called attention to informal avenues for dialogue, including the Group of Friends of Water in New York and the Water and Climate Coalition. Rahimzoda emphasized the need for interaction between the formal and informal processes, both to make the Conference more inclusive as well as to build momentum and create broad ownership of its outcomes. He asked all actors to join the process, expressing a desire to “catch every voice, vision, and ambition.”

Henk Ovink, Special Envoy for International Water Affairs, the Netherlands, encouraged UN-Water Members and Partners to work in partnership, spread the word about the Conference, and engage actors in their networks. He stressed the need to ensure people better value water and for the Conference to showcase what needs to be done as well as how it can be done. He said other sectors should recognize that water is part of their agendas and is an enabler.

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary-General of the UN 2023 Water Conference, outlined details of the three-day review conference in 2023, as mandated by UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions 73/226 and 75/212. He said it will:

- take place at UN Headquarters in New York from 22-24 March 2023;
- include an opening and closing session, six plenary sessions, and five interactive dialogues, as well as side events organized by participants; and
- result in a summary of proceedings from the UNGA President that will feed into the 2023 session of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

Liu reported that UN-Water and DESA are developing a zero draft of a non-paper on themes for the interactive dialogues, and these themes will be finalized at the preparatory meeting in November 2022. He said the Conference Secretariat is also preparing a report of the UN Secretary-General for the 77th session of the UNGA (2022-2023), assessing progress during the first half of the Water Action Decade and identifying actions to overcome challenges in the second half of the Decade.

Finally, Liu said the UN Secretary-General's report, “Our Common Agenda,” is designed to accelerate implementation of existing agreements and initiatives. On SDG 6, such initiatives are the Decade of Water Action 2018-2028 and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework.

At the conclusion of these presentations, the UN-Water SPMs adopted a decision reaffirming that UN-Water would continue to take appropriate steps to support and organize the activities of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028 and the UN 2023 Water Conference.

Roundtable on the UN 2023 Water Conference Preparatory Process

Following the opening statements, a series of panelists discussed their experience with related Conferences and preparatory events.

Minoru Takada, DESA, discussed the just-completed experience of the High-level Dialogue on Energy. He stressed the need to define the type of outcome desired along with the substantive focus for the event. He also pointed to the “Energy Compact” commitments mobilized by the Dialogue and stressed the value of mobilizing commitments.

Janine Muzau, German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU), discussed the experience of the Bonn Water Dialogues and said it was crucial for them to be embedded in the 2023 preparatory process.

On regional-level preparatory processes, Silvia Saravia, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC), described an event that elicited recommendations from actors in the region to address water-related challenges. She outlined an outreach strategy that resulted in 3,000 registered

attendants, 43% of whom were women, and a follow-up process in which the organizers collected additional comments and questions from participants. She said inputs reflected the region's main challenges for water management: the human right to water and sanitation; equitable water governance, including the active involvement of rural and Indigenous communities and a gender focus; innovative solutions to water investment needs; access to timely data and innovation; and water-based strategies for mitigating and adapting to climate change. She said the event allowed UNECLAC to identify champion countries in the region, which have committed to improve the provision of water and sanitation and use policies to raise consciousness of the value of water.

Carol Cherfane, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), said regional preparatory meetings for the midterm review will take place in the first half of 2022, thus feeding into the 2022 HLPF session and related discussions of the UNGA and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In addition, Egypt will hold a policy dialogue on achieving the SDGs in water-scarce countries on 24 October 2021, in Cairo.

Sasha Koo-Oshima, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), described the experience of a listening exercise related to World Water Day that elicited how participants value water.

Danielle Kamtié, World Youth Parliament for Water (WYPW), said it is important to include youth and consider them as partners and not just beneficiaries.

During a question and answer session, participants suggested bringing Indigenous Peoples' perspectives on water into the process as early as possible and holding an inter-religious event on water to create visibility and opportunities for advocacy at the grassroots level.

Updates on UN-Water Activities

At the end of the first day, several speakers updated participants about ongoing UN-Water initiatives and activities.

Lucie Chocholata, FAO, updated participants on the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-SDG 6) gender contextualization. She said the project seeks to ensure all indicators include gender disaggregated data and, if that is not possible, to apply a gender contextualization approach. The project is expected to conclude at the end of 2022, and will use a multi-level scale approach, from the household level to communities to institutions. She noted that a preliminary finding is that existing quantitative data on gender are often not part of an ongoing data collection process, but have been gathered for "ad hoc" purposes.

Nino Kukuric, International Groundwater Resources Assessment Centre (IGRAC), said the theme of the 2022 World Water Day (22 March) and World Toilet Day (19 November) is "Groundwater: Making the invisible visible." He reported that the campaign for these days is being developed, and highlighted:

- the World Water Forum in Dakar, Senegal in March 2022, where the World Water Development 2022 report will be launched;
- the Groundwater Summit taking place from 7-8 December 2022, at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris, France, with a focus on the implementing the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework specifically for groundwater; and
- the forthcoming catalogue on groundwater management, which is ready in an operational, interactive demo version.

Abou Amani, UNESCO, said some organizations still focus on surface water without accounting for groundwater, and the two must be integrated: "groundwater is the missing link in integrated water management." He stressed the need to bring all of the messages that emerge from the 2022 campaigns, reports, and events to the UN 2023 Water Conference.

Other Points of Information

Olcay Unver, Water Policy Group, presented the "2021 Global Water Policy Report," which surveys water leaders and aims to gain a better understanding of the issues facing national water policy leaders. He said the results pointed to governance issues, followed by finance and capacity, as key challenges in achieving targets on implementing integrated water resources management.

Barbara Schreiner, Executive Director of the Water Integrity Network, presented the "Water Integrity Global Outlook 2021: Urban Water and Sanitation." She highlighted the many costs of water-related corruption in urban settings and informal settlements, such as missing or poor infrastructure, poor health and mortality, environmental costs, and maladaptation to climate change. She said addressing these issues is critical for achieving the SDGs. Schreiner reported that controlling corruption could help to close the financing gap for water integrity, and also address the other effects of corruption. The report illustrates significant advances in water integrity around the world.

Setting the Stage for the UN-Water Strategic Dialogue

On Tuesday, 5 October, participants considered options for themes around which preparations for and the dialogues at the UN 2023 Water Conference could be organized.

UN-Water Vice-Chair Kelly Ann Naylor opened the discussion and noted that UN-Water's monitoring work has demonstrated that progress is being made in some areas related to SDG 6, but we need to do more and go faster. She encouraged participants to think about how the UN-Water platform can be used to accelerate progress on SDG 6. Naylor recalled that the [SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework](#) is part of the UN Secretary-General's work to deliver the SDGs by 2030 and has fostered collaboration to address gaps, develop new initiatives, and focus on country-driven results.

UN-Water Members and Partners were then briefed on planning for the UN World Water Development Report 2023, which will focus on the theme "Accelerating Change Through Partnerships and Cooperation." Michela Miletto, Director/Coordinator, World Water Assessment Programme, UNESCO, noted that thematic perspective chapters are expected to address: food and agriculture; industry; human settlements; and environment. Additional thematic perspectives to be included are human health and climate change. A chapter on responses and moving forward will focus on the five "accelerators" of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework: capacity development; funding, investment, and efficient spending; data, information, and monitoring; innovation; and governance.

Breakout Sessions: Exploring Options for the Interactive Dialogues

Following the scene-setting presentations, participants convened in five breakout groups. Each group discussed a different possible theme for the dialogue sessions that will take place during the UN 2023 Water Conference. Following the breakout groups, rapporteurs for each group reported back.

Madhushree Chatterjee, UN-Water Secretary and co-coordinator of the Task Force on the Water Action Decade Implementation, opened the sessions by noting the challenge in structuring the Conference so it will be more than a series of speeches. She said past events at the UN have structured dialogue sessions around questions and involved moderators, among other options. Chatterjee also noted there will be side events and special events taking place alongside the Conference.

The group on “Water Action Decade Work Streams” noted the importance of having a roadmap for the Conference and involving sectors beyond the water and sanitation sector. This group highlighted governance as an issue that should be discussed, as well as gender, human rights, and social justice.

The group on “SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework” suggested going beyond SDG 6 and identifying interlinkages with other SDGs. This group suggested focusing on what is being done and what has to be done. The group also suggested learning from the experience of the just-concluded High-Level Dialogue on Energy, and including the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples, youth, gender, and migrants.

The group on “Water-Related Global Targets” suggested organizing around five alternative themes that would split the SDG targets differently and include others that provide a broader systems-based view: climate and disaster risk reduction; peace and security; social needs, including health, education and economic development; food security/food systems; and biodiversity and the environment.

The group on “Thematic Focus” emphasized the need to build an action agenda, identify what has been done and what still needs to be done, and generate commitment by Member States to move forward. This group said the dialogues should have a multi-stakeholder approach and include stakeholders.

The group on “Blended Approach” said the dialogues should contribute to the objectives of the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade, and could include themes such as climate change, gender, vulnerable communities, and human rights. This group also said governance should be discussed.

Closing Remarks

UN-Water Vice-Chair Naylor offered closing remarks on both days of the open session of the 35th UN-Water Meeting.

On Monday, she highlighted that the discussions had shown there is a real commitment to making 2023 a watershed moment. She recalled the Netherlands’ ideas for how organizations could contribute to the preparations for the Conference: spread the word, get all stakeholders involved, and cooperate with each other. Naylor called for rising to the challenge and to the high expectations from the world community to deliver on the future of water. She reminded participants, “we’ve done this” in the past. For example:

- in 2018, the joint synthesis report prepared by UN-Water showed that the world was far off-track on SDG 6;
- UN-Water responded with the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework in 2020;
- in 2021, a high-level meeting was convened by the UNGA President and a special event during the HLPF built on the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework; and
- regions and countries have been engaged throughout these processes.

Naylor concluded that preparations for 2023 represent an “incredible opportunity to bring coherence and consolidate all we have achieved and where we are going.”

On Tuesday, Naylor highlighted the need for collaboration on the road to the 2023 Conference and said UN-Water’s role as a coordinating body is an important tool to ensure engagement in the process. She highlighted the opportunity that the 2023 Conference provides UN-Water Members and Partners to shape the future and looked forward to keeping the conversation moving forward. She closed the open session at 10:08 am.

The 35th UN-Water Meeting concluded with a closed session for UN-Water Members and Partners with special status on 6 October, during which participants considered operational issues.

Upcoming Meetings

First Part of the UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP15):

The first part of the 15th meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity’s Conference of the Parties (COP), the 10th meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties (MOP) to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and the 4th meeting of the COP serving as the MOP to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing are scheduled to take place in a virtual format with limited onsite presence of delegates from embassies and organizations based in China. **dates:** 11-15 October 2021 **location:** Kunming, China, and online **www:** cbd.int/meetings/COP-15

Cairo Water Week 2021: Cairo Water Week 2021 will focus on the theme, “Water, Population and Global Changes: Challenges and Opportunities.” **dates:** 24-28 October **location:** Cairo, Egypt **www:** cairowaterweek.org/

UNFCCC COP 26: The 26th session of the COP (COP 26), the 16th meeting of the COP serving as the MOP to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 16), and the third meeting of the COP serving as the MOP to the Paris Agreement (CMA 3) will take place in Glasgow. **dates:** 31 October-12 November 2021 **location:** Glasgow, Scotland, UK **www:** unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/glasgow-climate-change-conference

World Toilet Day 2021: World Toilet Day is marked annually on 19 November. In 2021, the day will focus on the theme, “Valuing Toilets.” **date:** 19 November 2021 **www:** un.org/en/observances/toilet-day

World Water Day 2022: World Water Day is marked annually on 22 March. In 2022, the day will focus on the theme, “Groundwater: Making the Invisible Visible.” **date:** 22 March 2022 **www:** worldwaterday.org

Ninth World Water Forum: The 9th World Water Forum will focus on the theme, “Water Security for Peace and Development,” and will consider four priorities: water security and sanitation; cooperation; rural development; and means tools. **dates:** 22-27 March 2022 **location:** Dakar, Senegal **www:** worldwatercouncil.org/en/dakar-2022

36th UN-Water Meeting: This event will gather UN-Water Members and Partners to coordinate the UN’s approach to water and sanitation issues. **dates:** TBD **www:** unwater.org

For additional meetings, see sdg.iisd.org

UN-Water Members
(33 as of October 2021)

United Nations Secretariat

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (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
(43 as of October 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*

Human Right 2 Water

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