

UN 2023 Water Conference Highlights: Thursday, 23 March 2023

The significance of the UN 2023 Water Conference continued to be apparent as large numbers of participants streamed into both the official meetings and numerous side events. The general debate in plenary took place throughout the day and into the night. Two interactive dialogues, focused on climate change and cooperation, were convened parallel to plenary.

General Debate

Delegates continued delivering statements in plenary, sharing national plans, policies, priorities, commitments and ideas to advance sustainability and fairness with respect to water resources and services. Specific topics covered included infrastructure investments, a holistic approach to water management, education, the 1992 UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention), the UN's future role, partnerships and collaboration, the needs of vulnerable groups, and data.

Regarding **infrastructure**, KENYA outlined its aim to build 100 mega, large and medium-sized dams in the next five years. ECUADOR shared a USD 65 million national plan for irrigation and the establishment of 21 water conservation areas. BAHRAIN described a shift to circular water management. INDIA announced the investment of USD 50 billion to provide safe and adequate drinking water to all rural Indian households before 2030. SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS committed to transition to 100% renewable energy by 2030. SAUDI ARABIA noted its desalination capabilities.

On a **holistic approach**, BULGARIA and MALAYSIA called for an interlinked framework of climate change, biodiversity and disaster risk reduction, with water at the center. SOUTH SUDAN emphasized peace and stability as essential for progress. SAUDI ARABIA highlighted integrated water resources management (IWRM) and BENIN presented its IWRM reforms. UKRAINE reported continued IWRM efforts despite Russian aggression causing dire environmental consequences. YEMEN also noted the impacts of war on water delivery.

With respect to education, UZBEKISTAN reported on raising awareness through art, design and science to preserve cultural and natural diversity.

On **data**, NIGER reported commitments to SDG 6 indicators.

On the **UN's future role**, FINLAND supported annual gatherings on the sidelines of the HLPF, a meeting in 2028 to review progress and a special envoy, suggesting that "solving the global water crisis is exactly the sort of purpose the UN was created for." NIGERIA announced its accession to the Water Convention.

On **partnerships**, CANADA drew attention to its longstanding and successful collaboration with the US on shared water resources. SUDAN proposed establishing a regional center to support delivery of water services. SLOVAKIA reported cooperation with the Netherlands to eradicate groundwater contamination in the Danube basin. JAMAICA said it had joined the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Coalition for Nature. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO and SOUTH AFRICA stressed the importance of partnerships and cooperation

On the needs of **vulnerable groups**, CANADA highlighted Indigenous Peoples and women, and the principle of leaving no one behind. MEXICO urged greater recognition of women's roles in water conservation and management. AUSTRALIA announced commitments to increase aboriginal entitlements to water and invest USD 150 million in water infrastructure for safe and reliable access to water for those communities.

DENMARK shared commitments to: scale up water sector cooperation based on peer-to-peer approaches in India, China, South Africa, Morocco and Ethiopia; host the UNICEF sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) innovation hub; provide more than USD 400 million to enhance transboundary water management and development in Africa; and contribute to the World Bank's Global Water Security and Sanitation Partnership.

JAPAN noted its contribution of USD 3.8 billion to the Kumamoto Initiative for Water, focused on the Asia-Pacific region.

Interactive Dialogues

Water for Climate, Resilience and Environment: This dialogue was informed by a [concept paper](#) (A/CONF.240/2023/6), and co-chaired by Hani Sewilam, Egypt's Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation, and Yoko Kamikawa, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of Japan.

Moderating the dialogue, 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.

Former Hungarian President János Áder reported on experiences in financing wastewater management in Ghana, highlighting that an investment of USD 50 per citizen can support provision of water and sanitation in Africa.

Mariam Almheiri, Minister of Climate Change and Environment, United Arab Emirates (UAE), said that as host of the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 28) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UAE will seek outcomes that foster investment in water security and sharing of new technologies, such as desalination.

Christophe Béchu, Minister of Ecological Transition and Territorial Cohesion, France, called for building capacity and

reported that France will double funding for early warning systems for Least Developed Countries and SIDS.

Mami Mizutori, Head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), committed UNDRR to help with data and early warning.

Bruno Oberle, Director-General, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), advocated for well-designed nature-based solutions.

Discussing early warning systems, Petteri Taalas, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), highlighted the Global Hydrological Status and Outlook System, which provides information on the water cycle.

Leticia Tituana, Youth from Future Rising Fellows, called on governments to ensure that large industries comply with regulations and legislation, and urged radical change to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

During the ensuing discussion, delegates highlighted various policy issues and ideas for how the UN system might address water issues in the future.

On policy matters, speakers highlighted the interlinkages between water management, land degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Several referred to greater coordination and the water-energy-food nexus. They also noted the need for cross sectoral approaches, including implementation of the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework and the GBF.

On the UN's response to WASH, some speakers urged the appointment of a UN special envoy on water. Several suggested an "inter-COP" process on water.

Other topics raised included technology transfer, financing, climate-smart agriculture, nature-based solutions, and innovative approaches such as desalinization using renewable energy sources.

The US announced an initiative to support countries in climate adaptation related to food and water security, and early warning systems. SLOVENIA highlighted its voluntary commitment to improve ecosystem restoration and management in the UNESCO Mura River Biosphere Reserve, aimed at water management and flood protection.

Water for Cooperation: This dialogue was 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.

Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, moderated the panel discussions. In the first panel, Tran Hong Ha, Deputy Prime Minister, Viet Nam, offered experiences from the legal framework in the Mekong River basin that delivers environmental benefits and protects livelihoods and lives.

Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary, UNECE, called on all UN Member States who have not yet acceded to the Water Convention to do so, applauding Nigeria for its recent accession. She outlined various benefits, including: provision of a sound and flexible legal framework to support development and policy integration; capacity building opportunities to mobilize financial resources; and prevention of water-related conflicts.

Daouda Samba Sow, Secretary General, Gambia River Basin Development Organization, highlighted his organization's role in achieving successful cooperation with neighboring countries.

Danilo Türk, President, Club de Madrid, said that 153 UN Member States share transboundary waters. He stressed the value of creating effective legal frameworks and that water cooperation also strengthens peace and security.

During the ensuing discussion, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid spoke about the management of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Highlighting the importance of cooperation with upstream countries, he called for countries to adhere to the 1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses and the Water Convention. One participant stated that transboundary cooperation is beneficial for upstream countries and others urged joining the Water Convention. Member States exchanged actions taken to raise awareness and catalyze collaboration; heard strong calls for the inclusion of all stakeholders, especially youth; and underscored the value of science for effective cooperation.

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.

Ahmet Mete Saatçi, Board of Governors of the World Water Council, noted that transboundary cooperation changes with place and time. He named drivers for success, including political will, mutual benefit sharing, stability, and trust.

Norbert Totschnig, Federal Minister for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water, Austria, described building a mutually-beneficial environment, including engaging civil society and supporting individual commitments needed for transformation, especially by youth.

Maria Gwynn, University of Bonn, said South America provides an example of successful transboundary water cooperation.

During the ensuing discussion, the World Bank spoke about establishing a global facility for water cooperation. Member States underscored the value of joint studies in building relationships for transboundary cooperation. They also discussed hydropower as a viable source of renewable energy to deliver shared benefits, as well as the need for additional financial resources to unlock the potential for increased cooperation.

In The Corridors

After Wednesday's "initial splash," delegates resurfaced to reality. By some accounts, many seem to be affected by "the bends," repeating very similar statements made in other fora—even in sessions of the current conference. Some delegates remarked that while a lot of commitments have been made, advancement in achieving SDG 6 will require more holistic approaches. One delegate noted that even if there has been progress in some countries, the divide between the haves and have-nots is growing and causing a drag on global progress on the goal.

In spite of some misgivings, the calls for creating an intergovernmental structure for water and sanitation, as well as recommendations for a special envoy for water, received a lot of support. Some delegates added that it's about time water has its own flagship, drawing comparison with processes on climate change, biodiversity, and disaster risk reduction. Supporters of a special envoy said it would give WASH an adequate—and needed—vessel to navigate along with the other big topics in the UN system.

As the second day ended, participants seemed to feel there was still great energy in the meeting to swim to the surface and deliver a robust Water Action Agenda. But with waters still murky and tides still uncertain, it remains to be seen if the right course has been set.

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* summary and analysis of the UN 2023 Water Conference will be available on Monday, 27 March 2023, at enb.iisd.org/un-2023-water-conference