

Committee of Permanent Representatives
Subcommittee Meeting
Thursday, 27 April 2023
10:00 – 13:00, 15:00 – 18:00 (GMT+3)
Conference Room 1
Hybrid meeting

Agenda item 2: Briefing on the outcomes of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference.

This background document has been developed by the Secretariat to inform the Committee of Permanent Representatives on the outcomes of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference. More specifically, it includes detailed information on the following aspects of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference:

- Background of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference;
- Conference Outcomes;
- Other links.

Following the presentation, Member States and Stakeholders are invited to engage in an exchange of views with the Secretariat regarding the United Nations 2023 Water Conference.

Briefing on the UN 2023 Water Conference

March 22nd – 24th, 2023, UN Headquarters, New York

Background:

The first UN Conference on Water, which took place in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977 concluded that water stress was a serious and growing problem threatening a wide range of socio-economic activities such as agriculture, navigation and fisheries, while also putting biodiversity and ecosystems at risk. The situation remains fraught today – despite progress in some areas, the World Water Development Report (2023) presents a daunting global water crisis – 26% of the world’s population (approximately 2 billion people) do not have access to safe drinking water and 3.6 billion people lack access to safe sanitation services. Meanwhile, water-related disasters in the form of both drought and flood are intensifying around the world.

In 2016, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the period from 2018 to 2028 the International Decade for Action: “Water for Sustainable Development” (A/RES/71/222) and in 2018 called for a Conference on the midterm comprehensive review of its implementation, to take place in New York in 2023 (A/RES/73/226).

The UN 2023 Water Conference was a major milestone, as the first UN Conference on water in almost fifty years. From the onset, the vision statement made it clear that we are not on track to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on water and sanitation for all, and a lack of progress on water jeopardizes the achievement of all other SDGs. This implies that a business-as-usual approach to the management of global water resources would not work. Such concerns were at the top of the agenda at the Conference and delegates shared national and regional plans and policies aimed at the sound management of water resources.

During this Conference, there was a review of progress on water action through high-level meetings facilitated by the hosts of the Conference, the governments of Tajikistan and the Netherlands. One major outcome of the Conference was the Water Action Agenda, which is composed of voluntary commitments from UN Member States and stakeholders. These pledges aim at creating partnerships and cooperation towards urgent, immediate and accelerated action, and establishing a strong international mechanism addressing the global water crisis. The Conference unfolded through general debate sessions held in plenary and five interactive dialogues designed to be solution driven, under the themes of water for health, water for sustainable development, water for climate, water cooperation and the Water Action Decade.

Conference outcomes:

Key points raised by Member States:

Shifting the way we regard water - there needs to be a reconsideration of water as a global common good and to radically change how the world values water, and how we manage it.

Raising the ambition on water action across the board and connecting water-related commitments made at climate COPs, biodiversity COPs, UNEA and other global fora.

Using the water-food-energy nexus approach and the circular economy as a means to achieve sustainable development and a just transition, catalyse ecosystem and water health, and mitigate disasters risk.

Connecting global information and data on water.

Scaling-up financing, focusing on innovative finance, including public-private partnerships and tapping into climate and Nature-based Solutions finance.
Ensuring water-related actions take human rights into consideration.

Specific outcomes of the Conference:

The [“Water Action Agenda,”](#) which sets out a series of action-oriented game-changing commitments, from making smarter food choices to re-evaluating water as a powerful economic driver, and recognizing its role as part of the Earth’s cultural heritage.

Marked the mid-point review of [the Water Action Decade](#) 2018-2028, aiming to accelerate SDG 6 and other international water-related goals, targets and commitments.

Called for the establishment of a mechanism for regular intergovernmental review of water action and SDG 6 progress.

Next water meeting should be held before 2028 (discussed in the final plenary).

Broad agreement that the UN inter-agency coordination mechanism for water (UN-Water) needed strengthening and possibly a revised mandate.

Establishing a UN Special Envoy on Water (most likely from the Global South) – the Secretary-General confirmed in his closing remarks that he would consider such an appointment before the SDG Summit in September 2023 – UNEP is expected to support this, possibly through the conduit of UN-Water.

UNEP will continue to work towards monitoring and implementing SDG 6, and strengthening these processes thanks to its role within UN-Water, as custodian of three of the SDG 6 indicators, i.e. water quality (6.3), water management (6.5) and ecosystem restoration (6.6), and developing support programmes to implement them.

The UNEP delegation, made significant contributions to the Conference through its interactive dialogues, in particular as a technical lead on the theme “Climate, Resilience and the Environment.” UNEP also played a central role in UN-Water, coordinating its group looking at the 2030 Agenda and developing the outcome document for the conference, which will feed into the 2023 High-Level Political Forum, where SDG 6 is under review. UNEP also partnered with Member States to organise several very successful side events including on sustainable lake management (with Indonesia), on the circular economy (with the EU) and on Source-to-Sea interlinkages (with UN DESA, UN-Water, Portugal and other Member States) and took part in numerous bilaterals and donor dialogues. UNEP was also a co-author of this year’s UN World Water Development Report, launched on World Water Day (March 22nd).

The Conference highlighted UNEP priority areas including the importance of water quality monitoring, wetland (and other freshwater body) restoration, integrated water resource management and global water pollution quality and data.

Other links:

- [Freshwater Challenge: mobilising action to restore freshwater ecosystems](#) - As part of the Global Biodiversity Framework, this is a country-driven initiative to restore 300,000 km of rivers and 350 million hectares of inland wetlands by 2030 to enhance water security, tackle climate change, and reverse nature loss.
- [Bold actions behind the Water Action Agenda](#) - a “milestone” action plan containing almost 700 commitments to protect “humanity’s most precious global common good.”
- [UN momentum behind the Water Action Agenda](#) - UN Secretary-General's remarks to the UN 2023 Water Conference.
- [IISD summary report of the UN 2023 Water Conference](#)