

The water crisis does not stop in New York



Although the events at the United Nations (UN) 2023 Water Conference provided countless opportunities to discuss the water challenges we are facing, proper action should now be taken by UN member states to tackle the global water crisis.

When the approximately ten thousand attendees arrived at the United Nations (UN) 2023 Water Conference that was held in New York from 22nd to 24th March, they were provided with a plethora of options to acquire information, present their perspectives, discuss obstacles, and propose solutions to the challenges related to water. Besides the plenary sessions, the conference included around 400 in-person side events organized by academics, NGOs, policymakers, political entities, citizen groups and various other stakeholders, plus numerous virtual events.

Covering all the themes discussed during the three-day marathon would be unachievable, and perhaps even pointless. However, we feel that it is worth recounting some of the recurring discussion points.

The first one is that the climate and water actions must be coordinated. Water management will play an essential role in mitigation and adaptation, and it is essential that water policies integrate risks connected to climate change¹.

Climate change is, however, far from being the only cause of the water crisis. The decades-long mismanagement of the world's water resources has led to their depletion and to an impact on the water cycle itself. This is the message conveyed by the Global Commission on the Economics of Water a few days before the UN conference in their document calling for a transformation of the economics and governance of water in seven points. Among these steps are a stop to water under-pricing, a drastic reduction in subsidies for water and agriculture that create overconsumption and aquifer depletion, the creation of a just water partnership, and a radical reshaping of the

water governance that moves away from the current fragmentation².

A second point that has clearly emerged from several discussions is that to achieve water security for all it is essential to better understand and use the relationships between hydrological and ecological processes. Nature-based solutions, which use or mimic these processes, play a key role in enhancing biodiversity, reducing risks associated with hydroclimatic extremes, and ensuring water-food-energy security and carbon cycling³. UNESCO's Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme⁴, a 20-year application of nature-based ecohydrological solutions in close collaboration with the local communities, has demonstrated that persevering the harmonious relationship between humans and nature is the solution for sustainable water management.

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The third point that resounded through the UN conference rooms was the necessity of involving in the decision-making processes those groups that can potentially be most affected by the water crisis, namely youths, women, and Indigenous populations. Young people are the ones whose lives will be affected most from water challenges in the future. Women, especially in lower-income countries, are hugely affected by the lack of water and sanitation infrastructure. Finally, Indigenous people tend to be generally excluded from the administration of those same water resources that are fundamental to the existence of their communities. Not only should they be included as a matter of justice but it should also be considered that their local knowledge and traditions can be a precious resource for decision-making processes. This aspect was emphasised in a number of side events at the UN conference and

it is also highlighted by Gert Jan Veldwisch in his [World View](#).

If the purpose of the conference were to support interaction between stakeholders, to share a large amount of information presented, and to discuss various proposals, we could be confident of its great success. The question remains, however, as to what comes next and what practical actions will be taken following the event. As Mark Zeitoun and colleagues assert in their [Comment](#), the water cycle knows no political boundaries. It is therefore the duty of all UN member states and other stakeholders to combine science and policy to restore and preserve water as a common good. Along these lines, a concrete outcome of the UN conference is embodied by the over 700 voluntary commitments, from different stakeholders, that form the so-called Water Action Agenda⁵. A good number of these are from individual member states or from consortia of nations. Furthermore, in order to raise consideration of water within the UN agenda, a Special UN Envoy for Water is likely to be appointed by the UN Secretary-General⁶.

Considering that it took 46 years for only the second UN conference on water to take place, we now need immediate action. It is further essential to follow up the meeting with a series of events that aim to define at a political level how nations should work together to preclude a further worsening of the situation. Let those events happen soon, as the water crisis does not wait.

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References

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