

The Water Action Decade is up for review



The United Nations 2023 Water Conference is a unique opportunity to create momentum to combat the global water crisis.

The first, and so far, only, United Nations (UN) Water Conference was held in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977. Driven by the need to ensure that the growing world population had an adequate supply of good quality water, the conference aimed to promote a level of awareness to prevent a global water crisis developing before the end of the 20th century. Although the Mar del Plata conference was a major milestone in water resources development, and much progress has been made since, it did not manage to avert a water crisis. A quarter of the global population still lacks safely managed drinking water and almost half lack safely managed sanitation. Urbanization, population growth, and climate change are undermining efforts to meet basic human needs and reduce pressures on the world's water resources. According to the [2022 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) report](#), the current rate of progress is too slow, and would have to increase at least fourfold to reach the goals of universal access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030.

In 2016, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the period 2018–2028 the International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development to further improve cooperation, partnerships and capacity development in response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The second UN Water Conference, to be held in New York on 22–24 March 2023, comes at the midpoint of this Water Action Decade and offers the world a highly anticipated opportunity to review progress, accelerate long-needed action, and advance on water-related goals and targets. The conference will be centred around five dialogue themes that focus on the linkages between water and: health; sustainable development; climate, resilience and environment; cooperation; and the Water Action Decade. These themes are supported by the

five accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, that is, financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation and governance.

To coincide with the conference, *Nature Water* published a series of articles this month that reflect on this global event; on expectations, challenges and opportunities, needs and priorities, the past, and the way forward. With the aim to inspire conference participants and to highlight the importance of scientific evidence when reviewing progress and identifying gamechangers, a [Collection](#) of *Nature Portfolio* articles, corresponding to the themes of the conference, is also made available.

In their [Perspective](#), Quentin Grafton and colleagues review the progress of the global water goals between the 1977 and the 2023 UN Water conferences. Noting that progress is mixed on the delivery of the global water goals and that there is no single approach to achieve 'water for all', they highlight three priorities for consideration at the 2023 conference and beyond: improved water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); investments in grey, green and soft infrastructure; and a shift in values, behaviours, and incentives.

The UN 2023 Water Conference is convened by the UN General Assembly and co-hosted by the Governments of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In their [Comment](#), Henk Ovink, Sulton Rahimzoda, Johannes Cullman and Angelo Imperiale reflect on the need to restore and preserve water as a 'glocal' common good for current and future generations, and how this should be considered a public purpose of all investments and interventions.

Of our current generations, young people certainly have the highest stake in ensuring water security, as they will be the ones who will have to pay with their futures if we fail to respond effectively to the water-related challenges. However, young people are not only the inheritors of these issues. As Yosr Khèdr writes in her [World View](#), they are also critical agents for both water and climate action, and their views and priorities must be incorporated in all parts of the decision-making processes.

Water and climate change are indeed intimately linked, and as climate change continues to disrupt progress towards global water goals, new partnerships between the climate and water communities are urgently needed. In his [Comment](#), John Matthews discusses how resilient water management and water-centric nationally determined contributions (NDCs), that is, national commitments on climate mitigation and adaptation required under the Paris Agreement, can be potential paths towards a more climate-oriented water community and UN Water Conference.

Water insecurity is affecting the Global South disproportionately. To identify high-ambition actions and capture research and innovation priorities for future water security in the Global South, the Transformative Futures for Water Security held a series of multi-stakeholder dialogues and conferences in Africa, Asia, and Latin America between December 2022 and February 2023. In their [Comment](#), Rachael McDonnell and colleagues highlight the need for multi-level governance, multi-stakeholder dialogues, gender equality and youth in leadership, and point out that researchers are crucial to support the needs of water security implementers.

The outcome of the UN 2023 Water Conference will feed into the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), which will be held in New York in July 2023. One key outcome of the conference will be the voluntary commitments on actions by member states and stakeholders, compiled in the [Water Action Agenda](#). The Water Action Agenda aims to collect commitments across all sectors, industries, and interests, to accelerate progress in the second halves of the Water Action Decade and the 2030 Agenda in addressing the water challenges.

Finally, it is important to remember that addressing the ongoing water crisis requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, and that collaboration is vital for success. In the words of Kofi Annan "if we work together, a secure and sustainable water future can be ours".

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