UN 2023 Water Conference
Thematic Areas Explainers

The UN 2023 Water Conference, co-hosted by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Tajikistan, is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to raise awareness, define a roadmap and advance the water agenda. The UN 2023 Water Conference The five themes for the 2023 UN Water Conference were proposed by the conference co-hosts, The Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Tajikistan. The thematic areas are in line with the five principles of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework.

1) Water for Health: Access to Safe Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Access to safe water and sanitation is a human right – fundamental to everyone's health, dignity, and prosperity. Yet, 2.2 billion people around the world lack safely managed drinking water, including 785 million without basic drinking water services.

The issue

Water supplies have been overly stressed by decades of misuse, poor management, and contamination. Additionally, demands for water have outpaced population growth, leading to half of the world's population experiencing severe water scarcity. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown that access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is fundamental to human health. However, over 1 in 4 people still lack access to handwashing facilities with soap and water at home, and half of the schools in the world do not have proper handwashing facilities. Inadequate WASH affects public health, the spread of infectious diseases and chronic illnesses, and can perpetuate inequalities.

Moving forward

To ensure universal access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030, current rates of progress need to increase fourfold. Achieving these targets would save 829,000 people annually, who die from diseases directly attributable to unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene practices.

2) Water for Sustainable Development: Valuing Water, Water-Energy-Food Nexus and Sustainable Economic and Urban Development

Water is fundamental to many aspects of sustainable development, but it is under threat. Demand for water is rapidly rising due to population growth, urbanization and increasing pressures from the agriculture and energy sectors.

The issue

Food production and energy are water intensive, with the agriculture sector being the largest consumer of the world's freshwater resources. 90 per cent of global power generation is water intensive. The scarcity of water can severely impact both sectors and also reduce the ability to support progress on several of the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDG), including hunger, poverty, the environment, and more.

Moving forward

To meet the growing demands for water, an integrated and sustainable management of this resource is needed to balance the needs of people, nature, and the economy. A shift to renewable energy sources that are less water intensive, the use of sustainable agricultural practices, and prioritizing an efficient management of the water-food-energy nexus, can help towards protecting and restoring this crucial resource.

3) Water for Climate, Resilience and Environment: Source to Sea, Biodiversity, Climate, Resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction

Freshwater ecosystems - like wetlands, rivers, and aquifers - are a critical part of the global water cycle. They are home to many biological species; wetlands alone are breeding grounds for 40 per cent of the world's plant and animal species and support the health of human societies and natural environments. Yet the mismanagement of these ecosystems, combined with accelerating climate change impacts, undermines the key services that they provide to support life on Earth.

The issue

Freshwater ecosystems around the world are in danger. Wetlands are being drained for agriculture, water pollution in lakes and rivers is increasing, and changes to surface water areas is accelerating. Freshwater species are also under threat due to habitat loss and pollution of freshwater ecosystems. The accelerating pressure on these ecosystems leads to impacts on human and ecosystem health, increase in flooding and droughts, and negative effects on water quality and quantity.

Moving forward

Sustainably managed freshwater ecosystems can help support the needs of communities, businesses, and the environment. The restoration and enhancement of freshwater ecosystems are also essential to climate change as they can help protect against extreme weather events. Policies and laws must be implemented at both local and national levels across sectors and governments to ensure the urgent protection and restoration of freshwater ecosystems.

4) Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Water Cooperation, Cross Sectoral Cooperation and Water Across the 2030 Agenda

Transboundary waters refer to the aquifers and lake and river basins that are shared by two or more countries. With 153 countries sharing at least one of these transboundary waters, it is critical to have an integrated approach to manage these resources in order to balance the needs of people and the environment.

The issue

Transboundary cooperation is lacking in many countries. In 2020, only 24 countries reported that all their transboundary basins are covered by cooperation arrangements. Transboundary waters provide essential ecosystems services to surrounding populations, like food provision or barriers against flooding. A lack of cooperation and proper monitoring system of these waters, leads to overexploitation and pollution, impacting the essential services that they provide.

Moving forward

With transboundary waters accounting for 60 per cent of the world's freshwater flows, it is crucial for governments to cooperate more and properly manage these resources, especially in areas vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Countries need to address data gaps, scale up capacity development and financing, and mobilize political will to ensure that progress is accelerated on these water resources.

5) Water Action Decade: Accelerating the implementation of the objectives of the Decade, including through the UN Secretary-General's Action Plan

In December 2016, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Resolution "International Decade (2018–2028) for Action – Water for Sustainable Development" to help put a greater focus on water-related challenges and the key role that this resource plays in sustainable development.

The issue

Kicking off on World Water Day, 22 March 2018, and concluding on World Water Day 2028, the Decade of Action builds on the achievements of the previous "Water for Life" Decade, from 2005-2015. Based on the Resolution, the objectives of the Decade call for:

- Advancing sustainable development
- Energizing the implementation of existing programmes and projects
- Mobilizing action to achieve the 2030 Agenda

Moving forward

As we approach the second half of the Water Action Decade, additional commitments, pledges and actions across all sectors will be needed to ensure the implementation of the Decade objectives. The 2023 UN Water Conference will be an opportunity to review progress so far and outline ways to move forward. One of the main expected outcomes of the conference is the Water Action Agenda, which will be the collection of all water-related voluntary commitments to accelerate progress of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.