

OPINION

Issues that should be addressed at the UN 2023 Water Conference

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A conference held by the United Nations about a particular subject confers the world's highest level of legitimacy upon that subject: conferences such as the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 or the recent series of UNFCCC COPs have become household names.

The only UN Conference on Water to date was held in 1977 at Mar del Plata. Among many other good ideas, that Conference proposed the UN International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade of 1981–1990. The Decade in turn generated huge momentum for the topic, set the target of water for all by 1990, founded several major water-related organisations that are still thriving today, and inspired young professionals such as myself to make our careers in water. That UN Water Conference effectively created what has come to be known as the water sector (and, years later, its sub-sector branded as WASH which has done so much to raise the profile of sanitation and hygiene alongside water) and led to the now-familiar basis of water development around the world.

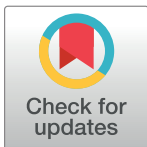
Since 1977 the world of water has become crowded with organisations, meetings, targets, declarations and pathways. The UN 2023 Water Conference gives us a rare opportunity to cut through that fragmentation and affirm a common vision for the years ahead that can be shared by the UN Member States' political leaders and by water professionals alike.

At the Preparatory Meeting on 25 October, the President of the UN General Assembly asked everybody to consider how we will achieve the already-agreed goals. He is right to concentrate on that question: we have no shortage of targets, commitments and rhetoric, but we are still short of ideas on how to achieve them. That was why the World Water Week 2022 theme of valuing water was designed specifically to feed into the UN 2023 Water Conference, and the World Water Week 2023 theme of innovation is being designed as part of the follow-up process from the Conference: doing existing work better, doing good work more, and doing work differently, all in order to achieve the targets.

The Conference agenda is extremely broad, with a set of themes that cover just about every aspect of water. In this short article I want to concentrate on two issues that I believe should be addressed at the Conference. One is about process, the other about substance.

Water as a tool to help other people achieve their goals

Water has not (yet) become a topic of big interest to politicians, and I doubt that they will care that this is the first UN Conference on this topic since 1977. I sense a risk that we water people are so excited that the UN is addressing our topic that we will simply generate a long wish-list of help that we want—indeed the Stakeholders' Consultation on 24 October showed this tendency. Precisely because water is such a low priority for decision-makers, water people have



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tended to use our rare interactions with them to ask for their support to our subject, holding out our hands for money and attention to be given to us.

However, politicians and business leaders already have too many people and topics clamouring for their attention and support. So I propose that we should turn the relationship around completely, so that we offer our help to them to solve their problems. This is a significant mind shift for us: it is not easy to see things through other people's eyes and to understand how they make their priorities and decisions. I am not aware of many water organisations that are good at doing this. One of the groups which I particularly admire is the Water Policy Group which analyses how politicians take decisions and then proposes the policy building blocks for them to use. Its Global Water Policy report [1] is full of insights into this process. I hope that other groups will be equally effective before, at, and after the Conference.

Keeping in mind the concept of offering water as a solution to other people's problems, here is a hitherto neglected issue that I believe should be addressed at this Conference:

Water's role in climate change mitigation

Preventing global heating and climate chaos are among the most urgent and important aims for all politicians and decision-makers, yet this subject is hardly mentioned in the draft agenda for the UN Conference.

At this Conference, water professionals can help decision-makers by explaining how improved water management can contribute to their greenhouse gas emission targets. We should highlight the water-related actions with the largest impacts on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Our current level of knowledge, as collated in recent reports by GIZ [2] and by SIWI and others [3], identifies these high-impact water-related actions:

- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption involved in water for agriculture, of which the biggest impact comes from reducing methane emissions from rice paddies.
- Increasing carbon capture and reducing methane emissions from wetlands and peatlands.
- Reducing methane emissions from human excreta, of which the highest impact comes from making large scale wastewater treatment plants net-positive.
- Reducing CO₂ emissions from power generation, notably by promoting more hydropower.
- Reducing energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions involved in water supply operations.

While not all these actions apply everywhere around the world, every action at every scale from local to global contributes to net zero efforts and to the Sustainable Development Goals: the very same aims as the UN Conference itself.

The water sector is tackling global problems such as poverty, inequality and climate change that are common to many sectors. At this Conference we will have an opportunity to make the water sector part of the solution, if we all as water professionals stand together to make it so. To quote President John F Kennedy, with his wording edited for gender: "Our problems are made by people—therefore they can be solved by people. And people can be as big as they want". Let that be our slogan for this UN Water Conference.

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