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U.N. water conference

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Why is in news? The United Nations 2023 Water Conference held in New York in March 2023 was the first such meeting on water after 46 years. The conference coincided with the mid-term comprehensive review of the International Decade for Action.

Background

In a report entitled 'Water for Sustainable Development 2018–2028', the U.N. recognised the urgent need for action given that we are not on track to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) no. 6 for water: "Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all".

Before the conference began, it had lofty ambitions: to identify game-changing ideas; to make recommendations to policymakers on how to speed- and scale-up change through capacity development, data and information, innovation, financing, and governance; to place water at the centre of the climate agenda in activities building up to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York in July and the COP28 climate talks to be held in Dubai later this year.

A brief about UN Water Conference

The last U.N. Water Conference was held in 1977. It resulted in the first global 'Action Plan' recognising that "all peoples, whatever their stage of development and social and economic conditions, have the right to have access to drinking water in quantities and of a quality equal to their basic needs."

This declaration led to several decades of global funding and concerted effort to provide drinking water and sanitation for all. These actions substantially reduced the population without access to safe drinking water in much of the developing world, in fact.

The UN 2023 Water Conference formally known as the 2023 Conference for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of Implementation of the UN Decade for Action on Water and Sanitation (2018-2028) took place at UN Headquarters in New York

The three-day summit in New York spurred almost 700 commitments from local and national governments, non-profits and some businesses to a new Water Action Agenda, and progress on the hotchpotch of voluntary pledges will be monitored at future UN gatherings. A new scientific panel on water will also be created by the UN.

Almost 7,000 people attended the conference, but the private sector and global north were far better represented than experts and water insecure communities at the frontline of the water crisis from the global south – many of whom were excluded due to visa and financial barriers.

Only a dozen or so world leaders attended the conference, and there were no protests and few activists to call out government and business hypocrisies.

Importance of the conference

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About 90% of climate impacts are related to water – too much, too little, or too dirty – yet only 3% of climate finance is currently dedicated to the world’s water systems.

Water related conflicts have risen sharply in recent years as sources dwindle, including many internal disputes between urban and rural dwellers, and pastoralists and farmers

A quarter of the world’s population still does not have access to safe drinking water while half lacks basic sanitation – which is one of the sustainable development goals for 2030.

Progress has been slow due to the lack of financial investment from rich countries – which has moved towards loans not grants, insufficient political will and a siloed approach to water.

At the current rate, universal access to clean water and sanitation will not be achieved for decades after the 2030 target.

At this juncture, UN water conference is important to resolve the water related issues through collaborative efforts

Major outcomes of the conference

The following are some commitments announced at the event, with examples of projects that showed potential:

Technology – There were specific innovations in wastewater treatment or solar treatment of water in remote areas, and a number of proposals for incubation platforms, including the IBM Sustainability Accelerator, focused on water management.

Data and models – Before every large investment, we must anticipate potential impact. Simulations are often important to do this, and they need large amounts of input data. Cost-effective approaches to data-generation included sensors and satellite data. Other efforts, like the World Meteorological Organisation’s Hydrological Status and Outlook System, offered data analysis tools.

Knowledge sharing – Solutions to most of these problems already exist, but each region and country often reinvents the wheel. We need to accelerate cross-learning. One useful tool here was the W12+ Blueprint, a UNESCO platform that hosts city profiles and case studies of programs, technologies, policies that addresses common water security challenges.

Capacity building – Many people lack access to basic services because they are unable to advocate for themselves and because infrastructure projects are designed for and by powerful actors in society. Efforts like the Making Rights Real initiative offered to help marginalised communities and women understand how to exercise their rights. Similarly, the ‘Water for Women Fund’ offered support mechanisms for more effective and sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene outcomes for women.

Civil society – There were several platforms for collective action by civil society groups lobbying for changes in regulations, e.g. creating transnational networks to advocate for national and international bodies to criminalise the use of certain pesticides harmful to aquatic life.

Environmental, social, and corporate governance – The conference concluded that a big barrier to farmers and industries using water more efficiently is that they have no incentive. Specifically, farmers aren’t becoming more efficient or going pesticide-free unless consumers are willing to pay a premium for more sustainably produced goods.

Effective water governance hinges on these broad areas, and weaving them into the Water Action Agenda is a step. But time will tell how we carry these commitments forward as we move into the HLPF and COP processes.

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