

Global water governance

The UN Water conference – time to govern water as a global commons!

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Bonn, 20 March 2023. The March 2023 UN Water Conference should lay the ground for improved governance of water as a global commons, ideally through a UN mandated multi-stakeholder platform on water.

On 22-24 March 2023, the first global United Nations (UN) Conference on Water will take place since 1977. Progress on water-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals is alarmingly off-track; at the current pace, less than half of the countries will reach drinking water coverage targets and only little more have so far implemented integrated water resources management needed to balance competing water demands. Against this background, the conference aims to review progress and discuss further actions within the UN Water Action Decade (2018-2028), which aims at sustainable development and integrated management of water resources as a “dealmaker” for the SDGs. In addition, water actors have been invited to



announce innovative ideas – so called game changers – for accelerated implementation of a Water Action Agenda.

Weaknesses of global water governance

The conference takes place at a time when water governance at global level is highly fragmented, lacks coherence and coordination and features diverse fora and initiatives with varying ownership but lacking governmental legitimacy. Water problems such as droughts and polluted rivers and drinking water are local and transboundary, but they need global action for two reasons. First, global drivers such as climate change, demographic change or trade in water-intensive goods affect local water resources, but cannot be addressed at the local level alone. Second, the aggregation of individual local and regional water problems at global level may threaten earth system stability and resilience as a whole. Because of its earth system stabilising functions, freshwater serves as a global commons.

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However, no global regime similar to the United Nations Framework Conventions on Climate Change or on the Conservation of Biological Diversity exists to govern water as a global commons: There is no UN mandated political forum on water. Existing multi-stakeholder platforms such as the World Water Forums do not have an intergovernmental mandate. UN-Water as interagency mechanism coordinates 35 UN organisations related to water, but it does not report to member states. UNESCO’s annual World Water Development Reports are not validated by member states and available knowledge on water is often not well linked to policy implementation. Furthermore, the role of the private sector in water governance is hotly debated, and civil society is insufficiently represented in water-related decision-making. All these shortcomings point to the need to govern water as a global commons.

Reforming global water governance

Indeed, the UN 2023 Water Conference’s background paper to the Interactive Dialogue on the Water Decade proposes reforms of global water governance. These include the appointment of a special envoy on water to the UN, establishing regular intergovernmental meetings on water within the UN, strengthening the role of UN-Water and a more coherent approach to the resource within the UN system. The paper also suggests coordinating more effectively with the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction and the New Urban Agenda, e.g. by introducing freshwater segments. These would be crucial reforms of global water governance, but at present, it is unclear, whether these suggestions will be taken up. Several countries have so far blocked reforms of global water governance due to sovereignty concerns. We therefore strongly encourage the Conference Co-chairs to include these reforms in their conference report so they can be followed through at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July to initiate a well-coordinated implementation.

In addition, it would be important to improve links between policy and science as brought forward by the game changer initiative on an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Water and Sustainability. A further noticeable effort is the initiative on Global Scaffolding for Water Policy Making on policy principles for solving the most sensitive issues in water resources management.

Beyond these existing proposals, a UN mandated multi-stakeholder platform would be an even more comprehensive approach: it could increase the transparency of discussions on water solutions, put them to a direct practice test by civil society and the private sector, and thereby strengthen ownership of a broad range of actors in the adoption of solutions to the global water crisis. This could be inspired by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) or European Commission’s suggestion for a science-policy-society interface for a food system transformation, and provide a framework for the initiatives mentioned earlier as well as for a reinforced UN-Water to bring in the collective UN voice coherently.

The international community has a once in a 46 year opportunity to take these initiatives to the next step in a coordinated manner and create a much needed positive tipping point.