

Chapter 2

Strengthening Interlinkages at the United Nations

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One of the outcomes of the UN 2023 Water Conference in March of 2023 was a recognition of the need to better link international conferences and events together and to create ongoing momentum for change that works coherently across different areas.

During the Friends of Governance for Sustainable Development workshop two months earlier, we were already discussing how to do that. I was specifically asked to speak about potential linkages between the UN 2023 Water Conference and UNFCCC COP 28.

- How do we create those linkages?
- What do we articulate linkages around?
- Who needs to be involved?

In addressing the “how” question, it's important to understand that outcomes from one conference or event can rarely feed directly into other processes or events because the form of the outcomes and inputs is unique and specific to each meeting, especially in the case of the UN 2023 Water Conference with its Interactive Dialogues and Water Action Agenda. The quality or applicability of outcomes is actually quite variable within an event or process, as well. While water can generically be inscribed on the agenda of any meeting, the specific outcomes and progress made on one occasion are, consequently, not fit for purpose to other processes—unless they are designed that way.

Instead, like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we have to envisage the overall systemic change that we're aiming for, in this case in the area of water and climate, and then design a pathway to get there by breaking it down into smaller stepwise pieces.

The international agenda is such that we have multiple opportunities to come together, take stock, realign and pursue action as a long-term change process. That's the way that we really need to conceptualize this. The pathway from UN 2023 to COP 28 has what could be a number of almost monthly stepping-stone events that we can use to this end.

In January, I suggested that the UNFCCC subsidiary bodies intercessional meetings in Bonn (SB58) in June would be an ideal place for fostering cooperation with parties and stakeholders around specific water action for climate that had been committed to at the UN 2023 Water Conference. Indeed, the members of the Water for Climate collective agreed to co-convene a side event at SB58 for this purpose. The event was designed as a listening exercise, encouraging parties to express their needs for developing and implementing water-wise climate policy. On this basis, the Water for Climate partners will then be able to cooperatively design responses to

overcome obstacles to progress in this domain so that we can go further and faster on our climate goals. Good solutions always start with good listening.

Likewise, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) will be reviewing SDG 6 on water and sanitation in July. It will also be reviewing SDGs on affordable and clean energy on industry, innovation, and infrastructure on sustainable cities and communities and partnerships. Could we envision discussions between and across all of these SDGs at the HLPF? That would potentially generate mutual benefits for their simultaneous achievement, while taking into account climate change risks which make everything more difficult. Taking a closer look at the countries which have registered Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which is the mechanism for reporting on progress on the SDGs at the country level, some broader systemic issues emerge that need to be addressed such as monitoring, finance and geographic disparities. These issues could actually serve to unite actors from each of these communities to find common solutions together.

However, the Zero Draft of the HLPF Political Statement was a great disappointment because it barely acknowledged that nearly 11,000 people in all their diversity assembled at the UN in March for the first time in 46 years to address how to overcome water challenges together. It didn't take into account over 800 voluntary multi-stakeholder commitments registered in the Water Action Agenda, a quarter of which attempt to create linkages to other global targets and half of which consider climate change.

Despite what some may say, the Water Action Agenda (WAA) is a hugely valuable source of information because it is the only place where you can see a mosaic view of what people are doing or intend to do on water around the world in the coming years. As such, it can further enable more coordinated action through the establishment of various multi-stakeholder constituencies at different levels. The real challenge now is to breathe life into it so that the actions may carry us closer towards the Future We Want.

It is important to understand that the responsibility for deliver on these pledges does not belong to the mechanism itself, which is just a tool. Rather, the commitments need to be regarded as lying within the agency of the submitters. We are so used to needing to manage everything, and that comforts us in the perception of our own utility. It's like we don't believe anything can happen if we aren't watching it. That simply isn't true. People survive without mandates from the UN every day. The relinquishment of control over that agenda is uncomfortable for some, as we see a need to evolve towards more polycentric governance systems where people are empowered to act at multiple levels simultaneously and in complementary fashion.

Consequently, I maintain that it is much more important for the WAA to provide a set of coordination mechanisms, rather than monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, to enable all actors involved to organize themselves, meet, and converge thinking over the long-term towards their common goals. We have to trust that will happen if people are given the tools to do so, because they have already identified that it is in their best interest.

This support can then be provided by different platforms at different times. The World Water Week in Stockholm, for example, provides an annual opportunity to bring together those communities that have committed to advancing the common agendas collaboratively through the

end of the International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development. It can be an opportunity to take stock of progress and coordinate further action together in global arenas, especially those outside of water, and move together towards a common horizon.

There are also other opportunities to seize, such as the Sendai Framework Midterm Review in May, the Climate Ambition Summit and New York Climate Week in September, World Bank annual meetings in October, the societal dialogues of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water, the Cairo Water Week and Meetings of Finance Ministers convened by Sanitation and Water for All. We should also remember regional opportunities, which are increasingly important, since they can speak to more context-specific realities on the ground.

This leads us to the next question: what is it that we really want to achieve with COP 28 and how do we design that pathway in smaller, more manageable steps using a language that speaks to climate specialists and can be integrated into existing UNFCCC mechanisms? The concept note that framed the discussion for the interactive dialogue on climate resilience and the environment at the UN 2023 Water Conference referred essentially to the SDG 6 Acceleration Framework, which talks about solutions related to finance data and information capacity, development, innovation and governance. It also, unsurprisingly, highlighted improving risk management for water-related hazards and threats, such as flooding, drought, and pollution, and limiting the resulting biodiversity loss through the promotion of nature-based solutions.

The concept note also included other more specific actions related to, for example, the Secretary General's Early Warning Systems for All initiative or the creation of a global water information system or a science-based mechanism like the IPCC but specifically for water. It also discussed the enhancement of policy to reduce poverty and support regulatory frameworks to spark innovation and create green jobs and a skilled workforce and the adoption of global standards for ecosystem accounting.

The note, however, falls into the trap of water experts speaking to water experts and fails to use language that resonates with climate experts. It doesn't provide clear connections with UNFCCC mechanisms such as Nationally Determined Contributions, the Global Stocktake, Loss and Damage, Long-Term Strategies, the Global Goal on Adaptation, the Marrakech Partnership or the Sharm el Sheikh Adaptation Agenda, where water action that will increase climate resilience can actually be integrated and prioritized. So, more efforts are needed to refine the "what" in a way that is truly transformational and can be integrated into COP processes.

We need to recognize issues of accountability of governments to enforce regulations, especially for polluters. We need to address urban planning and local and regional authorities in the implementation of national strategies, where adaptation, capacity, resilience, and vulnerability look very different from one place to another. We need to highlight poor disbursement of funding which is hindering progress. We need to acknowledge that all countries do not have equivalent access to resources to make things happen. We need to prioritize the empowerment of women, youth and populations who are more vulnerable to climate change and disasters and who are more severely disadvantaged.

So, onto the “who.” Well, the simple answer to that is, obviously, all of us have a shared responsibility to act. This goes far beyond the reach of the UN System alone. This ongoing collective action exercise, to be driven by all of us, will need to create simplicity within complexity by organizing action into smaller, more specific multi-stakeholder constituencies, each contributing to broader systemic change. And ultimately people—politicians and organizations—will need to actually deliver on what they say they will do.

As we have all heard, achieving SDG 6 will require quadrupling our impact. We can do more and we need to do better when we tackle the challenges together. That means reaching out to other communities, such as those of health, food, energy, oceans, climate, and finance, for example. Those communities need water to be successful, and they need the water community to help them become better stewards for it. We are only going to obtain the critical mass for exponential growth in impact if we get non-water people as excited about water as water people are. When we will finally succeed at bridging silos to foster this cross-sectoral cooperation through a systems-thinking approach, we will then all benefit from more robust decisions, policies, and investments borne of that cooperation.

The Water Action Agenda will also have to be gender inclusive. A majority of the planet’s population is female, yet women remain largely marginalized, especially from higher level (water-related) decision-making and planning processes. According to UN Water, involving women can increase the effectiveness of water projects between six and seven times. Also, gender inclusive peace processes have been found to last longer and be more resilient.

Progress will also require solid leadership, not only by a UN Envoy for Water and Sanitation but also from the UN 2023 Water Conference organizers and country co-chairs of the Interactive Dialogue process; both will be able to drive these conversations further in the political sphere. During the HLPF in July, we look forward to understanding more about how the UN intends to continue to drive change through the end of the Decade for Action and through 2030.

But most of all, we all need to drive the momentum forward by becoming leaders for change within our own spheres of influence and inspiring others to act. A poly-centric governance system is emerging where action is no longer top-down nor bottom-up, but both need to co-exist and advance together. As we are reminded by this year’s World Water Day campaign, we can all be the change we wish to see in the world.

As a certain young Swedish climate activist reminded us: the house is on fire. We are all the stewards for the water that can put out that fire if we commit now together to ambitious and ongoing collective action.