



## How can water illuminate a transformative pathway toward jobs, decent work, and an inclusive economy?

**This was the big question that guided the official UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) side event “[Water as the Economic Driver](#)” on 7 July, the opening day of the HLPF. Against the backdrop of a first-five-years review of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the ongoing Covid-19 and climate change crises, this timely side event was co-convened by SIWI, Women for Water Partnership, and the governments of Tajikistan, Norway, and South Africa, with participation from the governments of Tajikistan, South Africa, and The Netherlands.**

The spirit behind this year’s HLPF is interlinkages. With less than ten years to go until 2030, both the scientific community and the policy community are arriving at a consensus that, in order to bridge the [disparagingly wide progress gap](#) on the Sustainable Development Goals, it is imperative that our gears urgently turn to an integrated, synergetic, and holistic approach that will yield positive results across as many of the 17 SDGs as possible. We in the water community, especially as we worked to develop innovative approaches such as Integrated Water Resources Management, Source-to-Sea Action, Forest-Landscapes and Nature-based solutions, Transparency-Accountability-Participation (TAP) Framework, and the Water-Energy-Food nexus, and in general, improved water governance, have been leading proponents of integrated action on the SDGs through water as a blue thread, as well as action that bridges multiple global agendas such as the Paris Agreement on climate action, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the New Urban Agenda among others. Therefore, we welcomed the recommendations in the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report and the 2019 HLPF Political Declaration that gave special emphasis on the theme of interlinkages.

In this vein, we were delighted to convene an HLPF side event on the interlinkages between water, economic development and well-being, taking into account the goals on Water (SDG 6), Gender equality (SDG 5), and Economic Growth (SDG 8) as well as SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG2 (Zero Hunger) SDG 3 (Good health and wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG12 (sustainable production and consumption), SDG 13 (Climate action), SDG 14 (Life below water), SDG 15 (Life on land), SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions), and SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals). To shed a wide range of insights on this topic, we

gathered a diverse set of experts representing governments, international organizations, CSOs/NGOs, and academia. A video recording of the event is accessible at: <https://swedishwaterhouse.se/en/events/online-hlpf-side-event-water-as-the-economic-driver/>

The event opened with welcoming remarks from H.E. **Mahamadamin Mahmadaminov**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Tajikistan to the UN, who provided the backdrop for cooperation on the role of water, including Tajikistan's leadership in this cooperation, in the 2030 Agenda by spotlighting the [UN International Decade \(2018–2028\) for Action – Water for Sustainable Development](#).

**Maarten Gischler**, Water Adviser in The Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs and **Nchedi Moripe**, Chief/Director, Global Cooperation and Strategic Partnerships in the South Africa Department of Water and Sanitation, provided additional country perspectives. In the case of The Netherlands, which supports a global range of water initiatives such as the [Valuing Water Initiative](#), the [Urban Deltas Collaboration](#), and the [World Bank Global Water Security & Sanitation Partnership](#), their experience is that water management alone cannot save the day – as water is an enabling factor for so many SDGs, especially with regard to jobs and the economy, what is required is the integration of water in all Sustainable Development sectors, “every step of the way.” As an example of economic growth being pursued at the expense of the quality of water resources and the health of the biosphere at large, he pointed to the [Carbon Disclosure Project's survey of 2,400 companies on water pollution](#), which revealed that less than half monitor their water discharges, and only 12% have set a pollution reduction target.

From the perspective of South Africa, there are long-held and more recent lessons learned on the centrality of water to development, to job creation, and to enabling governments in building a sustainable future. South Africa, like many other countries responding to the Covid-19 crisis today, is having to redirect budgets for water management and other resources from job-sustaining industries such as fishing, mining, and energy to sanitation and health in communities in order to save lives and is grappling with the question, “How do we give our people water and sanitation quickly?” More broadly, South Africa is currently delayed in the implementation of the SDGs as a result of the impact of Covid-19. Both countries are part of the [High Level Panel on Water](#) and reiterated that elements of the final report should be revisited and acted upon.

From the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s Sector Policies Department, **Alette van Leur** provided scene-setting remarks that echoed the findings in the [2016 UN World Water Development Report on Water and Jobs](#). She stressed the necessity of good water and sanitation to achieving decent work and economic outputs, which the ILO recognizes in 9 of their conventions and 18 codes of practice applicable cross a wide range of workplaces, from fishing vessels to oil rigs to commerce offices, and reminded that it is the duty of all governments to enact international agreements on fundamental principles and rights at work when it comes to access to water. Complementing the work of governments, she added, it is important that UN agencies, enterprises, employers organizations, workers organizations, and civil society develop common strategies to accomplish the task of economic development through water and achieve several Sustainable Development goals simultaneously. Representing UN-Water, its Vice Chair **Olcay Ünver** added that the policy guidance laid out in the 2016 UN report on Water and Jobs, together with the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework launched on 9 July, chart a path forward for building back better through water, sanitation, and decent work. He repeated the main finding in the UN report, that water jobs,

although still underfunded, produce high returns on investment and generate a significant multiplier effect on job creation in other sectors. “Better water, better jobs, better lives,” he summarized. Both speakers stressed that measures to broaden the skilled workforce with vocational education and better human resources policies are crucial to reaching the SDG 6 targets.

A cross-disciplinary panel of experts followed, with several interventions drawing attention to the fact that the benefits of good water governance on the economy and the job market are well-known: the OECD’s **Oriana Romano**, Head of the Water Governance and Circular Economy Unit, spoke about the economic evidence for water as a critical factor for sustainable growth and development, given water’s many connections to, among others, poverty alleviation, just ecological transition, and agriculture, which underpin the OECD’s [Principles on Water Governance](#). **Aaron Salzberg**, Director of the Water Institute at the University of North Carolina, relayed findings that community level access to safe drinking water and sanitation and meeting minimum drinking water needs, by themselves, do not lead to promising results; rather water security at the household and community level for multiple uses, including for small-scale agriculture, is transformational, dramatically increasing human health and economic development. When it comes to the livelihoods of farmers, **Margarita Astrálaga**, Director of the Environment, Climate, Gender and Social Inclusion Division at the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), their productivity and income are found to be dependent on their ability to access a good quality and adequate quantity of water; therefore investing in groundwater wells, rainwater harvesting facilities, and water storage facilities improves the lives of farmers, and especially women and youth in rural communities. The World Bank’s Water Global Practice Manager **Soma Ghosh Moulik** cited the World Bank report [High and Dry: Climate Change, Water, and the Economy](#), which indicated that even modest improvements in water efficiency in developing countries significantly reversed the negative impacts of climate change and demographic growth. The World Bank’s recent report on [Women in Water Utilities](#) further elaborates on the economic benefits and opportunities found at the nexus of water, gender and jobs.

In practice, there are many innovative multi-stakeholder and inclusive civil society initiatives that work at the intersection of water and economic development. **Adrian Sym**, CEO of the Alliance for Water Stewardship, presented AWS’ [International Water Stewardship Standard](#), a voluntary standard endorsed and applied by a wide range of major water users in both public and private sectors who wish to better understand their water use and impacts, including economic impacts, and through this demonstration of leadership, catalyze good water governance for greater economic good. The [Water Youth Network](#), represented by WYN’s Secretary **Miguel Trejo**, is a global and inclusive connector in the water sector, with a vibrant community of students and young professionals and across disciplines. Miguel emphasized the positive impact that water related skills development and youth entrepreneurship can bring to the 67 million unemployed youth around the world today, which is all the more urgent when looking to post-Covid-19 recovery. President of [Women for Water Partnership](#) **Mariet Verhoef-Cohen** advocates, in response to the underrepresentation of women in professional and decision-making positions in the water sector in spite of the fact that women make up most of the unpaid workforce, for women and girls to have greater access to vocational training and to raise women’s employability to the new jobs that will be created in a Green Economy. **Joshua Newton**, founder of [Josh’s Water Jobs](#), shared current job market insights, noting the large human resources gap in the water sector, but encouragingly, that there has been an increase of jobs related to climate change and adaptation and nature-based solutions and emerging opportunities in data, technology, and informatics, with many governments,

international and civil society organizations, and businesses increasingly looking to harness local talent, in situ. He added that it would be useful to discuss which qualifications are most needed in today's economy and how to improve the marketing of water jobs.

SIWI's Executive Director **Torgny Holmgren** wrapped up the event by referring back the opening remarks by the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Tajikistan to the UN Mahamadamin Mahmadaminov, that water offers a road to restoring the world from the current crises and that water has a specific role to play in a post-carbon world. It is imperative that we prioritize water and sanitation for all to protect human rights, especially vulnerable groups, as well as strengthen the protection of water resources – our demand for water is much larger than the supply we have, and we need to be careful in the way we handle water now and in the future. In building back better, we have an opportunity to develop the world better in the future, and we all play a critical part in that journey. SIWI and Women for Water Partnership are open to continuing this discussion and to liaising with our partners the further explore ideas around harnessing water as a crucial driver for economic development.

*SIWI would like to thank our side event partners Women for Water Partnership, and the governments of Tajikistan, Norway, The Netherlands, and South Africa for this fruitful and timely dialogue on the transformative role of water in the global economy and development. We are also thankful to the moderators of the event Lesha Witmer of Women for Water Partnership and Jennifer Jun of SIWI, and to SIWI's Viktor Sundman and AGWA's Andr ea Ferret-Lambert for their support in organizing the event.*

**[Watch video recording of session](#)**

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