



HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON  
**WATER**  
UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK, 18 MARCH 2021



HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WATER-RELATED GOALS AND TARGETS OF THE 2030 AGENDA 18 March 2021, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Blog by Linda Witong (Soroptimist International) and Lesha Witmer (Women for Water Partnership)

In a somber but riveting session, our audience learned about how challenging our future is in relation to the water crisis. H.E Mr. Volkan Bozkir, the President of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly, began by relating how we were a long way from reaching our goals even before the COVID 19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, some 2.2 billion people –almost a third of the global population – continued to lack access to safely managed drinking water while 4.2 billion people – more than half of the planet’s population – lived without safely managed sanitation; 2 billion people did not have a decent toilet of their own. Moreover, according to **Ms. Amina J. Mohammed**, the UN Deputy Secretary General, the planetary crisis, including the interlinked threats of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, would increase water scarcity. By 2040, one in four of the world’s children under 18 – some 600 million– would be living in areas of extremely high-water stress (editor: the gap between availability and demand is going to be 56%). These challenges were all in need of urgent action – a tragic fact made even more obvious by the current pandemic which represented a stark example of global inequality.

Bozkir added that he considered it to be a moral failure that, although we live in a world with such high levels of technical innovation and success, the fact that 3 billion people have to face this pandemic without basic handwashing facilities and that health providers in some of the Least Developed Countries do not have running water is impossible to reconcile, especially when we lived in a world of such abundance and of such profound innovation.

Bozkir added an ominous warning: “when the next global pandemic or crisis strikes, and we know that it will, we will have no excuse for having not acted now.” Scientists back up his warning. A statistical estimate is “that the world’s mammals and birds are host to between 700 000 and 2.6 million as-yet unknown species from families of viruses that have shown the potential to cause zoonotic disease in humans. Of these, between 350 000 and 1.3 million could have zoonotic potential”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://earth.org/project-working-to-predict-pandemics/>

Representatives of Member States joined Bozkir and Mohammed in agreeing that water was crucial for life. We simply cannot live on this planet – and certainly not in any healthy capacity – if we were deprived of this most basic human need. Our entire agricultural system – all of the food we consumed – is dependent upon water supplies. The same extends to all other life on this planet. Every ecosystem, every species, depends upon water. Safe drinking water systems and adequate sanitation is also essential to ensure cities and towns grew sustainably. Unfortunately, the future does not look promising as, according to Mohammed, more than 90 per cent of natural disasters are water-related and increased flooding threatens to destroy water points and sanitation facilities and contaminate our water sources.

Without these core services and needs met, our ability to provide education, healthcare, and jobs and livelihoods will suffer. Member States also joined Bozkir in acknowledging that an adequate provision of safe and clean water was empowerment especially for women and girls across the globe whose daily trek to collect water continued to be an impediment to accessing education, healthcare, or work.. While women’s central role in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water was acknowledged, the implementation of this core principle remained far from adequate. Mohammed agreed with this assessment. She also observed that women and girls still suffered disproportionately when water and sanitation were lacking, affecting health and often restricting work and education opportunities. This was unfortunate as women are also the backbone of agriculture and key stewards of natural resources. The COVID-19 response has also highlighted the power of women’s leadership. As such, Mohammed argued, we need to draw from women’s experience with water and put more women decision-makers at the table as policies were put in place to build a green economy.

Other speakers also expressed concern that, by 2050, more than half the global population would be at risk due to stress on the world’s water resources. Desertification alone would threaten the livelihoods of nearly one billion people in 100 countries and intense water scarcity may displace as many as 700 million people by 2030. With 40 per cent of the world’s population living within shared river basins, trans-boundary water corporation, would become more important as without it “inclusive sustainable development is severely curtailed, and the potential for threats to peace and security are ever present.”

So why wasn’t anyone paying attention? Gilbert F. Hounbo, the President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development who also chairs UN Water observed that one problem might have been that “when we talked about the water crisis in global terms, it could seem abstract, and difficult to visualize”. Yet, by using an analogy, an excellent point was made. If a water crisis had been occurring in our own homes, he argued that it would have become our top priority to fix the problem. If our toilet or sewerage system broke down, we would also act quickly and decisively. And if the stream in our local park became polluted or our streets flooded, or if service providers made crucial decisions with no consultation – we would definitely work individually and collectively until the issue was resolved. According to Hounbo, we needed to “do on a global scale what we would do in our own homes. The world is getting smaller, and our lives are all connected. The COVID crisis has shown this to be true.”

States agreed that human health, productivity, food, energy and the natural environment all depended on a well-functioning, sustainable water cycle for everyone, everywhere. We still had time, but we needed to accelerate our efforts “and do it fast – in some areas up to four times faster – if we want to meet our SDG 6 commitments.” And we do need adequate financial support.

The COVID-19 pandemic was described as being human tragedy. But it had also created an opportunity to build a more inclusive and sustainable world and make peace with nature. But Governments alone

cannot achieve the 2030 Agenda, strong engagement of stakeholders, including women and girls are essential for the achievement of all SDGs.

During the “CSO spotlight” as the President of the UNGA called it, voice was also given to Lesha Witmer as spokes woman for Women for Water Partnership and the European Pact for Water. See speech [www.womenforwater.org](https://www.womenforwater.org) YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nb1eSxdBVng>

Lesha stressed the following:

Water is pivotal to women’s empowerment, enables them. Despite international commitments, practice is not on track, reliable data on achieving gender equality in the water domain are scarce, target 17.18 not reflected.

Ensuring people’s views and needs are reflected in our actions, we need disaggregated data; Citizens science could make a huge difference in availability and trust in data.

Gender-responsive budgeting is a good tool in view of the gender-blindness of governmental budgets. It takes gender perspectives into account - avoiding discrimination.

Good governance requires policies addressing women’s specific needs, empowers women to participate in decision-making on water in “ways defined by them”. It implies equal access to the labour market with safe working conditions, equal pay and vocational training. Pay women’s currently unpaid work is key to achieving gender equality and better management of water resources and a higher GDP.

Quotas improve “numbers”. Good governance is also: ensure people can speak, acknowledge their input in decision-making. We need to train chairs, minute takers, potential speakers to achieve this.

Women for Water, WWAP, UN Water, national women’s organizations are happy to share existing tools and cases.

News that water could be traded on the Wall Street futures market started a big on-line debate: is water a commodity or a human right? Monitoring systems lack Human Rights indicators, thus limiting interventions to realize HRWS and governance - as COVID has shown. @WfWPartnership; #water2me; #valuingwater



What does water mean to you?

## JOIN US

### The value of water: A discussion between people, governments and experts

The theme of World Water Day 2021 is 'Valuing Water'. We invite you to a discussion about the World Water Development Report 2021 and the #Water2Me campaign. This event follows directly from the official UN launch of World Water Day giving you a chance for more debate and to increase our understanding of the many values of water and what it means to people. Hear the thoughts and perspectives from users and people outside the water sector.

**World Water Day: 22 March 2021 | 15:00 - 16:30 CET**

#WorldWaterDay #Water2me #ValuingWater

Hosted by: Women for Water Partnership, AquaFed

**Register here:**

**Register for 22 March 2021 3 pm CET**

short: <https://bit.ly/3qFqXjL>

long: [https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_KA0YkKpxTHqVI42SPcIldw](https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_KA0YkKpxTHqVI42SPcIldw)