PROPOSED THEMES
WORLD WATER DAY
2021 AND 2022

UN WATER
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WORLD WATER DAY

Chronic Global Water Problems

The world is off-track to meet Sustainable Development Goal 6 and we need to speed up progress to achieve the goal by 2030. While this is a condensed message form the recent SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2018, it is not the first decade in a row, that we fail to meet the well-crafted and noble targets. Moreover, the global water development agenda has hardly changed since the 1980s. Some water problems are newer than others, such as those related to climate change adaptation or wastewater management in the light of a more extreme climate and a growing population. Others are much older, such as access to water and sanitation. Billion-dollar problems, such as the economic damage from floods and droughts, or "thousands deaths" problems of arsenic groundwater contamination, or proverbal problems of water data availability and free sharing – all have one thing in common: they stay unresolved. This World Water Day theme would put a spotlight on the long-standing water challenges we face for generations, and question why we are unable to solve them when, in many cases, we already know what to do. The public would be engaged to put into practice individual solutions to help solve the water crisis.

Groundwater: Making Invisible Visible

Groundwater is a vital resource that provides almost half of all drinking water worldwide, about 40% of water for irrigated agriculture and about 1/3 of water required for industry. It sustains ecosystems, maintains the baseflow of rivers and prevents land subsidence and seawater intrusion. Groundwater is an important part of climate change adaptation process and is often a solution for people without access to safe water. Despite these impressive facts and figures, invisible groundwater is out of sight and out of mind for most people. Human activities (including population- and economic growth) and climate variability are rapidly increasing the pressure on groundwater resources: serious depletion and pollution problems are reported for many parts of the world. A World Water Day on groundwater would put a spotlight on this invisible resource, enhance knowledge exchange and collaboration and thereby increase the awareness of the importance of taking care of our groundwater.

Saving land saves water

People will feel the impacts of water scarcity most strongly through its effect on land and the capacity to produce food. Agriculture is struggling to cope with increasing desertification, made worse by the effects of climate change. Maintaining healthy and productive land is a critical element in terms of sustainable solutions to respond to extreme weather events such as floods and droughts. Land degradation remains the greatest policy blind spot in domestic and global responses to water management with droughts at the forefront. However, solutions are at hand: a concerted global effort to halt and

reverse desertification, land degradation, restore degraded ecosystem and sustainable land management are essential for reducing the risks and mitigating the effects of water related disasters. Water and land are intricately linked. Action that affects one almost undoubtedly impacts the other, often with positive feedback loops. A World Water Day that focuses on water and land degradation would show audiences the link between healthy land and sustainable solutions to the water crisis. This will help drive new policy on deploying the smart innovation and investment we need to protect these finite, critical resources.

Unconventional Water Resources and Technologies

While SDG 6 calls for access to safe water for all by 2030, more than two-thirds of the global population is expected to face water scarcity by the same year. Conventional approaches relying on rainfall and river runoff in water-scarce areas are not sufficient to meet the human needs. Water-scarce countries and communities need to consider, progressively more, a range of unconventional water resources to narrow the water demand-supply gap for food production, livelihoods, ecosystems, and sustainable development. This World Water Day theme would focus on exploring the potential of the most unconventional water resources and associated technologies, such as harvesting atmospheric moisture, accessing groundwater confined in deep geological formations or off-shore, accelerating wide-scale adoption of desalination technologies while limiting and containing its environmental impacts, transporting water long-distances by the sea through tankers and icebergs, and other emerging approaches that can enhance water availability and access at various scales – from local to global. The topic will attract international attention to the "portfolio" of such source and technologies, stimulate policy responses, encourage technological innovations, and capacity development while addressing specific barriers. The public would be engaged around unconventional water solutions both on a macro and micro level.

Valuing Water

Access to safe water is key to the three pillars of sustainable development: people, planet and prosperity. Most people agree that water is an extremely valuable resource: for farmers who depend on it to grow crops, for businesses that need it to cool machines, spin turbines and produce goods, for the environment and its sustainable quality as well as for human life. But unlike most other valuable resources, it's proven hard to put a price on water, and the value of this vital resource is not reflected in levels of financial investment in many parts of the world. This leaves hundreds of millions of people without the sustainable water services they need to survive and thrive. A World Water Day about the value of water would focus on the innovative sources of finance needed to invest in water services to help achieve all SDGs that touch water: drinking water and sanitation, biodiversity and ecosystems, agriculture and food, energy, and impacts upon economic and social development for all segments of global society. This will inspire partnership between the private and public sectors by highlighting the current financing and social opportunities and helping less familiar stakeholders understand the linkages and overall value of investments in water.

WASH for Health Care Facilities

As places of healing, healthcare facilities need to be hygienic and safe. However, up to 40% of facilities lack water, 20% lack sanitation and 30% lack hand hygiene facilities. In March 2018, the UN Secretary-General issued a Global Call to Action on WASH in healthcare facilities, calling on all UN agencies to elevate and address this neglected issue within their various mandates and work. A global response has been drafted with input from over 30 partners, emphasizing the need for a systems approach, leadership from health and setting and tracking national targets. The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme will regularly report on WASH in health care facility figures as part of SDG 6 monitoring. The first baseline report will be released in early 2019 and UN-Water is contributing to the work through its Expert Group on WASH. Dedicating a future World Water Day to this issue will further catalyse efforts and progress, consolidate WASH sector actions and solutions, and feed into a concrete global work plan and monitoring system to further advance national goals and targets.

Water, Citizens and Youth

Youth make up 40% of the global population and are active citizens striving to create change through innovative initiatives and every day actions. If their rights to water and sanitation are not fulfilled it can become a major driver of extreme poverty - especially in cities - undermining educational and occupational progress and stunting mental and physical development through disease and malnutrition. The selection, training and retention of qualified staff is also a fundamental problem which leads to under-performance of water utilities. A World Water Day that puts a spotlight on youth action for water and the training of qualified staff will enable to engage citizens, particularly young people, to on the one hand get recognition and inspiration to continue being agents of change and on the other hand be aware of their rights and demand more action would accelerate progress towards SDG 6.

Water - from potential conflict to cooperation and peace

Water is a matter of life and death for the two billion people currently lacking access to safe drinking water. Most of them live in fragile, often violent parts of the world where conflict over water, in an era of increasing water stress, is happening at different levels. When these resources are depleted, degraded or contested, they have the potential to spark a conflagration within and between countries. How we manage local as well as transboundary water resource to serve all their dependent citizens (within the basin and beyond) is vital to promoting peaceful cooperation and sustainable development. A World Water Day on avoiding water conflicts through better governance and accountability to support peace and cooperation will show how cooperation can make our stretched water resources meet everyone's needs.

Water and Education

Water information, knowledge and education are needed to create a world where we make sound decisions to manage our water and environmental resources in a sustainable way. Building and continuously updating the skills and competencies of individuals, professionals and institutions and educating them to work in a collaborative and empowered manner is essential to make progress on SDG 6. Education and learning goes also through an important transition as the skills/competencies of the past are not fit for purpose in a rapidly changing and increasing complex world (i.e. impacts of increasing

digitalization, AI etc.). A World Water Day on water and education would not only teach and create awareness of how everyone can care about water but also contribute to promoting professional careers to support water and sanitation's proper administration.

Water and Innovation

The 2030 Agenda's ambitious goals and short time span call for innovation. Novelty will allow us to find effective and efficient solutions that generate a high impact. Business as usual will not get us there. Innovation is not only about technology but about new approaches, new collaborations, new perspectives, new tools, new actors, new business models, new decision-making models. We need to push the boundaries of the water community, shake the water box and create meaningful conversations. A World Water Day on innovation will build on previous themes for World Water Day, link with the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and could become a catalyst for the successful implementation of the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement.

Water and the Ocean

Freshwater systems and the oceans are connected through the hydrological cycle. Achieving a sustainable development is partly dependent upon our ability to balance competing uses of water in an equitable manner while maintaining water quality and ensuring healthy, diverse and connected ecosystems all the way from source to sea. Yet, challenges persist to reduce land-based pressures on freshwater systems, coasts and the oceans across the world. Nutrient loads from agricultural runoff and inadequate wastewater treatment continue to cause eutrophication and the proliferation of dead zones in coastal and marine waters. Millions of tons of plastic enter the ocean through rivers every year. Meanwhile, waters from some rivers are so highly diverted, there is little left to actually reach the sea. A World Water Day theme on "water and the ocean" could put a spotlight on the dynamics between upstream resource use and downstream impacts. It would explore the important role of water management to prevent unintended negative downstream consequences from land-based activities.

Water and Wetlands

Access to a clean and adequate water is critical for human survival. Less well understood is that wetlands play an essential role in maintaining the quantity and quality of fresh water. From lakes and aquifers, to rice paddies and deltas – wetlands supply almost all of the world's fresh water. Yet, 70% of natural wetlands have been lost to human activity and decline continues. A World Water Day that focuses on wetlands would highlight the essential role of wetlands in the water supply cycle. Audiences will learn to appreciate wetlands and be inspired to help stop their loss and degradation.

Water and Women

Access to and equal management of water and sanitation are prerequisites for women's development and empowerment. The water-related labor market, financial independence, education and good health are all unlocked by access to water and sanitation. Although this principle has been part of the legacy of and policy on water since 1992 (Dublin principles), the implementation needs a real boost. Acknowledging women's traditional and modern roles can help unlock women's potential in achieving SDG 6 and the wider 2030 Agenda. To

reach the SDG targets it is imperative to ensure and enhance women's professional and voluntary roles and involvement in water. A dedicated World Water Day can help to unlock this major, persisting issue.

Water in the nexus: Synergies across sectors

The three dimensions of sustainable development– social, economic and environmental – are inherently interdependent, and the integration of Goal 6 across the 2030 Agenda is essential to achieve all of the Sustainable Development Goals. A World Water Day that would put the focus on how to balance resource demands of the food-water-energy-ecosystem nexus would provide a framework to analyse the strong links between achieving a balance between food, water and energy security, the direct and immediate impacts these activities can have on ecosystems, and the solutions that biodiversity and ecosystems can provide. It would also raise the public awareness of the central role water and sanitation plays in the SDGs.

Water Quality

Improving water quality is central for the achievement of the SDG 6—in particular of its four Targets 6.3, 6.1, 6.2, and 6.6. Water quality also cuts across all SDGs with direct and indirect links. Improving water quality is a pre-requisite for the achievement of the SDG targets on eliminating water-borne diseases (SDG 3) , restoring and protecting freshwater ecosystems (SDG 15), reducing marine pollution from land-based activities (SDG 14), ending malnutrition and enhancing sustainable food production systems (SDG 2) and reducing the release of hazardous chemicals to water and soil through sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12). Yet, water pollution is worsening in all parts of the world, posing risks to human health and ecosystems. The degradation of water quality is the most predominant factor leading to ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss. The increasing water quality degradation furthermore limits the availability of freshwater resources for productive uses. Hence, dedicating one of the next World Water Days to the theme 'Water Quality" will provide an important global platform to draw attention to this critical issue and to call for action by all stakeholders at all levels and across all sectors in order to reduce water pollution and improve water quality to support the implementation of the SDG 6 and many other SDGs.