



2021 Valuing water



# WORLD WATER DAY 2021: VALUING WATER

## #WATER2ME LISTENING EXERCISE SUMMARY

MARCH 2021

*This is a product by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Aquafed, Public Services International, the Government of the Netherlands, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Sanitation and Water for All, International Water Association (IWA), International Water Management Institute (IWMI), Water.org and Women for Water Partnership (WfWP).*

*Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Members and Partners of UN-Water.*



## INTRODUCTION

What is the one true value of water? Or does it have multiple values depending on who you ask? These are among the questions that the [World Water Day 2021](#) campaign and the [United Nations World Water Development Report \(UN WWDR\) 2021](#) tries to answer.

‘Valuing Water’ – the theme of World Water Day 2021 – is complex and often left to policymakers and experts from environmental, engineering, scientific, finance and legal sectors. Their discussions and solutions can easily appear removed from the concerns people have about the impact water has on their lives and environment.

This year, the World Water Day campaign asked people around the world to say how they value water and why water is so important in their lives. This is not just about the financial value of water e.g., the price people pay, the costs and the investments. This is about policymakers and experts listening to users of water to understand how they see its value and what actions they want prioritized.

The messages from participants are simple and clear. They said water means life – it creates life and is essential to maintaining it. Participants also highlighted the importance of individual actions in the responsible and sustainable use of water, and

often in relation to the growing challenge of water scarcity in certain regions.

## WHAT IS THE ‘LISTENING EXERCISE’?

This summary of the Listening Exercise is not meant to be a technical document. This is a snapshot of the public conversations of more than 6,000 social media conversations on blogs, LinkedIn, Instagram, news, Facebook, Twitter and Reddit with a reach of nearly 140 million potential impressions generated by over 3,000 authors. The conversations took place between mid-November 2020 and mid-February 2021 in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

This was through a public campaign driven primarily through social media channels and using simple questions and shareable resources. People were encouraged to give their views on water or to join conversations already in progress.

A body of conversations was created in the three months leading up to World Water Day on 22 March 2021 by participants tagging their social media contributions with #Water2me and by sending in emails.

The campaign generated conversations in 140 countries, with USA, India and UK generating

almost a third of the total mentions<sup>1</sup> in the listening exercise. Notably, six of the 20 most engaged countries were in Africa, in the following descending order: Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya and Ghana.

### What will happen with the Listening Exercise?

This Listening Exercise summary will be presented to governments and everyone working in water, so that decisions are made with even greater knowledge of the needs and priorities of people and users. This summary will help to encourage greater prioritization of the protection of freshwater sources (rivers, lakes and water stored underground) and also better management of water services.

### Who wrote this summary?

This summary has been written by a group of UN-Water Members and Partners in partnership, operating under the umbrella of UN-Water.

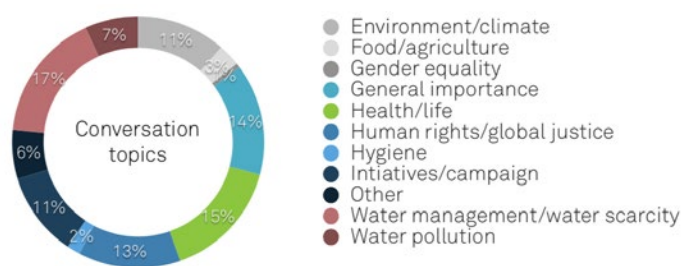
## WHAT DID PEOPLE SAY?

This is a summary of what people said:

- **Protecting water is everyone's responsibility.** There was a very loud and clear message that everyone is responsible for protecting sources of drinking water. Participants also spoke about being careful about how we use water in our daily decisions and their concerns about water scarcity. This message was also about political action and how governments and authorities must do more to protect water sources.
- **Water is life.** A simple message repeated by many who affirmed that safe water is essential to human life and is a prerequisite for life. Access to safe wa-

ter in poor countries was mentioned as a crucial element in maintaining health, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Water is a human right.** People in rich and poor countries highlighted that access to water is a human right and a foundation for other human rights. Injustice in access to water between poor and rich countries was raised as a key issue that needs to be solved. The news that water could potentially be traded on the Wall Street futures market started a debate in poor and rich countries about whether water is a commodity or a human right.
- **Water is life for the environment and ecosystems.** The fundamental importance of water to the environment was another key message. At times, participants spoke of the environment in a similar way to health and life, mentioning how water is necessary for all ecosystems to flourish. The impact of climate change on access to safe water was mentioned, while conservation and restoration of wetlands was brought up as an important measure of adaptation.
- **There will be no food without water.** People connected food and water with regard to both the lack of water in general for agriculture and the lack of safe water in particular. People referenced food's high content of 'virtual water',<sup>2</sup> and the importance of reducing food waste, and the positive effects this can have on water usage.



<sup>1</sup> Specific mentions of #Water2me on social media. A social mention is defined as the text inclusion of a monitored keyword in a post on a social media platform, blog or news.

<sup>2</sup> Virtual water is the concept of the water embedded in the production and trade of food or other commodities, such as textiles.

## THE CONVERSATION TOPICS IN MORE DETAIL

In this section, there is deeper analysis of the main topics that came up in the campaign and examples of what people said.

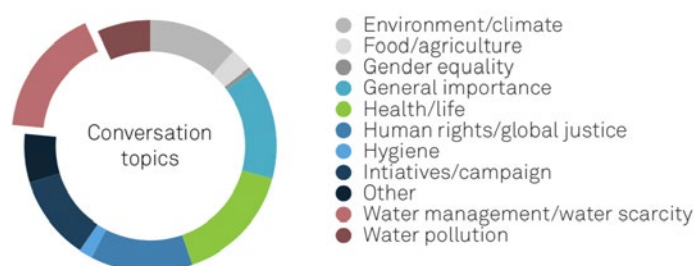
### CONVERSATION TOPIC: WATER MANAGEMENT AND WATER SCARCITY

- Water management in relation to preventing water being wasted was a frequent topic. A particular post stating that an estimated 1/3 of all food produced globally is lost or wasted generated much attention and retweets.<sup>3</sup> Reducing food waste was described as a way to reduce the demand for water from farming, which is one of the biggest water-consuming industries.
- [Another post](#) addressing how more than 3 billion people live in agricultural areas with high to very high water shortages or scarcity received much attention.
- Many users on Instagram and Facebook discussed ways to use less water and reduce water being wasted. These suggestions ranged from individual actions such as harvesting rainwater and taking shorter showers, to collective actions like building water pipelines and water treatment plants.
- Governments were urged to develop better strategies to conserve and protect water catchment areas, an issue that was brought up in a variety of regions in North and South America as well as Africa.
- The slogan and the hashtag “every drop counts” occasionally appeared in posts by individual users.

#### Quotes:

*“Advise the government to develop better strategies to conserve water including protecting water catchment areas and educating people accordingly.”*

*“Our whole civilization is built on the access to water sources. It happened in my life to face the difficulties that someone can experience when there was no water for some days in the place I was living then. It is very hard when you are used to turn on the tap and have as much water as you want, to drink, to cook, to bath, to toilet, to clean, to wash, and to be suddenly without it!! The only alternative available it was expensive bottled water from the supermarket. It was a time in my life that I woke up and realized how valuable and important water is in my life, for the life on Earth.”*



### CONVERSATION TOPIC: HEALTH AND LIFE

- The phrase “water is life” frequently appeared in the conversations and was used by several different organizations, as well as individuals. This general phrase referred to both health and the environment and, in the context of health, water was described to be essential to the survival of the human species.
- A majority of the posts related to health emphasized that accessibility to safe water is important to health in general, rather than raising specific, individual concerns.

<sup>3</sup> By February 2021, the post had generated over 46,000 impressions on Twitter.



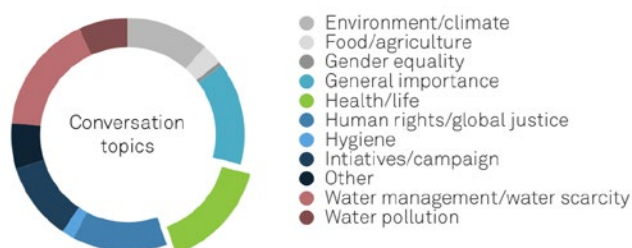
- Conversations related to public health mentioned that reliable and affordable water services are essential for a society to function. [One tweet](#) highlighting that pipes, tanks and treatment systems are easily taken for granted received a high number of retweets from several non-profit organisations and companies and was one of the most responded-to posts.
- Various posts highlighted that people in poor countries are at a higher risk of COVID-19 due to lack of safe clean water, and raised awareness around hygiene in the struggle against the pandemic. As an example, a non-governmental organization in Kenya mentioned that access to safe water was critical to the health of families in Kenya in order to protect themselves from the COVID-19 pandemic and other diseases.

#### Quotes:

*"We still have water crisis in our country, over 24 million people lack basic safe and clean water. This is half of the population."*

*"Water is good health and is extremely crucial for all over development."*

*"Yes public health largely depends on availability of safe drinking water and its quality. The selection of right material for construction of public utilities is very critical."*



### CONVERSATION TOPIC: ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE

- Various posts described water as a vital resource that makes ecosystems flourish.
- The protection of wetlands was described as particularly important, since they are effective and inexpensive

natural barriers to flooding, extreme weather events and erosion. Posts also highlighted that less than 1 per cent of water on Earth is usable freshwater and it is mostly stored in wetlands. The posts received much attention and a significant amount of retweets, where the connection to World Wetlands Day and related hashtags contributed to the visibility.

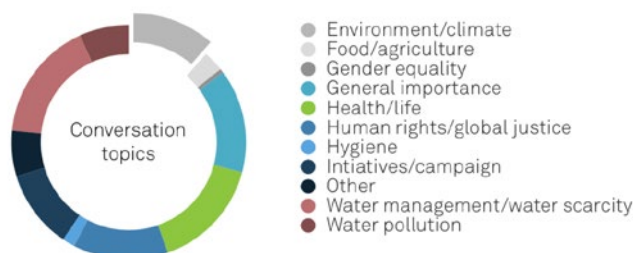
- Climate change was described as making access to safe water harder in certain areas. As a result, various participants highlighted that it is more important than ever to safeguard water effectively. Participants in some instances expressed how governments and authorities needed to do more to protect sensitive areas.
- On an individual level, a number of participants also highlighted increased levels of recycling as a way to reduce plastic waste, which might otherwise end up in seas, lakes and rivers.

#### Quotes:

*"We know that we are feeling the brunt and the impact is visible but we need to know the extent of loss in the eastern Himalaya which is also the water tower and source and livelihoods for so many people."*

*"Clean water is vital for life. Beside this, water bodies beautify the environment, are habitats to various species, help generate forex [foreign exchange] (as same as tourist sites) and help with ecosystem balance."*

*"Find a sustainable alternative to drawing most of the low quality drinking water from the already parched Colorado River."*



## CONVERSATION TOPIC: HUMAN RIGHTS AND GLOBAL JUSTICE

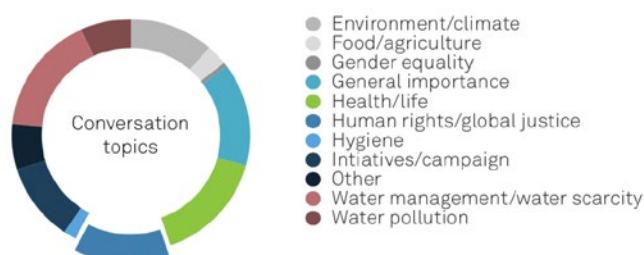
- Various posts covered different local campaigns in Africa, which used slogans and hashtags such as #ClaimYourWaterRights and #VoicesforWater, in addition to the campaign hashtag #Water2me. Universal access to safe water was described as a human right, as well as a foundation for achieving other human rights, such as right to good health and the right to development.
- Conversations on this topic often had a political and activist character. Several posts covered protests that demanded the human right to safe and clean water, particularly in Zimbabwe under #StandUp4WaterRights.
- The gap between poor and rich countries with regards to accessibility to safe water was described as a global injustice and a key issue that needs to be solved.
- Related to news that water will be traded on the Wall Street futures market, [a tweet](#) calling on everyone to start a global debate on the values of water, received much attention.

Quotes:

*"Everyone should have access to a good quality water, it's a right."*

*"In rural India, one sees that it is the duty of women to fetch water from water ponds kilometers away, in urban slums too we see women fighting for tank water."*

*"Here in the US we're lucky that the majority of our citizens have access to clean water, but there are still over 2,000,000 people living without it. That's what we strive to change every day!"*



## CONVERSATION TOPIC: WATER POLLUTION

- The connection between the environment and water pollution was a frequent topic. A reduction in water pollution was closely connected to the preservation of aquatic life and functioning ecosystems.
- Several posts highlighted a variety of initiatives meant to eliminate pollution of water sources, such as the 'TrashPocket' portable ash tray.
- Several participants raised awareness about places with polluted water and a lack of safe water. They mentioned rural communities in various parts of Africa and in the case of the Yamuna river in India, people spoke about the environmental impact from uninhibited industrial and religious activities along the river.
- Plastic pollution was raised as a major concern by multiple participants, where many argued that tons of plastic waste entering oceans, seas and rivers every year was a threat to health and the environment. People referenced initiatives to reduce the amount of plastic in rivers and lakes, and on shorelines, with relevant organizations retweeting and engaging in the conversations.

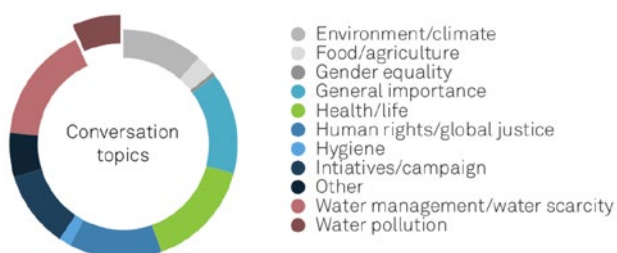


## Quotes:

*"Life cannot be thought without water. But unfortunately, our inhuman activities are the main reason for ruining it. We have to truly take necessary steps for saving the water, for aquatic organisms. Otherwise the whole ecosystem processes will be collapsed [...] we are belonging to this ecosystem."*

*"I would love to make water free from plastic pollution if I ever can do something great for it I would not hesitate to take step forward. Presence of plastic in water is dangerous for the survival of living in water. Change will be – let's make water pure for drinking."*

*"I will ask people to stop throwing spiritual offering in rivers... it damages the most as it contains harmful chemicals and plastics."*



## CONVERSATION TOPIC: FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

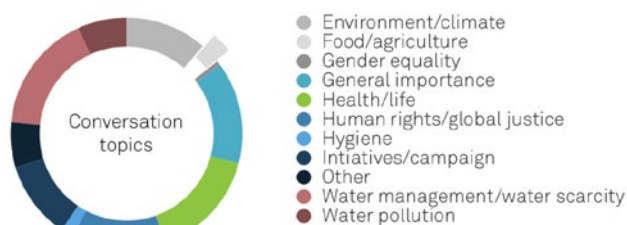
- Food and agriculture was discussed as a problem with regard to both the lack of water in general for food production and agriculture, and the lack of safe water in particular.
- Several organizations used the slogan "water is food", which also referred to food's high content of virtual water and made the assertion that "no water = no food". Participants in the social media conversations also spoke of the importance of reducing food waste, and the positive effects this can have on water usage.
- Content on the topic was also shared and commented on by organizations and entrepreneurs within the food

industry and agriculture sector, who highlighted progress and innovation such as smart farming and automated irrigation that can help with water efficiency.

## Quotes:

*"Water used in foods/drinks production should be clean. This is because the water will determine the quality of the final product for consumption. Unsafe water used in food/drinks production can have adverse health effects to the consumers. It's all about water quantity and quality."*

*"I introduced Conservation Agriculture Systems approach to farmers and they adopted now because they can save 40 percentage water compared with conventional tillage."*



## OTHER CONVERSATION TOPICS: GENERAL IMPORTANCE

The conversations grouped as 'General importance' constituted a large share of the conversations. Mentions and comments did not raise any other arguments for water other than proclaiming for example that water is "great", "precious" or "means everything". However, the comments are still an indication of the engagement and the positive attitude the majority of participants expressed related to the campaign.

The conversations grouped as 'Initiatives and campaigns' included several posts about different initiatives related to World Water Day: for example, the One Bucket Challenge where participants (living with an adequate water supply) are challenged to only use one bucket of water per day for all their needs.



In relation to hygiene, various posts described the importance of clean water when it comes to maintaining good hygiene standards and avoiding diseases, with COVID-19 being mentioned as one example.



## WORDCLOUD: HASHTAGS, PHRASES AND KEYWORDS

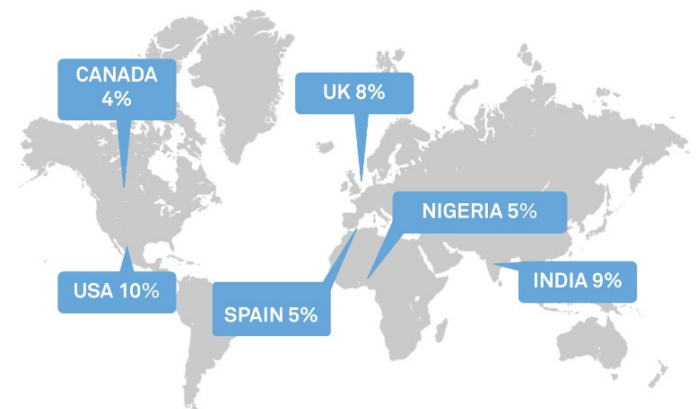
### AND KEYWORDS



## WHO IS TALKING?

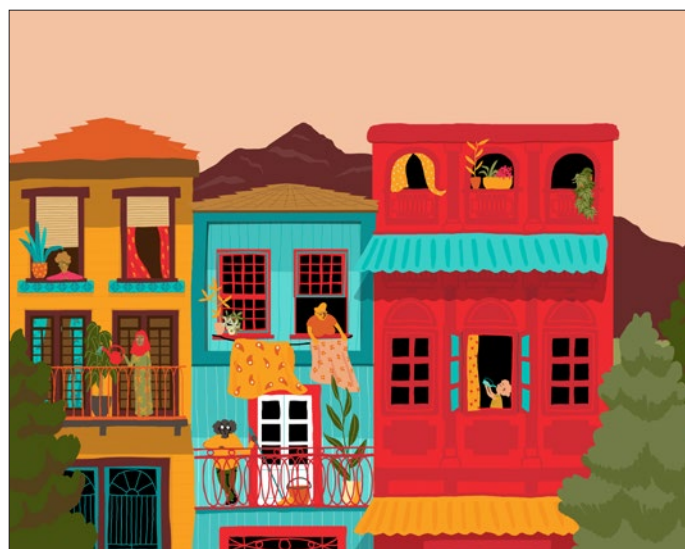
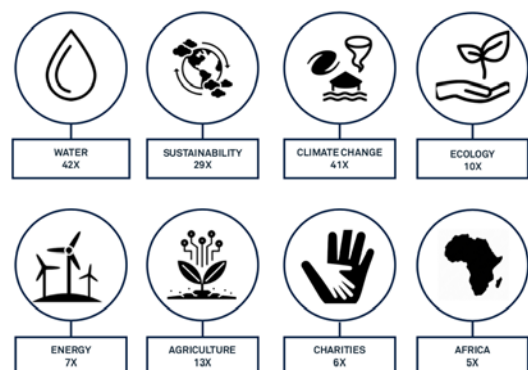
#Water2me generated conversations in a total of 140 countries, with USA, India and UK generating almost a third of the total mentions. Six of the 20 most engaged countries were in Africa, in the following descending order: Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Ghana.

### Top six conversation locations



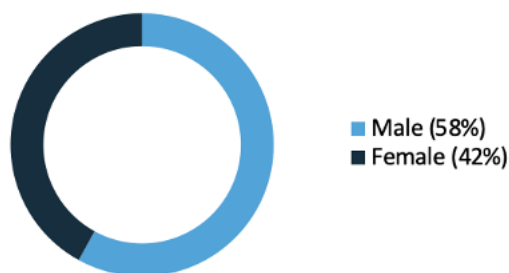
Looking at the interests of the participants, water, sustainability and climate change were among the most defining affinities,<sup>4</sup> and it was found that participants engaging with the hashtag #Water2me have much higher affinity with certain key issues than the average social media user.

### Degree of increased affinity with key issues compared to the average social media user



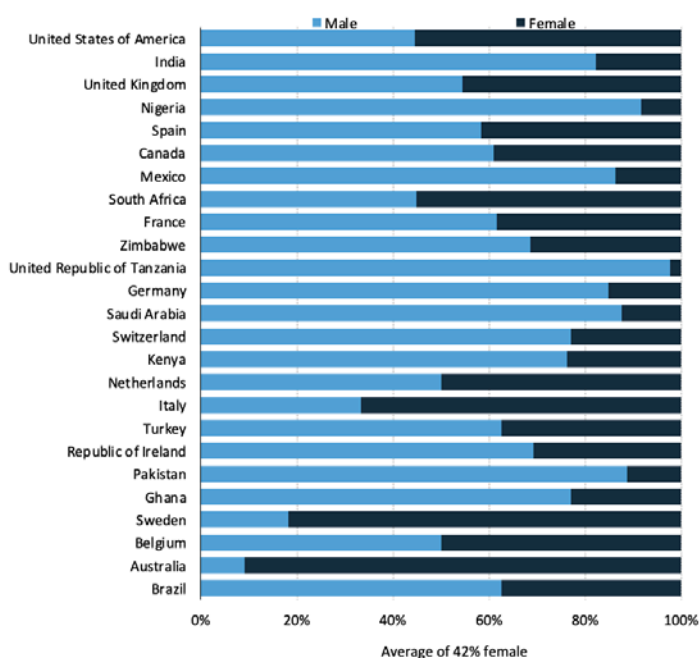
<sup>4</sup> Likelihood of interest compared to the average social media user. Affinities are based on social media users' interests, conversations, keywords and engagement. The audience is then compared to an average user in order to identify particularly active interests.

58 per cent of the participants were male and 42 per cent female.



- In the USA, Netherlands and South Africa the majority of participants were female.
- More than 75 per cent of participants were male in several African countries: Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Egypt, Kenya, Ghana and Cameroon; and in India, Pakistan and Germany.

### Gender breakdown top 25 countries

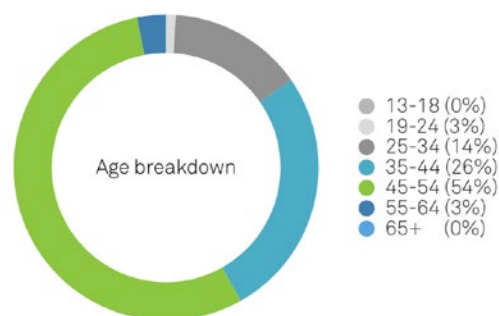


### Age breakdown

80 per cent of the audience was age 35–54, with the age group 45–54 being the single largest at 54 per cent.

This indicates that the topic generated high interest among a slightly older target group. Arguably the

target group's age might also be an indication of the audience being educated and having prior knowledge within the topic.



### WEIBO

On Weibo, one of China's largest social media platforms, with around 523 million users (as of 2020), seven posts generated an additional 39 engagements and 117,000 impressions.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to engagement on the other social media accounts, water as a source for life was the most recurring topic among responses on Weibo, with multiple users mentioning the positive health impacts of drinking water.



<sup>5</sup> Data provided by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

## NOTABLE INFLUENCES ON THE CONVERSATIONS



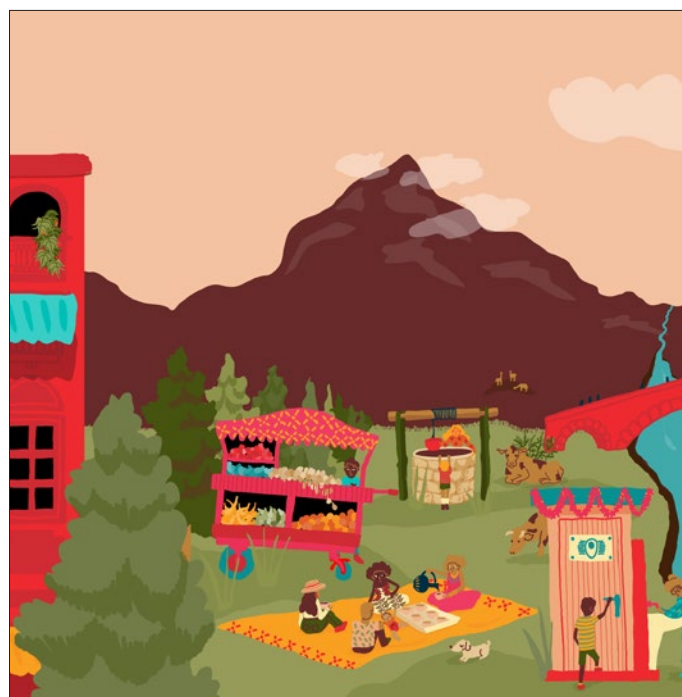
World Wetlands Day, January 18, had the highest volume of conversations, at 282 per cent higher than average. On January 11, the conversations peaked around the question “what does water mean to you?” due to a joint coordinated effort on social media from UN-Water Members and Partners, that drove conversation in several languages. The rising volume of mentions in December 2020 was due to the news that water could potentially be traded on the Wall Street futures market.

## CONCLUSIONS

The following points are conclusions based on what has been learned through the #Water2me listening exercise.

**Social media is an effective way to understand people’s opinions on water.** The Listening Exercise, using social media platforms to initiate and facilitate conversations, succeeded in collecting a wide range of views on the value of water from participants all over the world.

This summary presents a picture of where and how conversations around water and related topics happened and a record of the themes that people referenced, helping to understand many people’s opinions on a variety of themes related to water.



**Communication about water needs to be two-way.** There is great potential to further use social media platforms not only in a listening capacity but also in a genuinely conversational manner, to talk with people about their opinions and experiences. These conversations matter and are important. With appropriately targeted communications strategies, conversations can be as general or specific and technical as desired.

**People have the same priorities but understand them in different ways.** General proclamations (e.g., “water is great/precious/means everything”), while not especially descriptive, were a good sign that the issues people are focused on are the same as policymakers, even if from different perspectives.

The link between life, health and water was one of the most discussed topics. People were clear: water is vital to ecosystems and aquatic life, and critical to human health and survival, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Deeper and more complex conversations happened around other topics such as water as a human right, water accessibility disparities between high- and low-income settings, and various aspects of trading water on financial markets.

**People need to be supported to share knowledge and collaborate for positive change.** The campaign proved a very useful way to connect people with the same concerns in different locations and to understand from each other what they can do bring change.

Pollution, particularly by plastic waste, generated a lot of conversations and many people shared various initiatives to recycle and reduce the amount of plastic in oceans, rivers and lakes.

What clearly stood out across various discussions was the recognition that solutions to many water challenges involved both personal and political action. This came through strongly in conversations around water management and governments and authorities' perceived role in safeguarding this precious resource, especially in relation to the effects of climate change and growing challenges with water scarcity.

Explore some of the [public conversations](#) and [stories collected](#).