



A boy jumps into a river formation after a cyclon in Baki District, Somaliland.

SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all

2023 – a turning point in the global water agenda?

A third of humanity has no access to clean drinking water¹, and adequate sanitation is not available for almost half of the people worldwide². So far, it has not been possible to adopt a development strategy for the natural resource of water which would sustainably ensure access to water and sanitation for the present and future generation. The year 2023 marks the mid-point in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and could represent a turning point in the global water agenda. This year in particular, water takes high priority in numerous UN conferences, but will there be a breakthrough in successfully addressing the structural challenges of SDG 6?

THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF SDG 6 FOR THE 2030 AGENDA

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030 call for universal action and demand global measures to combat poverty and inequality. The sixth sustainability goal in Agenda 2030 addresses access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). With this global goal, the international community has committed itself to ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030³. SDG 6 links development aspects with ecological challenges and is a crucial factor regarding all dimensions of social, economic, and environment-related development (see diagram). The agenda 2030 is based on the Universal Human Rights. In 2010, the adoption of the human rights to sufficient water for drinking, personal and domestic hygiene, and access to adequate sanitation paved the way for the integration of SDG 6 into the agenda 2030. Furthermore, SDG 6 and its criteria reflect the human rights principles⁴.



1 <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/1-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who>
 2 <https://www.bmz.de/de/agenda-2030/sdg-6>

3 <https://sdg-indikatoren.de/6/>
 4 <https://human-rights-to-water-and-sanitation.org/hrbackground/>

The current pace of implementation is not sufficient to achieve the water targets by 2030, which would require a fourfold pace of implementing SDG 6⁵. As yet, 2.2 billion people still have no access to water on their premises which is free from contamination and readily accessible when required⁶ (safe drinking water). 3.6 billion people have no access to toilets which are not shared with other households and from which the wastewater is safely treated and disposed of (safe sanitation)⁷.

Implementing Agenda 2030 is a cross-sector task, and the target projects of the SDGs cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. SDG 6 contributes in particular to achieving SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 13 (climate action), and is hence a key instrument in achieving the SDGs of Agenda 2030.

WASH IS FUNDAMENTAL TO THE HUMAN RIGHT TO FOOD

Clean drinking water and adequate sanitation are of particular relevance to achieving SDG 2, ending hunger worldwide by 2030. Access to WASH has a direct influence on the nutrition situation, food supply, and health of many people. Both children and adults who do not have basic WASH facilities face grave consequences. An environment which is polluted because of insufficient wastewater disposal, contaminated drinking water, and a lack of hygiene owing to water scarcity is a frequent cause of diarrhea and infectious diseases. As a consequence of this, nutrients can no longer be absorbed and processed by the body. In turn, this leads to acute under- and malnutrition. Realizing the human right to food is therefore closely linked to access to WASH. This was already established by the United Nations in its guidelines on the human right to adequate food in 2004⁸. According to guideline 3.6, access to clean drinking water, adequate sanitary facilities, and good hygiene practice is of particular significance in strategies to combat poverty as well as in food and nutrition security. Moreover, agriculture is the biggest consumer of water and is hence intrinsically linked to SDG 6⁹.

STRENGTHENING WASH SYSTEMS TO ACHIEVE SDG 6

Achieving SDG 6 calls for resilient national and local WASH systems in order to sustainably valorize investments in water and sanitation. A systemic approach considers a complex network of mutual interaction between actors and factors. It is important for all those who are part of the system to cooperate, to consider accountability mechanisms, and to bear financial, institutional, ecological, technological, and social factors in mind. Only if this is accomplished will we get a step closer towards SDG 6.

However, applying systemic approaches alone will not be enough. The acceleration needed to achieve the water goals by 2030 also requires fundamental changes in the governance of the global water agenda.

Silo mentality frequently dominates WASH service delivery in practice. As a result, WASH services are often not sustainably available, and WASH interventions cannot unfold the intended impacts on public health, food security, and economic development. The Sustainable Services Initiative (SSI) launched by Welthungerhilfe in 2016 seeks to ensure the sustainability of WASH services. The SSI supports governmental institutions, local service providers, and private actors in improving their WASH interventions at district and national levels. Already, more than a million people in rural areas are benefiting from improved and sustainable access to WASH. A BMZ-financed program is currently being implemented and accompanied by a research project in four countries (Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Pakistan and India).

THE 2023 UN WATER CONFERENCE – A SUCCESS?

On the 22nd of March 2023, World Water Day, the first three-day, intergovernmental UN Water Conference in 46 years was opened in New York. The aim of the Conference was to adopt the Water Action Agenda, a compilation of all voluntary commitments and pledges by governments, civil societies, and stakeholder representatives to accelerate the achievement of SDG 6. These pledges amounted to a total of 300 billion USD. However, critics point out that the voluntary commitments were negotiated without any monitoring, without an evaluation process, and without any concrete accountability mechanism for the international community being agreed. According to the World Resources Institute, just a quarter of the voluntary commitments of the Water Action Agenda contribute to an accelerated implementation of SDG 6¹⁰. How the voluntary and non-legally binding self-commitments are to be administrated and monitored in future generally remains unclear. During the UN Water Conference, the German Federal Government called for more coherence in the UN system as a whole in order to better coordinate the measures in the field of water and joined with 150 other countries to demand the appointment of a UN Special Envoy for Water, committing itself to co-finance such a mandate¹¹. The UN Special Envoy for Water ought to cooperate closely with the various UN institutions and the respective Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation in order to positively influence the current fragmentation of water topics in the complex UN system, and ensure SDG 6 the necessary international attention and political clout. We very much welcome the Federal Government's efforts regarding this mandate and see it as important that Germany actively participates in its implementation. The mandate has to be based on human rights principles, consider relevant cross-sector topics such as health, climate, and food, and be endowed with sufficient authority to hold actors accountable, should they not comply.

5 <https://www.bmz.de/de/agenda-2030/sdg-6>

6 <https://washdata.org/monitoring/drinking-water>

7 <https://washdata.org/monitoring/sanitation>

8 FAO 2004, Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of food security, Rome

9 <https://www.water-energy-food.org/mission>

10 <https://www.wri.org/insights/un-water-conference-2023-needed-outcomes>

11 <https://www.bmuv.de/en/press/speeches/speech/speech-by-steffi-lemke-at-the-information-event-for-the-permanent-representations-staev-of-the-un-member-states-on-the-appointment-of-a-un-special-representative-for-water>

In the run-up to the conference, many expectations were raised to find approaches for innovative and transformative ideas beyond business as usual in order to better cope with the future challenges in the water sector. However, many results of the UN Water Conference are not transformative but relate to insights which have already been made:

- the need to regard water as a global common good,
- radically changing the manner with which we treat water towards a sustainable use of the natural resource of water,
- considering the water-food-energy nexus in efforts to achieve sustainable and fair development,
- the need for innovative financing instruments, including public-private instruments,
- the need to pursue a human rights-based approach in all activities,
- taking the needs of women, girls, and other marginalized groups into special consideration.

The UN Water Conference 2023 has given important impulses and again created awareness of the topic. Nevertheless, it was clear right from the onset that the conference would end without commitments and without accountability for the international community. It is all the more important to make use of the forthcoming international conferences, such as the 2023-HLPF, the SDG Summit, COP 28, or the Summit of the Future 2024, in order to now translate these impulses into concrete commitments and promote measures.

THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (HLPF), AN EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENT TO MONITOR THE SDGS?

In September 2023, the SDG Summit is to be held, at which overall progress made with the SDGs by the halftime of Agenda 2030 will be assessed. To prepare it, the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) will be held in July 2023, its prime objective being the monitoring of implementing Agenda 2030 and the global Goals. SDG 6 is one of the five Goals subject to an in-depth scrutiny at the HLPF 2023. Since Agenda 2030 does not contain any legally binding goals, the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of the member countries are of crucial relevance in examining the political measures and structural challenges in the implementation of Agenda 2030.

It is nevertheless doubtful whether the VNRs are making an effective contribution to implementing Agenda 2030. For although the governments deal with the status quo of the SDGs and their implementation in the VNRs, the reports above all continue to be government self-promotion¹³, and existing structural deficits are only insufficiently addressed. There has also been criticism that not all member countries use the official SDG indicators, which makes drawing comparisons difficult¹⁴.



With more than 6,500 delegates, the UN Water Conference was a complete success in terms of visibility. An impressive number of side events took place on the sidelines of the official program. This is an action of the German NGO Viva con Agua at Times Square in NY.

Furthermore, there is a lack of structured evaluation processes to create more effective and more results-oriented SDG progress, and to enable the member countries to be held to account.

To prepare for the UN Forum, the German HLPF Conference is to take place in May. The Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) will be in charge of organizing the event. For the Federal Government, this forthcoming conference represents an important opportunity to actively adopt a stand and then effectively engage in the international processes of the UN system. It is crucial to develop a declaration in addition to the voluntary commitments of the UN Water Conference 2023 which contributes to accountability, strengthening SDG 6, and emphasizing crosslinks to the other SDGs.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S ENGAGEMENT

“Developing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)” is established in the Federal Government’s Coalition Agreement, and Germany is the second largest bilateral donor in the water sector in development cooperation¹⁵. The human rights approach is a binding provision in

12 https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/download/Briefing_01-2022_HLPF_new.pdf

13 https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/download/Briefing_01-2022_HLPF_new.pdf

14 <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/konflikte-in-verhandlungen-zu-un-reformen>

15 Freiwilliger deutscher Staatenbericht zum HLPF 2021 <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/86824/staatenbericht-deutschlands-zum-hlpf-2021.pdf>

German development cooperation, and systemic and integrative approaches are already promoted in project and program planning. Among other items, the BMZ campaigns for the key significance of water and supports the integrative approach of SDG 6 in the nexus of water, energy, and food security¹⁶. However, transformative and integrative approaches at content level, principles conforming to human rights and an up-to-date

strategic framework do not seem to be enough to achieve SDG 6 of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Especially at policy level, the international community must make considerably more efforts to achieve progress in the complex UN system. Here, realizing Agenda 2030 has to take top priority. This also applies to the German Federal Government.

DEMANDS

WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO

- consistently work towards achieving the human rights to clean water and adequate sanitation and the human right to adequate food via national legislation, policies, and programs. Civil society's active involvement in these processes should always be ensured.

WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS AND DONOR ORGANIZATIONS TO

- ensure a cross-sector and integrated implementation of the nexus topics and enable cross-sector cooperation at political and implementation level, which is crucial in attaining greater synergy between the sectors.
- concentrate more on the sustainability of WASH measures by supporting and applying systemic approaches and by viewing the local and national WASH systems holistically and strengthening them. Welthungerhilfe's sustainability initiative shows that collective and coordinated action is indispensable, and that strategic partnerships have to be formed to tackle systemic challenges.

WE CALL ON THE GERMAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO

- advocate at UN level for the voluntary commitments declared at the 2023 UN Water Conference during the Water Action Agenda to be complied with and monitored;
- advocate, at the SDG Summit, for addressing the structural challenges in achieving SDG 6 and reviewing, implementing and monitoring commitments at all levels, e.g. through introducing a mutual accountability mechanism, member countries' in an inclusive manner.

¹⁶ <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/23546/strategiepapier404-06-2017.pdf>

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