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Aqua Publica Europea (APE) is the European Association of Public Water Operators. It unites publicly owned utilities providing water and sanitation services to over 80 million European citizens, to promote public water management at both European and international level. APE is an operator-led association that looks for efficient solutions that serve public rather than corporate interests.

Statement on the UN 2023 Water Conference

As the association representing the voice of public water operators in Europe, Aqua Publica Europea (APE) is committed to contributing to the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 6. We share the general concern about the alarmingly slow progress in achieving SDG6 water-related goals and targets and we call on governments and relevant stakeholders to act.

On the occasion of the UN 2023 Water Conference, APE is delighted to share its perspective, based on our analysis of the five Interactive Dialogues. First of all, we welcome the recognition that the most vulnerable populations are the most affected by poor WASH, and of the difficulties that some countries face in addressing these challenges, notably due to a lack of sufficient resources. This is often linked to or caused by poor governance, limited political commitment and inadequate capacity of local and regional administrations. Precisely because of the importance that the concept papers attribute to integrated water resources management at river basin scale, we note the lack of attention to the fundamental role that local authorities and administrations play in this context.

We welcome the many references to the importance of capacity development in the Interactive Dialogues. APE is convinced that capacity development is one of the cornerstones for achieving the goals of SDG6, as water resources management requires a growing set of skills and know-how. Cross-border cooperation to promote and further capacity development of local actors should be encouraged. However, the perspective on how to build capacity and who should pay for it is often missing from concept papers. We therefore plead for more concrete recommendations on how to support capacity development efforts and initiatives.

The issue of financing is also central to this debate, and we welcome the recognition of the importance of public financing, which remains critically important even in heavily market-oriented economies. Private financing should also be encouraged, but we draw attention to the potential mismatch between the investment needs and characteristics of the water sector (low returns and long payback periods for debt-related instruments) and the expectations of private investors; consequently, more emphasis should be placed on the role of public banks and other patient investors.



APE sees innovation as an important tool for achieving SDG6, but we believe that it must be adapted to local conditions, as some technological solutions require a level of infrastructure development that is not available everywhere. We therefore appreciate the references to the importance of local and indigenous know-how to ensure solutions are adapted to local needs. More emphasis should also be placed on developing autonomous research and innovation capacities in developing countries to avoid perpetuating a situation of dependence on developed countries' technologies. We stress that innovation is not an end in itself, as some of the concept papers seem to suggest.

What is sorely missing in this conference is the issue of pollution. Pollution is the most serious threat to the sustainable management of water resources, with the aggravating factors that the most vulnerable are the worst affected, and that decontamination activities are costly and energy intensive. We are therefore surprised and concerned that pollution appears so rarely in the Interactive Dialogues. APE believes that it is better to prevent pollution at source; where this is not possible, polluters should bear the costs: it is a matter of social equity and a condition for market efficiency.

In conclusion, we welcome the UN 2023 Water Conference as an important step in mobilizing political actors and other stakeholders to tackle water-related challenges. As a European association, APE would like to point out that public authorities and public financing will continue to play a key role in the development of water infrastructure, as they have done in the past. We stress that water supply is largely in public hands worldwide, that public operators have a crucial responsibility, and that the development of their capacity should therefore be supported. We also stress that new financing models, beyond simple volumetric tariffing on households, need to be developed to reconcile access to water for all with adequate financing. Democratic processes and participatory governance are and will remain the most appropriate way to make decisions on a common and increasingly scarce resource.

On behalf of Aqua Publica Europea's members,

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