

Statement by Henk Ovink (350+ words)

Preparatory Meeting for the UN 2026 Water Conference, July 9, 2025

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues, friends, waterambassadors,

Congratulations to the co-hosts of the 2026 UN Water Conference UAE and Senegal, as well as the UN system and all members and partners, with the agreement on the themes and the meetings today.

I am honored to address you today as a lifelong *waterambassador* – no longer “there”, but now “here”, investing everything in bridging these divides – on behalf of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water, in partnership with the International Water Management Institute.

Last month, I swam in my hometown, Rotterdam, a port city. Thanks to a coalition of local and global players, united in the Swimmable Cities Initiative.

They stand for something bigger: bridging racial, gender and generational divides, societal injustices and giving access to water while empowering all to act for our health, and that of our planet, for just transitions and equitable societies.

It reminded me of the power of people, across generations, cultures, and positions. We all swam in that same water, holding hands, celebrating that moment. We were all reminded of the reality that this was just one happy snapshot in the journey we are all on: yes, we can!

We know the crisis, yet we underestimate its complexity. Leaving us paralyzed with failing practices, setting us back instead of ahead. Yet the water-cycle offers us all endless opportunities for catalytic action.

1. We must come together and radically shift our perspective: addressing our challenges in a pro-active approach, instead of constantly responding to the crises of yesterday and today.
Together we must and can change the way we work, from short term profits to longer term values, investing in people and programs that deliver on our collective One Water Mission.
2. Preparing for 2026, we can't afford to each go our own way, we must come together around One Water Agenda, with a One Water Approach.
3. We need a new economics of water:
 - One that recognizes the hydrological cycle as a global common good.
 - that transforms water governance at every scale and values water properly.
 - And that shapes water-economies and spurs innovations, capacity-building and investments.

4. We must look beyond the horizon of 2026: the World Water Forum in Riyadh, the UN 2028 Water Conference in Dushanbe, the end of the Water Action Decade and the opportunity to reshape our agendas post 2030.

Yes, we can, we – *yes, we, everyone* – can swim in our waters together, in my lifetime, in every city and stream, ocean and delta, catalyzed by a stable hydrological cycle, unifying everything and everyone in a radical shift towards a pro-active, all-inclusive One Water Approach. Yes, we can!

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