2026 United Nations Water Conference
Stakeholder Brainstorm
10 July 2025, 10AM – 1PM

Summary of Reflections and Recommendations from Stakeholders

Background

On 10 July 2025, DESA co-organized, together with the Missions of Senegal and the United Arab Emirates, a highly interactive and informal Stakeholder Brainstorm, held in Conference Room 12 at the UNHQ ahead of the 2026 UN Water Conference.

The session was attended by the Ministers from UAE and Senegal as well as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water, covering lessons learned from the 2023 UN Water Conference, reflections on the six themes of the Interactive Dialogues, and strategies for effective stakeholder engagement.

A total of 108 participants from various sectors and industries attended the session. Participants expressed appreciation for the informal and interactive format of the meeting, which allowed many to take the floor and contribute.

Further details of the meeting, including the link to the webcast, can be found here. Photos of the event are available here.

Summary

This document summarizes and reviews the discussions in accordance with its agenda: (1) Stage Setting Remarks, (2) Panel Discussion: Lessons Learned from the 2023 UN Water Conference, (3) Reflections on the 2026 UN Water Conference Interactive Dialogues, (4) From New York to Dakar to UAE – Key Milestones and Strategies for Engagement and, (5) Next Steps and Closing Remarks.

(1) Stage Setting Remarks

The session began with **opening remarks** by H.E. Cheikh Tidiane Dieye, Minister of Hydraulics and Sanitation, Senegal and H.E. Abdulla Balalaa, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Energy and Sustainability, United Arab Emirates. H.E. Cheikh Tidiane Dieye emphasized that achieving SDG 6 requires mobilization beyond institutional circles, calling upon the expertise, lived experience and innovation of stakeholders as the

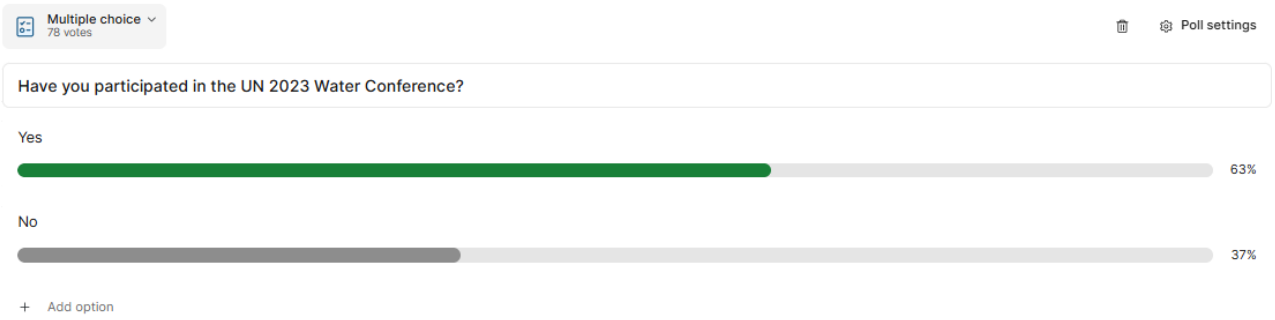
true engines of collective success. He reaffirmed the co-hosts' commitment to including all stakeholders throughout the process, especially in the high-level preparatory meeting to be held in Dakar in January 2026. H.E. Abdulla Balalaa also reiterated that governments alone cannot solve the water crisis, and that collective action across all stakeholder groups and sectors is essential to leverage the conference as a means of course correction.

(2) Panel Discussion: Lessons Learned from the 2023 UN Water Conference

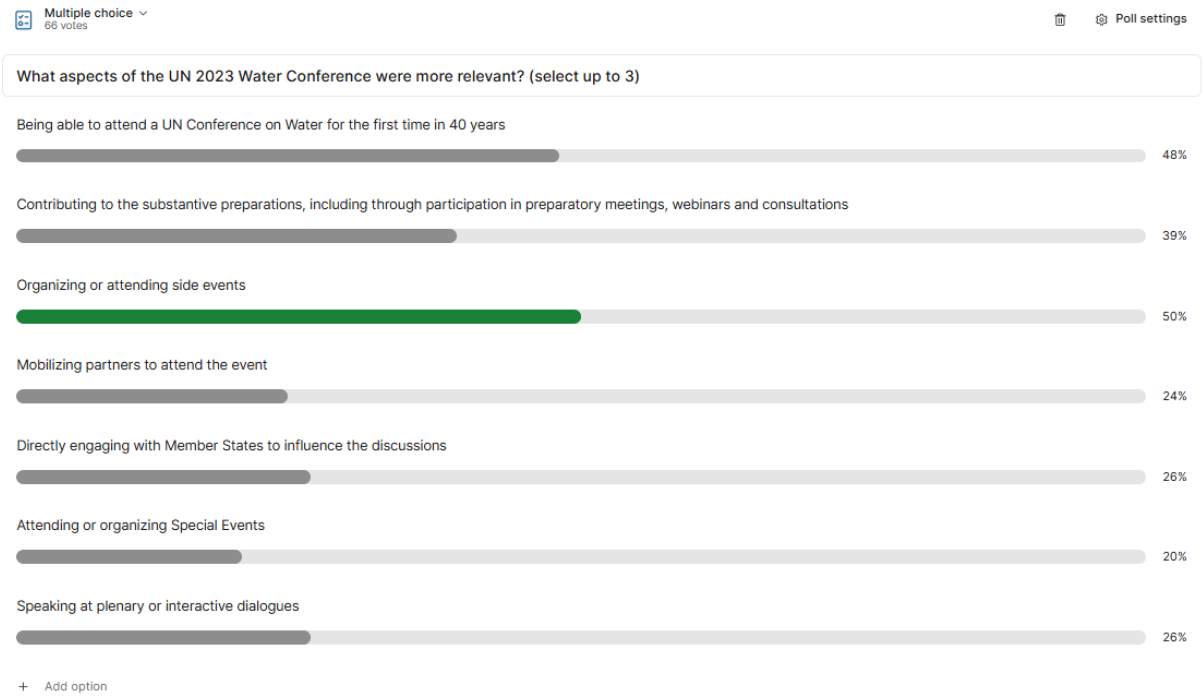
The **panel discussion** on *'Lessons Learned from the 2023 UN Water Conference',* was moderated by Mr. Henk Ovink, Executive Director, Global Commission on the Economics of Water, featuring Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation, lead discussant Dr. Bahia Tahzib-Lie, Ambassador & Charge d'Affaires of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN and Ms. Naiara Costa, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, DESA/DSDG. Key questions reflecting on the 2023 UN Water Conference with regards to stakeholder engagement, valuable formats and spaces as well as barriers were discussed and how this can be replicated or scaled for the 2026 Conference.

A Slido poll was conducted with all session participants to gain a better understanding of recurring or newly participating stakeholders, the relevance of certain conference aspects, and expectations for the upcoming conference.

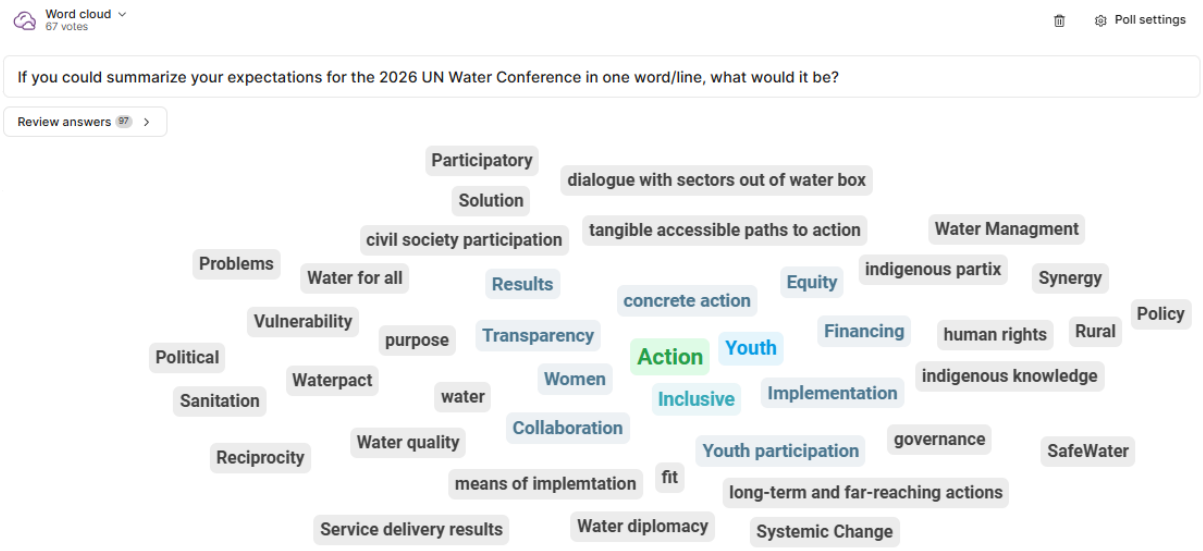
Slido Poll 1: Have you participated in the UN 2023 Water Conference? (78 votes)



Slido Poll 2: What aspects of the UN 2023 Water Conference were more relevant? (66 votes)



Slido Poll 3: If you could summarize your expectations for the 2026 UN Water Conference in one word/line, what would it be? (67 votes)



Looking back at the UN 2023 Water Conference, stakeholders emphasized the need for **greater inclusion and accessibility**, particularly for indigenous peoples, youth, women, rural communities, and marginalized groups in the preparations for and during the Conference. Many speakers called for the inclusion of water and river defenders, as well as representatives from the UN human rights system during the 2026 conference. Several

participants suggested processes to be **accessible and redistribute power** intentionally to those most affected by water-related injustices.

Stakeholders highlighted the need to address **barriers to participation** including **financing**, **visa** and **accreditation issues**. They called for dedicated, timely and sustained funding, as well as equitable access to support in accreditation and visa processing. Stakeholder Engagement Funds were underlined as having been beneficial in the past, and stakeholders urged Member States to continue making this support available. Speakers encouraged the provision of **options for active online engagement** during the conference, particularly for those from the Global South.

Stakeholders underscored the **contributions of youth and indigenous youth** as changemakers and called for the Conference to set up platforms that would enable them to lead and showcase their innovations. It was suggested to include youth during each of the interactive dialogues and side events. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of **recognizing children under the age of 18 as distinct actors** within civil society, calling for their systematic inclusion in UN processes.

Stakeholders called for formats and spaces that can facilitate **meaningful engagement**. In recalling the UN 2023 Water Conference, some indicated that, although the interactive dialogues were intended to be inclusive **limited seats and speaking role opportunities** where available for stakeholders, including indigenous peoples, representatives from local and regional governments, and youth.

The benefits of **targeted stakeholder engagement strategies** were flagged, such as those employed by the Women and Water Diplomacy Network to help participants navigate the process and establish shared priorities.

(3) Reflections on the 2026 UN Water Conference Interactive Dialogues

Next, Mr. Neil Dhot, Executive Director at Aquafed, moderated a **tour de table on** *'Reflections on the 2026 UN Water Conference Interactive Dialogues'*, for stakeholders to discuss the themes for the interactive dialogues and other aspects of the 2026 UN Water Conference.

Stakeholders called for the Conference to prioritize the **human right to water in all aspects of the conference** and as a cross-cutting topic in **all six Interactive Dialogues**. Concerns were raised about ingrained social hierarchies that prevent marginalized communities, including Dalits, Roma, Haratins, Quilombolas and others, from accessing water. Compelling testimonies were shared, including instances of violence against children for accessing shared water sources. Stakeholders accentuated that denial of access to water should be criminalized as a violation of human rights.

Stakeholders suggested a **better integration of water and environmental priorities**, including specific calls to incorporate SDG Target 6.6[1] on the protection of water-related ecosystems into **Interactive Dialogue: '*Water for planet*'[2]**. The perceived absence of this target in the 2023 conference discussions was seen as a missed opportunity that must be corrected moving forward.

Stakeholders also discussed the importance of **private sector engagement**, particularly in the **commercial finance sector**. They encouraged co-creation of solutions through early involvement of finance ministries, treasury departments, and water ministers in **interactive dialogue: '*Investments for water*'[3]**. Some participants noted the value of public-private partnerships and blended finance models that have already helped millions gain access to water.

Stakeholders stressed the **inclusion and recognition of Indigenous scientists** in discussions around **interactive dialogue: '*Investments for water*'[4]**. The formal participation of the Indigenous Peoples' Major Group was called for as well as the establishment of direct dialogue mechanisms between Indigenous communities and the private sector.

Stakeholders asked for the integration and **representation of local and regional governments** in **all interactive dialogues** at the upcoming conference. They advocated for the inclusion of a robust parliamentary track within the conference's structure, with legislative actors participating in shaping and implementing water-related commitments. Stakeholders urged for water ministers, utility directors and mayors to be present at the conference, specifically considering infrastructure developments and the lack of workforce needed.

Some proposed setting up **thematic advisory groups** to support the preparation of the interactive dialogues. They also called for **innovation to be redefined** from the perspective of water-stressed communities and individuals, with a focus on simple yet impactful ideas that are overlooked by experts.

Stakeholders requested the **recognition of rural water systems and community-based governance** as key topics for discussion during the Conference. They mentioned that rural areas often face disproportionate challenges and are rarely prioritized in infrastructure planning or international water discussions. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of collaborative governance models and case studies showcasing successful community-driven water management.

[1] SDG Target 6.6.: By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.
[2] Interactive Dialogue: Water for planet: climate, biodiversity, desertification, environment, source to sea, resilience and disaster risk reduction
[3] Interactive Dialogue: Investments for water: financing, technology and innovation, and capacity-building
[4] Interactive Dialogue: Investments for water: financing, technology and innovation, and capacity-building

(4) From New York to Dakar to UAE – Key Milestones and Strategies for Engagement

Another **interactive discussion**, *'From New York to Dakar to UAE – Key Milestones and Strategies for Engagement'*, was moderated by Ms. Maitreyi Koduganti Venkata Adivi, Global Focal Point (GFP) for SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation for all, Major Group for Children and Youth. Ms. Miriam Haritz, Director for Water, Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety of Germany, was the lead discussant.

Stakeholders called for **more active engagement of major groups and other stakeholders** (MGOS) in the preparatory process. Stakeholders suggested a coherent approach, **connecting water-related processes to other key UN mechanisms**, such as the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and SDG reviews. They requested a deliberate alignment and cross-process engagement to ensure coherence and impact.

Stakeholders noted that those who contribute least to water insecurity often lack representation, while those who shape global policies are not affected by the consequences of their decisions. In response, stakeholders proposed launching **public education campaigns** based on scientific research, aimed at reshaping public perceptions around water conservation. They also recommended **setting up a public relations committee** dedicated to raising awareness and building broad-based support for water action.

Stakeholders stressed the importance of **community-driven action** and **behavioral change** to achieve sustainable water usage and governance, advocating for behavioral insights to be embedded into water governance frameworks. Stakeholders flagged the significance of broadening engagement, seeking out **new partnerships and reducing the number of isolated, single-focused side events**. They encouraged the development of **larger multi-stakeholder platforms** that would facilitate broader and more impactful dialogue.

Some stakeholders called for the **formal recognition of self-managed water systems**, which often represent the only available infrastructure for many low-income communities. They pointed out the public health risks posed by unreliable water access and called for **SDG 6 to be operationalized** in real-world contexts through **localized solutions and technology-driven models**.

Stakeholders also highlighted the **underrepresentation of food systems in the water discourse**. They accentuated that agriculture is the largest water consumer and that food security and water governance must be addressed in a coordinated manner. They urged the co-hosts to **elevate the food-water nexus** in the 2026 Conference planning and outcomes.

(5) Next Steps and Closing Remarks

Lastly, **the next steps** were presented by Ms. Retno Marsudi, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water in a discussion facilitated by Ms. Madhushree Chatterjee, Chief, Natural Resources and Interlinkages Branch, DESA/DSDG.

Ms. Retno Marsudi reaffirmed the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement in shaping the success of the 2026 UN Water Conference. Ms. Madhushree Chatterjee further highlighted opportunities for stakeholder engagement, including the Dakar preparatory meeting, the in-depth review of SDG 6 in July 2026, and the upcoming regional and thematic consultations, inviting all stakeholders to submit their inputs.

H.E. Cheikh Tidiane Dieye, Minister of Hydraulics and Sanitation, Senegal and Ms. Shaima Gargash, Director of Energy and Sustainability Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UAE delivered closing remarks, expressing their appreciation for the active participation of all stakeholders. Ms. Gargash asked participants to identify and engage communicators who can share human-centered water stories globally, as awareness gaps were still prevalent in 2025.

Overall, the session emphasized that collective and cross-sector collaboration is essential to ensure the success and inclusivity of the 2026 UN Water Conference. Stakeholders were encouraged to engage actively in communication efforts and knowledge sharing, as well as to participate continuously in the preparatory steps leading up to the Dakar meeting and the 2026 UN Water Conference.