

WCC Water and Climate Leaders Panel inauguration summary

On March 3rd 2021, the Water and Climate Coalition held the inauguration of the Panel of Water and Climate Leaders. Due to the prevailing COVID-19 situation, the inauguration was conducted remotely. Through invitation by WMO Secretary-General Mr Petteri Taalas and UN-Water Chair Mr Gilbert Houngbo, the Water and Climate Leaders Panel has been established to provide leadership in the effort to bring an integrated climate and water agenda to sustainable development. The Panel of leaders, from cross-sectoral backgrounds including UN Members, civil society and the private sector, will deliver strategic guidance on the unification of water and climate agendas alongside maximising the output of water-related Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) actions implemented by the Coalition.

Mr Taalas opened the inauguration by stressing the importance of addressing water challenges in order to adapt to climate change successfully. “We have started seeing a growing amount of disasters. And many of those disasters are related to water - the biggest impacts of climate change have to do with water,” said Mr Taalas. He expressed his expectation that the Panel will produce tangible output that will make an impact at the national level.

Mr Emomali Rahmon, Honourable President of the Republic of Tajikistan, welcomed the launch of the Coalition and reiterated the need for placing water and climate at the apogee of the current development agenda. President Rahmon informed those gathered of the vital role of glaciers in the provision of freshwater. “Glaciers are the main resource for freshwater. Their accelerated melting, coupled with an increase in water consumption associated with population growth and economic development, can lead to very negative consequences,” explained President Rahmon. He announced that 2025 should be declared the UN year of glacier preservation to counter the current developments and projected negative impacts.

President Rahmon highlighted the abundance of water resources in Tajikistan and the dependence of Central Asia on the continued prosperity of these resources. The main sources of which are the country’s glaciers. Today, however, President Rahmon warned, the volume of these glaciers has decreased by almost a third in a relatively short time. In order to address this rapidly evolving and precarious situation, President Rahmon stated Tajikistan’s prioritisation of the climate change agenda and heralded the International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development (2018-2028)” as a valuable platform for uniting the efforts of the world’s community.

“The international conference on the mid-term review of this Decade, which will be organised by the UN in two years (2023), can play a key role in integrating water and climate issues, and by so doing contribute to their comprehensive solution in achieving sustainable development. I am sure that our High-level Panel will decently contribute to the preparatory process of this important event. This will further facilitate consolidation of the efforts by the world community, particularly political leaders, for more proactive action and adequate measures”, concluded President Rahmon.

Addressing the inauguration, Mr János Áder, President of Hungary, apprised the inauguration of the critical importance of monitoring and evaluating fluctuating precipitation patterns seen with climate change. “One of the very serious consequences of climate change in certain regions is a reduction in precipitation, whereas in other regions it is the dramatic change in the distribution of the precipitation, and then there are other regions where both are felt,” said President Áder.

Furthermore, President Áder stressed the importance of regional, integrated data and the need for effective training programs to build a future cohort of international water science professionals. “If we are talking about international collaboration, then I believe in the training of professionals – either flood protection engineers or disaster recovery professionals – their training is something I consider to be very important for the future.” He further called for an unbureaucratic attitude to provide tangible action, a set of readily available tools and methods and stressed that we need action, not paperwork.

Expressing his pleasure in working with the Water and Climate Leaders, Mr Han Seung-soo, Past Prime Minister of South Korea, spoke about the necessity to break down the silos in water and climate and consider these topics as one entity. Impressing upon the Water and Climate Leaders to prioritise existing recommendations and help bolster implementation at the political level. “Our mission should not be to reinvent the wheel but to prioritise the existing recommendations and proposals to help implement them and convince leaders to act. I believe that this group has the political power and influence to make this happen,” urged Mr Han Seung-soo.

Climate change is escalating the likelihood of floods and droughts along with increasing water resource vulnerability. Mr Komi Sélom Klassou, Past Prime Minister of the Republic of Togo, called for stakeholders across society to join forces in finding solutions to these problems. “All stakeholders, from researchers to policymakers, must hasten efforts to find solutions to these problems. We need to support the development of hydrometeorological monitoring activities, which are essential for providing the information needed to implement innovative and sustainable solutions. Solutions concerning not solely water availability, but for both disaster risk reduction and adaptation to climate change, he said”.

Mr Carl-Hermann Gustav Schlettwein, President of African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW), and Minister for the Republic of Namibia, focused on the importance of infrastructure to provide adequate water resources in Africa. “Infrastructure development needs to be on the agenda, to harness the scarce resources to be optimal.” Africa, with its enormous landmass, large population and potential to be a leading food producer, must play an important role in the climate and water agenda, concluded Mr Schlettwein.

Speaking on the insufficient progress on realising the water-related SDGs, Ms Hannele Pokka, Professor and Former Minister of Finland, informed the inauguration of the requirement to connect water and climate in order to achieve these goals. “We are far away from reaching Sustainable Development Goal 6 and Sustainable Development Goal 13 on Climate Action. The water-climate connection is key to go forward.” She further called for a global water and climate observing system that allows to access free data and information and is crucial to evaluate and adjust the efforts that are needed in raising the level of ambition in water and climate action.

Climate change impacts are felt through all areas of society, and water resources play a cardinal role in the magnitude and extent of how these impacts are manifested. Mr Howard Bamsey, Chair of the Global Water Partnership, explained how this significantly affected the global economy. “The first impacts of climate change are felt through water resources. Water is then the vector by which those impacts are carried through to the rest of the economy, to agriculture and food production, and to human health, and to so many other parts of the economy”, he said. Connecting to the economic sector is a prerequisite for finding tangible solutions that are sustainable and that help actors using the data and information that is available.

Driving global action on water and climate challenges is key to achieving the water-related SDGs and building a climate-resilient future. Ms Aldaco-Manner, World Youth Parliament for Water, expressed the need to make the water issue paramount and how young people had a critical role to play in that regard. “Some of the biggest mobilisers out there are young people,” she said.

Commencing the afternoon session of the inauguration, Mr Hougbo welcomed the opportunity to work together with the Water and Climate Leaders in the coming years. Leveraging the individual and combined political influence of the Panel will be instrumental in tackling water and climate challenges. “So, the main job for us as the Water and Climate Leaders is to bring unity to the fragmented water community as it is today. This Coalition I’m expecting to bring us together so we can use our political capital to make sure water is embedded in climate policies,” he said.

Addressing the inauguration, Ms Haydée Rodríguez, Vice Minister of the Republic of Costa Rica, called for the need to link the climate and water agenda with issues pertinent to biodiversity. “If we want to achieve all the human rights, then we need to start talking about the consequences of the biodiversity loss and climate change. A partnership like this about water and climate is fundamental”.

Acting on climate and water challenges is paramount to achieving food security. Mr Matthias Berringer, Senior Vice President of Public Affairs & Sustainability at BAYER, explained the importance of novel technology in this regard. “The main contributions that I see to strengthen food systems is one - climate action, but two - really making technologies available for broader communities,” he said. Moreover, Mr Berringer pointed out the need for effective branding in order to ensure the maximum scope and reach of the Water and Climate Leaders Panel is realised.

Critical to achieving this desired reach will, of course, be targeted and pro-active engagement. Mr Ernest Gibson, a member of the UN Secretary-General’s Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, advocated for focused circular community engagement mechanisms that value those in the community. “We need to be always conscious of the fact that a one-size-fits-all never works,” he added.

Drawing the inauguration of the Water and Climate Leaders Panel to a close, Mr Talaas echoed the principal messages of the panellists and reinforced that addressing water and climate challenges is not solely a technical endeavour but a political one too. It is with the latter endeavour that this Panel will provide invaluable guidance and support. Mr Talaas concluded by thanking the Panel for their contribution to a successful inauguration and expressed his hope that, in the near future, the Leaders could gather in person under one roof to continue their momentum.