

# So was the UN Water Conference worth it?

The world of water through the eyes of GWI publisher [Christopher Gasson](#).



It was a pig. A heartless pig. 300 onsite sessions. Another 1,000 or so offsite sessions. All in three days. No keynotes. No plenary sessions to bring everyone together to hear a single message. No signage, no delegate list, no way of telling who was speaking where and when. Yet somehow it was worthwhile. How so?

I think somehow this impossible event captured the essence of the world's water challenge. It is impossibly complex. It isn't going to be solved by a few government people getting together to sign something like the Paris Climate Agreement. The water challenge isn't one challenge, like climate change. It is a thousand different challenges happening in a million different places with 7.888 billion different solutions. That is to say, solving it relies on every single person on the planet playing their part.

The commitments coming out of the Water Action Agenda are evidence of this. There were a few big numbers being bandied about by the likes of the African Union, the US government, and the European Union (see [GWI's List this month](#)) but most of the commitments were hyper-localised, small-scale commitments such as the US Consulate General in Kolkata teaming up with schoolchildren in the village of Hingalganj near the Bangladeshi border to create a "climate wall" promoting the benefits of different species of mangrove. The deliverables include the planting of 4,000 mangrove trees and "the creation of a theme song".

One can despair at the thought that the UN is relying on schoolchildren singing about mangroves to deliver the outputs from the conference. At the same time, this is the reality of solving the problem of water. It expresses itself differently in different places: as vulnerability to flooding, as a loss of biodiversity, as a domestic inconvenience, as a threat to public health, as a threat to agriculture, and as an urban infrastructure challenge. The list goes on, and in each place, there is a different solution to whatever the particular problem might be. You cannot imagine a UN agreement signed by heads of state which would provide a solution to every aspect of it.

But it is not just that the water challenge represents a myriad of different and impossibly local problems. It is that they are all inter-related. For example, addressing flooding is related to urban infrastructure finance, as well as activities which might promote biodiversity (such as planting mangroves). But biodiversity is also related to reducing water pollution, which is also an infrastructure finance issue. And reducing pollution is related to

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public health and – if we are talking about ending open defecation – it is also about reducing domestic inconvenience. Every water issue is so tightly enmeshed with a number of others that we need events like the UN Water Conference to bring them all together.

Having said all that, it wasn't really the place for GWI people: that is to say, the people who make the big things happen in water. I can see why you might give it a miss – it was not a place to do business, and the direct return on investment is quite low. Furthermore, all the serried ranks of not-for-profits can be intimidating to those who are trying to make an honest dime from water. Nevertheless, there was some serious money being talked about by some of the governments and development finance institutions which did show up. They need to find better ways of spending it than the not-for-profit community can offer. That is where the GWI crowd matters.

I hate to say it, but perhaps the biggest impact of the UN Water Conference will be to make the [Global Water Summit](#) in Berlin on 8-10 May more fruitful. Many of the key development finance institutions will be there. We won't be singing about mangroves.

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