



World Water Day Event: “Better Water, Better Jobs”

Tuesday, 22 March, 2015

United Nations Headquarters, New York

On March 22nd, to celebrate World Water Day, the Permanent Mission of Sweden hosted the official United Nations event focused on the year’s theme, “Better Water, Better Jobs” and featured the launch of the new [WASH4Work](#) initiative.

The event brought together a cross-section of representatives from the public, private, and civil society sectors to discuss how to better mobilize the private sector to address water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) challenges in the workplace, in communities where workers live, and across supply chains. Susan Myers, Senior Vice President of the UN Foundation provided opening remarks and highlighted the importance and rationale for the launch of the new WASH4Work initiative, indicating that it is a continuation of the Deputy Secretary General’s “Call to Action on Sanitation.” She indicated that the initiative seeks to amplify and coordinate efforts already underway, rather than to create a competing platform. 2016’s Theme of Water and Jobs also provides a unique opportunity to introduce this initiative.

Following Ms. Myers’ remarks, Mr. Guy Ryder, Chair of UN-Water and Director General of the ILO, provided a video message that highlighted the need to address WASH in the workplace. With over 340,000 workers dying each year due to inadequate water supply and sanitation, a common vision and joint action amongst private sector, government, citizens, and consumers is needed to ensure safe water and sanitation for all workers. Ms. Annika Soder, the State Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Government of Sweden, welcomed the audience to the event and further highlighting that WASH is essential for people’s dignity, equity, safety and security, particularly for women and girls. She also highlighted the important economic outcomes of investments in WASH, including increased productivity gains, and reiterated the Swedish government’s commitment to increasing access to 60 million people by 2030 via public-private partnerships, technical assistance for WASH Sector reform, improvements in national governance, and improved monitoring systems. She also called for increasing dialogue between employers and employees on the topic in order to bring about necessary benefits for both.

The opening session concluded with remarks by UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, who highlighted the central importance that water and WASH has for the achievement of not only the Sustainable Development Goal on Water (SDG6) but also for related SDGs, such as those on child mortality, maternal health, and general equality. He stressed the need to work across sectors, breaking down siloes to address the water-related challenges. Doing so is critical to improving health, ensuring economic growth and development, and avoiding conflict. The Deputy Secretary-General stressed the need to see water as a source for cooperation by actors, rather than arena for conflict whether in rural or urban areas, in developing and developed countries. He called for action now to ensure that the goals are implemented.

The opening session was followed by an interactive panel discussion that featured Geeta Rao Gupta, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, Sarina Prabasi, CEO of WaterAid America, and David Croft, Global Sustainable Development Director at Diageo. The panel and the following audience discussion highlighted a number of themes:



Addressing WASH needs to move beyond households, schools, health facilities to where people spend a large quantity of their time – at the workplace: The focus on WASH has been historically at the household and community level. More attention needs to be paid to WASH in the workplace with a focus on workers' wellbeing – in both the formal and informal employment sectors. It is very clear that poor WASH conditions negatively impacts workers in all sectors increasing mortality rates for workers. Business is the third leg of the stool, in addition to the public sector and civil society, to help address the WASH challenge.

Businesses are impacted by and can impact WASH for local communities and workers: Many businesses rely heavily upon water for business growth; their water use can impact local water resources; with potential adverse impacts on WASH services. Leading companies are taking action to ensure that their corporate water management addresses these concerns. At the same time, poor WASH in communities can have major negative consequences for companies, particularly in agricultural settings or in company supply chains. Companies need healthy work forces and communities for their own wellbeing. Companies that invest in WASH interventions in the workplace and the community have seen benefits from increased efficiencies and productivity and decreasing rates of absenteeism leading to benefits for both the business and for families.

Businesses can also go beyond work-place interventions by working with other actors to scale local interventions, engage in public campaigns, or create products that are critical for achieving WASH goals, not just at the workplace but also beyond.

Partnerships and Collective Action is Vital to Addressing the WASH Challenge

The WASH challenge has to be addressed in a holistic manner that works across stakeholders. Civil society, business, and public sector working together to build the evidence base, promote dialogue, challenge companies, and create a conducive environment for action is the only way to successfully tackle WASH issues. In many cases, action is required at the watershed scale which requires the expertise and resources of each actor. There also needs to be a focus on issues of water governance, integrating WASH4Work, or similar initiatives, into larger sustainable development frameworks, and linking across sectors to really bring solutions to scale and enable social mobilization that enables communities to thrive and prosper.

Jason Morrison, Head of the CEO Water Mandate, closed by stressing that sometimes the scale of the challenge can seem unsurmountable to companies. Nevertheless companies are taking action, via their corporate water stewardship strategies in order to show that they are contributing to the SDGs. However, companies are not all at the same space; some are clear leaders and have taken significant action to improve WASH for workers and communities, while others are further behind.

The WASH4Work initiative offers very clear grounds for what companies can do:

- Understand and respond to impacts that poor WASH has on communities and business operations.
- Understand and respond to their own impacts by ensuring all employees have WASH in their workplace and using their leverage in their supply chain to bring about changes. Companies can also minimize their impacts by improving water efficiency, managing polluting, and treating wastewater.
- Working with others, including governments, civil society, and WASH4work partners to improve WASH access in communities.

The WASH4Work initiative will be working to enable more business action by bringing together a range of perspectives and competencies to further develop guidance tools, and provide peer-to-peer learning to scale-up action on WASH in the workplace, supply chain, and communities. The initiative is a key driver for action by the array of actors involved.