

Report: Youth in the Swiss Delegation to the United Nations Water Conference 2023, March 22nd-24th

Representing the Youth of Switzerland during the Midterm Review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2025, New York UN Headquarter, 2023

Delphine Magara, Swiss youth envoy, Swiss water Partnership Youth, May 2023

As part of the Midterm review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2025, the hosts of the UN Water Conference 2023, Netherlands and Tajikistan defined youth empowerment as a main point of the conference's agenda. Swiss Water Partnership Youth, the flagship youth organization in the water sector in Switzerland, took the opportunity to join Switzerland's Delegation to the first United Nations conference on water after Mar del Plata of 1977. This report summarizes the experiences of Switzerland's youth envoy at the conference regarding meaningful youth participation, including her on-site observations and insights on the topics discussed.

Switzerland's role in Youth inclusion at the UN Water Conference and in the Development Cooperation for Water

Fostering youth is enshrined in the Swiss Development Cooperation Strategy of 2021-2024 and the 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy, advocating for inclusion and empowerment of disadvantaged stakeholders, through the contribution of civil society and well-functioning rule of law¹².

Switzerland leads the way in achieving SDG 6 through international cooperation and democratic participation, for example through its initiative «Blue Peace»³. As specified in the Guidelines on Water 2022-2025, the SDC makes efforts to promote the voices of women, young people, disabled and disadvantaged groups on water-related issues⁴. Beyond written statements, action is taken, through Switzerland's financial support to the Global Youth Movement for Water and through the inclusion of Swiss Youth delegates at the COP 27 of 2022 in Egypt. Having added a youth envoy to the Swiss Delegation to the Water Conference in New York further forged the path towards youth empowerment. Its effectiveness will be reflected upon in this report.

The Swiss Water Partnership Youth (SWP Youth) is a global platform focusing on young people's needs and potential in the field of water for development, based in and out of Switzerland. It is a founder of the Global Youth Movement for Water (GYMW), supported by the Swiss Development Cooperation. The GYMW counts more than 250 members worldwide. It is an unprecedented movement to foster intergenerational collaboration and grow a coalition of committed, young leaders to contribute and go beyond SDG 6 of the 2030 Agenda, through local and global actions.

¹ Swiss Federal Council, 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy, Bern, 23 June 2021, Chapter 4.3.1-4.3.2

² Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, Bern, Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy 2021-2024, 19 February 2020.

³ [Blue Peace and Youth \(thebluepeace.org\)](https://thebluepeace.org)

⁴ Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Global Guidelines Water, Bern, 22 March 2022, Chapter 3.6.



Preparations to join the conference

SWP Youth has sent a representative to the conference, to accelerate its mission and to strengthen the Global Youth Movement for Water. To be granted permission to join the delegation, the SWP Youth envoy sent in a formal letter and spoke with Federal Councilor Cassis while attending the International Cooperation Forum in Geneva. Furthermore, the SWP Youth consulted with FDFA representative Mr. Frutiger, as well as sought input from heads of the SDC Water Section, including Mr. Zbinden, Mr. Fretz, and Mr. Maselli. Mr. Fretz, who serves as the Water Section Programme Manager at the SDC, played a key role as the main point of contact between the SWP Youth and the Delegation. The adhesion of SWP Youth envoy to the Delegation of Switzerland was confirmed one month in advance to the conference and was financed by Swiss Water Partnership.

SWP Youth's goals as part of the Swiss Delegation

The Youth envoy's goals for the conference were based on SWP Youth's and the GYMW's mission, as follows:

- 1. Represent the interests of the Swiss youth in the water sector globally and collect relevant opportunities and information to report back to the youth**
 - a. SWP Youth enables youth in water for development across the globe, while simultaneously fostering Swiss youth in the water sector. The delegate would disseminate and collect new information and opportunities on how to enhance this mission. Learnings would be reported back to the Swiss and the international youth water community.
- 2. Raise awareness on the Global Youth Movement for Water and its agenda across stakeholders and learn more about possibilities to implement the «30-30-30-target».**
 - a. The GYMW aims at meaningfully including youth in operational level and decision-making level around water issues, defining the target of 30% of meaningful youth inclusion under 30 years old, by 2030.
- 3. Advocate for more meaningful youth inclusion in the Swiss Development Cooperation's projects in the water sector.**
 - a. While youth involvement is noted in the strategy, SWP Youth advocates for more institutionalized exchange between Swiss youth in water and young water professionals of developing countries. Furthermore, youth in Switzerland shall be better represented in political and regulatory decision-making concerning national and international water governance.

Represent the interests of the Swiss youth in the water sector globally and collect relevant opportunities and information to report back to the youth

The promotion of SWP Youth's mission and gathering of opportunities and new information happened during official youth networking events as well as during informal conversations between and after sessions. The international Secretariat for Water (ISW) for example, organized daily youth briefings which were a useful platform for interaction and exchange between like-minded youth and where different networks and their goals could be linked together. Promoting SWP Youth's activities represented a benefit for the growth of youth in water community, and a good example of how Switzerland supports the engagement of young people in conducting projects in water for development.



Throughout the conference, many youth delegates stressed the necessity of accessible funding for youth-led water projects. This indicates the relevance of SWP Youth's mission to enhance financial support and capacity building for youth to be active in water management and governance.

SWP Youth members were among the panelists of side events outside the UN HQ, for example at the EU-Commission's "Youth-led Dialogue on Sustainable Water Management", The Swiss side event "Know your Water" and a side art performance after the Conference: "Meeting of Rivers", organized by members of SWP Youth. The Swiss youth envoy met with the Climate Youth Negotiator Programme, which was an important exchange on how to improve youth's negotiation and advocacy skills for water.

The Netherlands showed to be particularly active in hosting youth-led events, discussing the 30-30-30 target and adding young representatives to their panels. There were innumerable opportunities created for the Dutch youth in not just public speaking events but also providing them access to key stakeholders in many private networking events.

Raise awareness on GYMW and its agenda across stakeholders and learn more about possibilities to implement the 30-30-30 target

During the conference's main sessions, little opportunities were given for the audience to intervene, if not pre-registered in the list of statements. The main sessions, as well as most side events inside the UN headquarters followed a strict protocol, which was limiting the interactive nature of an "Interactive Dialogue". This especially hindered youth and civil society to be meaningfully included in the midterm review of the SDG 6 achievement, as the application for plenary statements during sessions prioritized member states.

Nevertheless, some opportunities were offered to discuss the role of youth and develop on the 30-30-30 youth target during side events outside the headquarters and in informal conversations.

1. Submission of Commitments to the Water Action Agenda
 - a. To the Water Action Agenda, currently 30 Swiss entities have submitted a commitment including the keyword "youth". Globally, 25 different entities submitted a commitment, related to the "Global Youth Movement for Water". SWP Youth has committed to "Offer training and capacity-building to reach the 30-30-30 youth target"⁵. The GYMW is currently reviewing all youth-related commitments of the Water Action Agenda to be able to hold actors accountable of their commitments.
2. Attendance of the side event hosted by the Netherlands "Briefing on 30-30-30 Youth target" with Henk Ovink, The Dutch Water Authority and World Waternet.
 - a. During this session, examples of how to adopt the 30-30-30 Youth target and how to participate in decision-making on water was discussed interactively with the panelists and the audience. Main points raised were (i) the need of disaggregated data of employees to identify the youth rate, (ii) to optimize educational curricula fit for professional purpose, and (iii) the role of accountability and action behind commitments of all entities, such as the Water Action Agenda.

⁵ <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/offer-training-and-capacity-building-reach-30-30-30-youth-target-30-youth-below-30>



3. Attendance of workshop hosted by Josh Water Jobs and GIZ “Towards World Water Workforce initiative: Commitments to close the professional gap in water and sanitation to achieve global water security.”
 - a. The workshop opened the floor to the audience on how to encourage upcoming generations to work in the WASH sector. Working groups and plenary discussions were held. 10 million more people will be needed in one decade than originally predicted, in the workforce for the water sector, for which capacity needs to be built and jobs in water and sanitation must be made appealing and accessible to youth. This includes proper salaries for internships and traineeships, especially from the United Nations.
4. Note-taking on youth-mentions for the GYMW during the Plenary of the General Assembly.
 - a. The SWP youth envoy had the chance to enter the General Assembly Hall, a popular space for interaction between higher-level decision-makers. On the day of visit (Day 2), the Swiss seats were only occupied by the intern to the Swiss embassy – no official delegates were present. Notably, Slovenia mentioned the necessity to cooperate *within* water management, *across* levels whereas Nigeria raised the concern of lacking capacity in their country to manage the water crisis. Nevertheless, no linkage to these issues was made with cross-generational cooperation. During the time of visit (2 hours in the morning), youth was mentioned by none of the member states delivering a statement.
5. Youth was brought to the forefront during the Informal Special Event “Water Leadership: Uniting for a Sustainable World”, where several youth organizations were on the panel. The panel focused on developing mechanisms and opportunities to ensure that the voices of underrepresented entities, including youth, are appropriately reflected and integrated into all aspects of water leadership at the local, regional and global levels. All people are impacted by, and impact on, our planet.
6. Attendance of Interactive Dialogue 4 on Transboundary Water Cooperation- hosted by Switzerland.
 - b. During this event one youth representative of the North American World Youth Parliament for Water had the opportunity to deliver an oral statement. This was the only contribution by and about youth of the Interactive Dialogue on transboundary water governance systems.

Advocate for more meaningful youth inclusion in Swiss water cooperation activities

1. Pre-Conference Meeting with the Swiss Delegation.
 - a. A one-hour meeting on 21.3.2023 in NYC, along with two members of the Swiss Delegation and the SWP representative allowed an exchange of information on goals, targets and activities. The meeting was an opportunity for the SWP Youth envoy to communicate its mission to the SDC and to obtain an approximate overview on the delegations’ planned activities.
2. Similarly, the Swiss reception organized by EAWAG SDC, AguaSan, SWP, HEKS, Solidarit’Eau Suisse allowed an informal interaction with the Swiss Delegation and the Swiss Ambassador in New York about the importance of youth to be involved in development cooperation decision-making.
 - a. The organization Human Right 2 Water and SWP Youth requested to make a short interview on the topic of virtual water footprint with Head of the Delegation Mr. Frutiger



– unfortunately, the interview was canceled as the Ambassador had to replace the Federal Councilor Cassis during a closed meeting.

3. The role of Youth and the importance to embrace the right to water of young people, women and children, was specifically emphasized during the special meeting of the Security Council, “Sparing water systems in armed conflicts”, co-hosted by Switzerland and Mozambique.
 - a. The youth envoy had the chance to participate as a spectator. The hosting member states successfully brought the topic of water access in armed conflicts to the agenda of the Security Council. They enhanced the importance of water going across all spheres of human existence. Several member states emphasized the holistic essence of governing water, where women and youth’s face special vulnerability but also have unexploited potential to ensure access to water and WASH during armed conflicts. A variety of suggestions was provided, such as engaging on a local level, where communities share water, to avoid conflicts. The active involvement of youth, that is a fast mobilizable group, should be encouraged to cooperate instead of competing. Many member states demanded that the vulnerability of children and women must be given proper attention and make violations of international humanitarian law intolerable.
4. Attendance of Session “Invest in Sustainable Development and Peace through Water” co-hosted by Switzerland.
 - a. During this session the Blue Peace portfolio of projects was presented as a best-practice case. As a youth coming from a non-finance sector, it was difficult to understand the finance-language. This, despite that funding is an important channel for inclusion of minorities in water decision-making – which should be made more accessible. Swiss delegates, except for SWP and SWP Youth, were not present during this event.
5. The SWP Youth side event «Meet the Rivers» allowed to have an informal de-brief between one of the Swiss delegates and the SWP Youth envoy.

Harnessing the conference’s outcomes

1. The activities and experiences made during the UN Water Conference will feed into the session that SWP Youth is organizing for the Stockholm World Water Week 2023.
2. Learnings will also be presented at the SWP Youth Assembly and SWP General Assembly.
3. An important outcome from the conference was the strengthening of a global youth network in the water sector and making personal connections with other youth leaders in water.
4. The Swiss Youth Delegate will organize a virtual event for young water advocates, on ways to join a government delegation and how the role of a youth delegate can be optimized.
5. A copy of this report will be submitted to the GYMW coalition’s Community of Practice and will be used for an official communication on SWP’s attendance of the UN Water Conference.
6. A follow-up on SWP Youth’s and on SDC’s commitments of the UN Water Action Agenda will most likely take place by end of next year, conducted by the GYMW coalition. The exact procedure is under discussion among the GYMW members.



Concluding learnings and recommendations to the Swiss Development Cooperation on youth inclusion

While from a global perspective, Switzerland is on a good path, youth inclusion and representation on the national level could get more support. Unfortunately, Switzerland was not able to create many structured opportunities for the youth to actively contribute to a dialogue, despite that youth have been repeatedly mentioned to be important stakeholders in achieving SDG 6. The unforeseen absence of the Federal Councilor, and the late planning led to a lack of capacity on the delegations' side, to integrate additional stakeholders. Additionally, logistical shortcomings hindered the SWP youth delegate to attend the first half day of the UNHQ events, which exacerbated the poor youth inclusion into the Swiss Delegation.

While youth inclusion at the national level may still need improvement, the UN Water Conference demonstrated a positive example of international youth participation, which was made possible with the support of the SDC. As compared to past water and climate conferences, as for example last year at the World Water Forum 2022, this conference showed more inclusivity of minorities. Through the SDC's provision of funding and capacity for the GYMW, Switzerland contributed to this success. Switzerland is encouraged to pursue this path and keep supporting the youth movement through funding of GYMW and providing opportunities of meaningful involvement in international water dialogues and decision-making. This way, Switzerland can ensure that youth can gradually be integrated in concrete, active participation. However, there is also much scope for supporting youth activities and organizations within the country and empowering Swiss youth to represent their interests in such international fora.

Importantly, while organizing "youth events" is a first step, meaningful and purposeful inclusion signifies, mixing generations within the same room, instead of keeping them separate. The SDC is in an excellent position to further develop its potential in integrating national youth to its water and development section. It can take the work of the Netherlands as a good example, for their committed youth involvement through government-level support.

In contrast, the official sessions inside the Headquarters, despite countless mentions on the importance of collective action and cross-generational collaboration throughout the conference, youth mostly remained segregated from the high-level panels. Paradoxically, «lack of capacity» was mentioned throughout the conference as a major hindrance to achieving SDG6, without linking it to the shortcomings in providing attractive opportunities for young generations.

Most of the time, sessions about generational inclusion were attended by youth, whereas seats at the high-level panels were meagerly occupied by minorities, including youth and indigenous entities. Hence, informal conversations were most fruitful to present and advocate for youth and the GYMW agenda during this conference.

Overall, the UN Water Conference 2023 provided a growing platform for youth engagement with some high-level exposure to international cooperation in the water and development sectors. While Switzerland played a crucial role in the success of youth inclusion through the financing of the GYMW, and the inclusion of a youth representative in their delegation, more structured opportunities to this purpose can be capitalized in future.

Water will have an existential role in the coming years for all sectors and countries, and youth have a critical role in dealing with this challenge. Switzerland, known as "Europe's Water tower" can now seize the opportunity to make pioneering steps in that regard.

For further questions, reach out to: swpyouth@gmail.com or delphine.magara@graduateinstitute.ch