



# NATHALIE OLIJSLAGER JAARSMA

PROGRAM DIRECTOR, UN 2023 WATER CONFERENCE

## “The adoption of the Water Action Agenda was a breakthrough”

**Held at the end of March, the UN 2023 Water Conference was the first conference dedicated entirely to the water sector since 1977. The event brought together around 10,000 participants to discuss the water crisis and set actions to accelerate achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 6 – on Clean Water and Sanitation.**

 OLIVIA TEMPEST

Nathalie Olijslager- Jaarsma has over 25 years of experience working for the government of the Netherlands and is an expert in Sustainable Economic Development, Economic Cooperation, and International Business. Passionate about water, she accepted the role of Program Director for the 2023 UN Water Conference, and now, in the wake of this historic event, we had the chance to speak with Nathalie about the outcome of the Conference and her expectations for the future.

### Can you tell us briefly about your career path and your role as Program Director of the 2023 UN Water Conference?

I started my career in 1995, having graduated in international economic relations. My postings, as a diplomat, were in South Africa, Hungary, United States and to the UN and other specialized international organisations in Geneva. In

between my postings, I worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of Economic Affairs in the Hague.

The three common threads in my positions are:

- ★ content: sustainability
- ★ process: change/transition (management)
- ★ aim: innovate by bringing more (people, topics) to the table to learn from each other and create novel solutions and positive power to influence.

My role as Program Director of the UN-Water Conference was to lead the team(s) to create content on the sustainability of water (for our lives and livelihoods), to think about how to create a movement for change and have people feel comfortable enough in uncharted territory and create coalitions for commitments/programmes in the Water Action Agenda. I was also constantly trying to identify risks and mitigate those.

### What were your expectations for this historic event? Are you satisfied with the outcome?

Our hope and aim were to create a historic event for the reason of the change that is needed to address the water challenges of the world and prevent the next crisis. My fear was that the Conference was going to be “just another conference”, or

historic for the wrong reasons (political turmoil, stalemate etc.). I am very satisfied with the outcome, as we were able to reach many different people with our messages, also via (social) media as well as we were able to create a positive spirit of “can do” with a very filled water action agenda (719 commitments was a lot more than I thought we could generate).

### A number of water experts expressed regret over the lack of binding agreements made at the Conference, saying these fail to secure the resilient and sustainable water future needed. What is your opinion?

Considering the limitations we were facing in organising the UN-Water Conference, as placed upon us by a negotiated UN resolution which prohibited a negotiated outcome of the conference, I think we were able to push the boundaries as far as we could, with keeping all the member states on board. The adoption of the Water Action Agenda was a breakthrough. The resolution had not called for it, we created it and because of it being adopted, it exists now. I do agree with the regret expressed that we were limited in what we were allowed to organise and realise, also I acknowledge that the UN does not have the power to make countries adhere to what they have promised. But this cannot be attributed to the UN, because the UN is all of us, all the countries together and if we promise to do something about a worldwide problem, we should deliver ourselves, for ourselves, for each other and most of all for future generations.

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We cannot make them responsible for cleaning up our mess.

**Before the 2023 UN Water Conference, the last UN event focused on water took place in 1977. Do you think water has enough visibility in the political and social spheres?**

This is an interesting question. I have often wondered why it was not discussed for 46 years; would it have been too political? Were we taking water too much for granted? Why do we discuss food security and energy security, or security at large, while not discussing water security? Why do we discuss (climate) crises, and migration while not discussing drought/water? I think water should be an explicit topic in all these discussions. I am not sure if that goal is going to be

achieved by separate water conferences, or by making sure water is on the agenda of all the other conferences on food and climate, etc. I tend to think the latter is more useful.

**How did the UN Water Conference highlight the urgent topic of groundwater and transboundary cooperation?**

The topic of transboundary cooperation was highlighted specifically and explicitly in the Interactive Dialogue, number 4, chaired by Senegal and Switzerland which both have a strong track record of how to manage water with the neighbouring countries in a trust-building way, mitigating conflict and crises.

The topic of groundwater got attention, but what I missed was the combination of the human right to water and sanita-

tion (access for all) with the knowledge of how we currently are depleting our groundwater resources with our (over) consumption and production. To give an example; there are maps available which show you in which regions of the world people still need to get access to drinking water and sanitation. There are also maps available of which regions of the world are “drying up” in this decade; hence will not

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have any groundwater left by 2030. Some regions are in the worse category of both kinds of maps and so their water challenges should be addressed in full understanding of the water situation. To give people drinking water and sanitation, wastewater needs to be recycled, less water needs to be used in agriculture, and infrastructure to keep rainwater and floods when they occur should be installed to help fill up the aquifers.

**In the world's aim to achieve a low-carbon economy, water is often forgotten. How did the UN Water Conference shed a light on this issue?**

Water is indeed forgotten when it comes to its significant role to also capture CO<sub>2</sub>, as wetlands do. Also, wastewater treatment plants can be built to create energy instead of costing energy. In the discussions and negotiations on climate change, water is usually only

addressed in the context of adaptation. Of course, it is especially important to build infrastructure and build with nature (use the natural power of nature) to protect against floods and droughts, but it is also important to invest in the mitigation possibility of water. If countries invest in lowering the risks of disasters, they invest in preventing loss and damage, so good disaster risk reduction policies, plans and investments create less loss of lives and livelihoods, and less damage. I think this is a particularly important notion for the discussions on loss and damage because we all have a responsibility in investing in the reduction of risks. And we cannot engineer our way out of these crises, we must understand the force of nature, and how the water cycle works, we must use indigenous knowledge and experience and create local, logical, affordable solutions to reduce the risks of floods and droughts.

**In closing the summit, António Guterres, secretary-general of the UN, urged the pledges made at the Conference to be turned into action. What do you think the next steps should be?**

My very opinion is that the platform "UN Water" should be strengthened by the organisations which are a member. UN Water encompasses all the big UN

and other relevant organisations, but they are not given the mandate nor the power nor the influence to coordinate water action across the system, to share knowledge so that others also can make use of it, to warn or alert the highest international level when necessary. I think there is more competition than cooperation in the system and therefore UN Water cannot function as well as it should.

**What role did women play in the UN 2023 Water Conference? And how can we achieve gender equality in water, sanitation, and hygiene?**

I think we have tried to give a good example by having Ms Evelyn Wever-Croes, Prime Minister of Aruba, as our head of delegation after our King left. She was also an ex-officio and hence chairing the general assembly at certain agenda items. With her, we tried to emphasise both the importance of women as leaders, as well as the specific challenges of island states. I saw many women in the special events, in which indigenous, NGOs and other civil society groups were given a voice, but I have to admit that women were underrepresented when it came to the heads of delegation, the CEOs in the private sector, both in business as in financing. We can only achieve gender equality when there is an even distribution and execution of power amongst the different genders.

**Having also worked in the private water sector, do you think businesses should do more to tackle their water-related challenges encompassed within SDG 6? Do you have any advice to offer?**

If businesses do not go circular, they will eventually be out of business and that might happen sooner than they think. If a company is pumping up all the groundwater in a specific region for its production process, without making sure that the groundwater is filled up again, the people in that region will want to sue the company, boycott their products and in the long run others might follow suit. If too

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many watersheds will lose their natural water and become “desert-like”, companies cannot find places to relocate to and products might become very expensive or unavailable. My advice to the private sector, therefore, is to step it up and bring the discussion on water security to the boardroom; invest in water and technologies to make the production process circular and keep the water that is discharged clean and reusable. If the companies can invest in the energy transition, they should be able to invest in the water transition.

**The water sector needs to attract young talent. How can we engage with the younger generations to consider jobs in this sector?**

I honestly do not understand why young people would not want to have a job in the water sector. They care about their future; they care about the planet on which we live; they will have no future nor a planet without water. So, water expertise is needed in banks and financial institutions, in companies, in governments and in households, as well as in the media,

advertising, the analysis of data, fashion etc. There are no jobs without an understanding of water.

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