

# Leveraging the Past for Better Futures

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In 1977 the first UN Conference on Water took place in Mar del Plata, Argentina. We were already aware of the need for water security for all, yet unable to figure out how to get there. The effects of pollution and emissions on climate and the interlinkages with water were not left undiscussed. We also discussed the need for action on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and more. But there was no clear follow up, no roadmap nor institutional capacity, let alone political or societal ownership. Water, always perceived as a sector, continues to be perceived as a sector. A sector to call on when the pipes fail to function or when water floods our communities or is absent or too polluted to use. That perspective is not only unrealistic, but has led to the abuse of this vital yet scarce resource. The mismanagement and undervaluing of water has helped damage the hydrological cycle, undermining everything we value and want to achieve.

It took 46 years for Mar del Plata to have a successor. The UN 2023 Water Conference in New York, March 22–24, 2023, acts as a midterm review for the Water Action Decade. But its ambition goes way beyond looking back. It aims to change the world with water security by and for all, for good. We must change the economics and politics of water, increase our collective understanding, start valuing water as a global common good and manage it across silos, borders and divides. Water can bring us together but demands radical change. Investment in water trickles down across all SDGs, catalyzes their implementation and scales up inclusive, sustainable and resilient security for communities, our economies and the environment.

The UN 2023 Water Conference will bring together the collective will and action of the world for inclusive, comprehensive and sustainable water action grounded in the geographies and cultures of our societies. The stakes are high: we need concrete commitments for the second half of the decade that ends in 2028. The hiatus between high-level water meetings and insufficient action over the last decades has been marked by extraction, extinction and exclusion. The past, for many, is something to overcome and leave behind.

Learning from the past is not only about looking back. In fact, looking at the past should be about the future. This means that we critically and actively position our past and present actions toward current and future challenges. It allows us to recognize the non-responsive or even reactive approaches that we are engulfed in, and to shy away from them. It allows us to identify vested interests, in which every step is a replication of mistakes. Exploring past practices can and must have positive meaning for today. Many traditional systems are still working and need to continue to support local communities. Indigenous cultures continue to teach us how to value water as a solution broker. Others can be adapted and inspire future practices. The sites we have recognized as

World Heritage require careful attention and preservation efforts. Paradoxically, knowing our past mobilizes us to become radically proactive, looking at the future in an inclusive, comprehensive and sustainable manner, as the sum of our previous and current decisions.

Given the current situation, in which we need to act on scarcity, quality and flood risk at the same time, far-reaching strategies are necessary – politically, financially and culturally. We need to match short-term innovative approaches with long-term comprehensive planning, answering today’s challenges while consolidating the ground for a sustainable future. Partnerships, collaborations and coalitions become the foundation for this fusion. Meanwhile, we need to achieve these goals with transparency, and make sure we hold stakeholders accountable for the outcomes. To do so, it is necessary to build capacity that is institutional, individual and informal. We need to innovate, invest in each other and build coalitions that hold the change in hearts, minds and hands. Here, shared water identities and practices can activate comprehensive, common scenarios.

The weight of the past should not pull us down, but should act as a lever pushing forward necessary change. This first issue of the journal *Blue Papers* starts a conversation about which practices can and which won’t help us. It raises the question: which past should be an example for our sustainable future, and how does it relate to contemporary and future values? As such, the new journal is a welcome addition to the field and one I wholeheartedly support. I expect that *Blue Papers* can leverage sustainable water practices of the past as a strong counterpoint for the future: as an inspiration, but also as a careful reminder not to repeat past mistakes.