

# Towards sustainable and fair water footprints: A global call to action for COP26

## 1. Summary

At World Water week in 2021 **UK Minister Goldsmith launched a global call to action for sustainable and fair water footprints**. Introduced by Minister Goldsmith, the UK's Minister for the Pacific and Environment, UK and chaired by Dutch international Water Envoy Henk Ovink, Ms. Sareen Malik, Executive Secretary of ANEW (the African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation) and Vice-Chair on the Sanitation and Water for All steering committee, Minister Nancy Tembo, MP, Minister for Forestry and Natural Resources, Malawi; Maheen Malik, Country Coordinator, Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS), Pakistan; Simon Zbinden, Head of Global Program Water, Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation; Willem Uijen, Water Stewardship Programme sponsor & Head of Supply Chain South Asia, Unilever; and Francesco Curto, Global Head of Research, DWS UK formed a panel of civil society, government, business and investor representatives.

The **event** was convened by the British Embassy Stockholm and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, UK with support from K4D working in collaboration with the Dutch and Swiss Governments, Water Witness International and CDP. The event took place virtually as part of SIWI's World Water Week on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> August 2021. The recording is available [here](#).

### Key takeaways from the panel and the discussion include:

- This event launched a Global Call for Action Towards Sustainable and Fair Water Footprints
- The way we consume water today is unsustainable and unequal and will only increase our vulnerability in years to come with climate change.
- Governments, businesses, investors, civil society, and academics need to trust and work together to integrate good water stewardship into supply chains for everything from textiles and critical minerals to food.
- Frameworks and partnerships, such as the AWS Standard and the 2030 Water Resources Group, are good examples of how we can bring the private sector, governments, civil society to the table but resources must be made available to fund an enabling environment for multiple stakeholders to be able to work together.
- We can be inspired by brilliant examples of solutions already happening on the ground, including from Malawi and Pakistan, to take action to scale.

Register [here](#) for the next event hosted by Chatham House on 5 October 2021 – Towards sustainable and fair water footprints: Forging a global action partnership for launch at COP26.

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## **2. Minister Zac Goldsmith, UK's Minister for the Pacific and Environment, UK**

**“To secure access to clean water for everyone, we must turn best practice into the norm.”**

We are causing unprecedented damage to the natural world on which each and every one of us depends. Although we will all pay the cost, it is the poorest who depend most directly on the free services that nature provides, and who therefore suffer first and worst as they begin to fail. As presidents of COP26 and the G7, we are putting nature at the heart of our response to climate change and a core part of that agenda is water.

Donor countries invest a great deal in water, but we pursue clean water delivery targets without thinking about where that water will come from and where the water will go to and what impact climate change will have on water security. The focus has been very narrow. Direct government support via ODA is clearly important but we cannot do the job without also harnessing the immense power of the market.

We are delighted that the UK's Taskforce for Climate-related Financial Disclosure has produced water reporting standards for our companies and investors that will become compulsory by 2025. And the Adaptation Action Coalition water tracker can help us take inspiration from the brilliant solutions around the world that are already helping people who share a water source work together to protect it.

Ahead of COP26, and alongside Switzerland, the Netherlands, and others, today we are launching a Global Call for Action Towards Sustainable and Fair Water Footprints. We need governments, business, investors, civil society, and academics working together to integrate good water stewardship into supply chains for everything from textiles and critical minerals to food.

## **3. Henk Ovink, Dutch international Water Envoy**

**“The way we consume water today is unsustainable and unequal and will only increase our vulnerability in years to come with climate change.”**

To raise resiliency and to harness the transformative power of water for education, health and well-being, livelihoods, jobs and inclusive growth, climate adaptation and clean energy, biodiversity, and nature-based solutions you must join our call to action. This focuses on no pollution, sustainable water withdrawal, protection of nature, access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene and resiliency to drought, floods, and water conflicts. Over 40 percent of Europe's water footprint lies outside its border.

As initiated by the UK government, today we enter a dialogue between consumer and producer country representatives from government, business, investors, and civil society with the aim of launching a partnership at COP26 to increase sustainable water use and climate resiliency globally. This political coalition will work collaboratively on the ground to reduce unsustainable water use using supply chain reporting, disclosure etc. and importantly focus on consumer

country measures such as due diligence regulations, consumer awareness, raising campaigning and more.

In partnership, we would like to draft and negotiate a political declaration at the Chatham House event on 5 October that could be signed at COP26 in the Water Pavilion on 5 November with small fanfare and perhaps a bigger moment at the 2023 UN Conference on the Water Action Decade with other steppingstones along the way.

[Here](#) is a short video by Water Witness International on How Fair is Your Water Footprint?

A question now for all panellists: **What are your recommendations to drive this call to action towards sustainable and fair water footprints?**

#### **4. Sareen Malik, Executive Secretary of ANEW (the African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation) and Vice-Chair on the Sanitation and Water for All**

**“People must be at the centre of all the solutions for an enabling environment to explore and engage in water stewardship.”**

On behalf of ANEW, our 47 members and the 422 million people living in poverty in Africa for whom we seek water and climate justice, we thank you for this opportunity to follow on from Minister Goldsmith’s Call to Action.

One key word is textiles. Last week Water Witness International published a report on [How fair is fashion’s water footprint?](#) This report really unpacks the damage the textile industry has in Africa with regards to water. The destructive impact of the global fashion industry on Africa’s water and workforce are exposed. In some of the most vulnerable countries and communities in Africa – Madagascar, Tanzania, and Mauritius – the production of clothing for the high streets of Europe is causing horrific levels of pollution and undermining the human right to water and sanitation. Yes, there is the opportunity for creating decent jobs for millions of people, including women, but it is being squandered by a lack of due diligence and neglect in the supply chains of the UK, the rest of Europe, and in the US. Unfair water footprints add to other problems in Africa, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, including climate change, inequitable growth, disease, and the loss of biodiversity. There is no better example for why we need immediate action.

The report shows that 55 percent of the UK’s water footprint is currently unsustainable. The hands of our governments and regulators are often tied, even with the best of intentions for jobs, investments and export revenue which is so badly needed. The costs of pollution control are an almost impossible additional burden on job-creating factories when the markets punish increased costs by immediately shifting production over the border. The globalised supply chain, multinationals and global financiers are driving the race to the bottom of Africa’s water barrel. Here is where the change must start with the opportunity for sustainable and fair water footprints becoming the norm rather than the exception for business. Solutions include adopting transparent water stewardship standards, holding investors to account for due diligence, advancement of human rights and nature-based solutions, the need to end water abuse and embed resilient use throughout a globalised economy.

Civil society groups, communities and the media must have the freedom and resources needed to investigate, demand, and hold business, investors, and governments to account on taking rapid and radical action for change to happen.

The power of our globalised supply chains is a threat to sustainable growth and climate justice but if properly harnessed, can be a force for progress. We stand ready to play our part by bringing light towards injustices and being the foot soldiers on the ground representing the most vulnerable communities, bringing voice from the most marginalised. We support this call to action.

## **5. Minister Nancy Tembo MP, Minister for Forestry and Natural Resources, Malawi**

**“Malawi is already feeling the effects of climate change. However, as a producer country we remain optimistic and encouraged by the commitment of our government to sustainable management of resources and by positive experiences of good water stewardship in Malawi.”**

We support this global call to action for sustainable and fair water footprints.

Malawi is a producer country with most annual exports being agricultural commodities – top exports being sugar, tobacco and nuts having a water footprint amounting to seven percent of the total water use of Malawi. We therefore know very well that sustainable water management is critical, not only in securing jobs, protecting the environment, and growing our economy, but also in positioning our economy as a competitive player on the global market.

Malawi is already feeling the effects of climate change. Over the past two decades, Malawi has experienced a high frequency of floods and droughts affecting millions of people. However, as a producer country we remain optimistic and encouraged by the commitment of our government to sustainable management of resources and by positive experiences of good water stewardship in Malawi.

For example, in the southern part of Malawi our biggest small tea cooperative responsible for over 60 percent of Malawi’s moderate production is driving water stewardship strategies both at work sites and catchment level. Some of the strategies being used are monitoring water use and water quality protecting nature and increasing access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene. As a result, they have increased water and livelihood security and stronger climate resilience.

As a producer country, we must protect and sustainably use our water resources. This is being achieved by promoting water harvesting, restoration of our landscapes, especially around and along our riverbanks to increase water availability and access, and promoting sustainable water withdrawals through optimisation of water use amongst others.

This global call encourages us to come together to act decisively and join efforts to ensure that our water footprint is sustainable and fair.

## 6. Maheen Malik, Country Coordinator, Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS), Pakistan

“Join the Alliance for Water Stewardship and adopt the AWS Standard as good practice.”

At AWS we are the custodians of a sustainability standard system for water stewardship with a mission to ignite and nurture global and local leadership. Our systems enable users to make credible claims through independent certification against a globally applicable standard. With support we have been able to drive action on water footprints of some of the world’s largest water dependent companies.

The vision of the **AWS International Water Stewardship Standard** is for ‘a water-secure world that enables people, cultures, business and nature to prosper now and in the future’ with the mission to ‘ignite and nurture global and local leadership in credible water stewardship that recognises and secures the social, cultural, environmental and economic value of freshwater’. The AWS Standard asks users to follow a set of five actions to lead to five positive water outcomes:

### AN ACCESSIBLE ‘HOW TO’ FRAMEWORK FOR SITES TO IMPLEMENT WATER STEWARDSHIP



Source: AWS

Users of our Standard are typically businesses, such as factories, farms, and production units, often introduced to the AWS Standard by their global brands that they supply to.

For example, working with the textile sector in Pakistan. For a business in Pakistan to continue working with other countries, it is important to build resilience, not just as required by the consumer but also for business continuity. The AWS Standard offers a way for brands to understand the actions of their suppliers in tackling local water challenges and for producers to know that they are following global best practice. Through a collaboration between WWF Pakistan and the International Labour Organization we are facilitating the textile and the leather industries in adopting and implementing the AWS Standard. Initially, four sites have been

certified in Pakistan – two by a US group in Lahore and two Surya enterprises in Karachi. The experience of these producers has stimulated interest in AWS from major buying brands including Primark, H&M and Gap. The interest of these buyer companies is in turn motivating more and other SME producers who want to supply these brands. This is creating a snowball effect where brands, SMEs and other actors engage with AWS and each other to better understand how water stewardship can address water challenges in their value chain.

## **7. Simon Zbinden, Head of Global Program Water, Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation**

**“We need trust to trigger sustainable, equitable and resilient water management through globalised value chains.”**

We have estimates that suggest 82 percent of Switzerland’s water footprint is from outside our borders, even though we are abundant in water. This is largely due to our low level of self-sufficiency in food. Switzerland does not have as much land as other countries and so a lot of food is imported which increases our water footprint outside our own borders. We do not know how much of this water footprint is unsustainable, but it is possible to believe that it is comparable to the UK. There is a large consensus, even beyond this community, on what we should do but how, is the tricky part.

To trigger sustainable, equitable and resilient water management through globalised value chains, we first need reliable and trusted information to connect producers with consumers. We have the methodology and a set of standardised approaches which allow us to quantify and trace the water footprint of countries and companies, but we need trust in this to trigger change in consumers. We also need to prioritise fair water use and access. We also believe that we should look beyond water footprint to water effectiveness.

## **8. Willem Uijen, Water Stewardship Programme sponsor & Head of Supply Chain South Asia, Unilever**

**“We need leadership from businesses and others, including governments, for action and ambition in water management, mitigation, adaptation and innovation.”**

As Unilever has offices in over 190 countries and manufacturing operations in over 60 countries across our supply chain, we are really hoping to use our scale as a force for good. We are building and operating sustainable supply chains. It is critical for us to ensure business continuity as well as to have stability in commodity prices, ensuring our customer and consumer satisfaction.

Water security represents a real risk to our sourcing and manufacturing operations as well as for our consumers and hence also the products that we have. Climate change is projected to further increase this risk. We see an opportunity to engage in innovation and collective action to preserve and protect water resources to create a future where everyone has access to safe and resilient water supply. We look at continued risk management focused on the physical impacts of

climate change – scarcity and extreme weather. We have been on this journey for the last 10 years and continue to learn how to address and manage the shared risk.

Last year we set out our next Climate and Nature goals which include what we hope to do to tackle water security. This includes making all our product formulations 100% biodegradable by 2030.

We are piloting the implementation of water stewardship programmes at around 100 Unilever manufacturing sites using the AWS Standard, starting with 12 this year and are hoping to roll out to the next group of sites very soon.

We have also joined the 2030 Water Resources Group to drive more transformative change and build water management resilience in key stress markets – mainly in India, South Africa, Vietnam, Brazil and in Bangladesh.

We are looking to create new regenerative agricultural principles because across most of the world, 70 percent of fresh water is being used for agriculture. A lack of water can reduce the yields of the crop that we use and to produce our products. We can couple this with our work on WASH programmes and the creation of products that meet the growing consumer demands for lower impact and more restorative lifestyles e.g., Plant based foods such as The Vegetarian Butcher.

Whilst we have programmes underway, we call on our suppliers and businesses that we collaborate with to mobilise their skill and speed needed to ensure that water security becomes central to resilience planning.

## **9. Francesco Curto, Global Head of Research, DWS UK**

**“COP26 is a fantastic opportunity to create for water what Paris did for climate.”**

We think, through our analysis on water over the last 18 months, that we need a transformational framework recognising that water is essential to everything that we do - led by governments, not by investors. We can help, but the government must lead on facing this crisis.

The European Water Charter was published more than 50 years ago which includes what we have been hearing should be done now. Yet 80 percent of wastewater remains untreated around the world. We are talking about 50 years of failure because the price of water is the same for corporates and for people despite the human right to water. Water legislation is incredibly fragmented, and we need to bring that together. We have plenty of data about water risk provided often by charities, but as an investor I need to understand how legislation is going to change. We need to understand the complexity and that multiple solutions are required that are context relevant.

COP26 in Glasgow is a fantastic opportunity to create for water what Paris did for climate.

## 10. Discussion

### How can we reach the youth?

*Minister Tembo:* Here in Malawi, young people are leading by example. They are the ones that talk about landscape restoration especially along the riverbanks. As we go to COP26, the youth must be at the forefront of championing these issues if we are going to maintain a fair water footprint.

### What does this initiative need to address for your business and investors to join?

**What is needed not only to have impact on your own environment in the way you work and to bring to scale but also how can we elude this to a political global platform?**

### How do we realise the ambition shown today to scale?

*Maheen Malik:* Picking up on Francesco Curto's suggestion - 'if there is a framework that is available that can be scaled up' – the AWS Standard provides that kind of framework that can be used in local and global contexts. The example I presented in the textile sector shows how adoption and implementation of the AWS Standard has created results that we want to see – the private sector coming forward, taking up and implementing incentives in collaboration with governments and local NGOs.

*Sareen Malik:* The multi-stakeholder partnerships and the various platforms that we have seen emerging over the past decade – the AWS Standard, the 2030 Water Resources Group – are good examples of how we bring the private sector, governments, civil society to the table. But critical to this is resourcing of these mechanisms/enabling environment including funding for facilitation and meetings.

## 11. Closing remarks: Henk Ovink

The ambition shown here today by the UK government and panel members that water security must rise to the top of the agenda reflects the ambition behind the resolution [A/RES/75/212](#) “United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018-2028” adopted by the UN General Assembly on 21 December 2020 which provides the modalities for the 2023 UN Conference on the Water Action Decade to be co-hosted by the Government of Tajikistan and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This conference aims to ensure implementation to scale of commitments made. A transformative framework suggested by Francesco Curto from an investor's perspective, could be presented at this conference.

In response to the price of water in the context of a human right, the High-Level Panel on Water defined 5 principles to value water better and triggered the Valuing Water Initiative to put these into practice.

### The 5 Valuing Water Principles

1. **Recognise and embrace water's multiple values** to different groups and interests in all decisions affecting water;



2. **Reconcile value and build trust** – conduct all processes to reconcile values in ways that are equitable, transparent and inclusive;
3. **Protect the sources**, including watersheds, rivers, aquifers, associated ecosystems, and used water flows for current and future generations;
4. **Educate to empower** – promote education and awareness among all stakeholders about the intrinsic value of water and its essential role in all aspects of life;
5. **Invest and innovate** – ensure adequate investment in institutions, infrastructure, information and innovation to realise the many benefits derived from water and reduce risks.

We welcome the announcement of the Water Stewardship Accelerator (WaSA) Forum during WWW 2021 as a vehicle for much needed dialogue and joint action on water stewardship and look forward to working together.

To close, let me reiterate the Call to Action made here today - to drive sustainable water use and climate resilience globally – and invite you to respond at a virtual event hosted by [Chatham House on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2021 at 9am BST](#) to help construct the foundations for a Global Fair Water Footprint Declaration.

## 12. Supporting resources

### **Tackling the Global Water Crisis: The Role of Water Footprints and Water Stewardship**

[https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/16816/K4D\\_ReadPack\\_WaterFootprints\\_2.4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/16816/K4D_ReadPack_WaterFootprints_2.4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

An introduction to the issues involved in water footprints and water stewardship.

### **Hear from Lord Zac Goldsmith, Minister of State for Pacific and the Environment, United Kingdom**

Lord Zac Goldsmith, Minister of State for the Pacific and the Environment UK, sets out the need for a global call to action on water footprints for COP26

5 min <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmE4IAJWWLw>

1 min <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHSXaMQbh30>

### **Water Witness How Fair is Your Water Footprint?**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuBQYfAZbHY>

### **DRAFT: The global call to action for sustainable and fair water footprints: A COP26 Initiative**

<https://programme.worldwaterweek.org/Content/ProposalResources/PDF/2021/pdf-2021-9645-3-Draft%20global%20call%20to%20action%20for%20sustainable%20and%20fair%20water%20footprints%20190821.pdf>

### **A Concept Note – Towards sustainable and fair water footprint: A global call to action for COP26**

<https://programme.worldwaterweek.org/Content/ProposalResources/PDF/2021/pdf-2021-9645-5-Water%20Footprint%20Concept%20v%2014th%20Sept%202021.pdf>

## Event recording

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooOGIP0cVFY>

## Towards sustainable and fair water footprints: forging a global action partnership for launch at COP26

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/towards-sustainable-and-fair-water-footprints>

Link to register for this event online at Chatham House on 5 October 2021 09:00-12:30 BST

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## About this report

This summary is based on one day of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact [helpdesk@k4d.info](mailto:helpdesk@k4d.info).

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