

**Opening Statement by Dr. Shamshad Akhtar,
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations & Executive Secretary of
The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**

**World Water Day 2016 Commemoration on Water and Jobs
Bangkok, 23 March 2016**

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Colleagues,
Asia-Pacific Water Forum experts,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the 2016 Asia-Pacific commemoration of World Water Day.

Water is an essential lifeline resource for people and for development. It is especially valuable in Asia and the Pacific, given its relative scarcity and uneven distribution. Water politics aggravates this scarcity.

The good news is that water's centrality to development has been well-recognized for some time by Member States of the United Nations. On 22 March 1993, the General Assembly convened the first World Water Day and has continued this tradition ever since. The Millennium Development Goals focused attention on improving access to clean water and sanitation. The new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopts a more holistic and universal approach to water-related challenges, with a dedicated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on water issues, explicitly linked to the human rights framework. SDG6 calls "to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all", supported by targets on achieving universal and equitable access to water and sanitation, hygiene for all, improving water quality, substantially increasing water-use efficiency across all sectors, reducing the impact on populations of water scarcity, as well as investing in the preservation and restoration of water-related ecosystems.

The critical importance of SDG6 must be underscored, both nationally and regionally, because water remains under threat. Our changing climate, inefficient use, the absence of treatment and re-use of wastewater, as well as rampant mismanagement and misuse in water consumption and production, results in considerable water wastage. Moreover, the lack of clean water and sanitation claims more lives through illness today than any armed conflict. Globally, every day, nearly 1,000 children die due to preventable water and sanitation-related diseases,¹ while at least 1.8 billion people still use sources of drinking water that are fecally contaminated.²

This combination of scarcity, wastage and quality of water supply and sanitation has serious consequences for human health, economic growth, the impacts of disasters and a range of other development priorities. There is an urgent need to think and act beyond sectoral limitations and beyond implementation of quick-fixes based upon short-term planning and *ad hoc* interventions.

¹ UNICEF 2015

² <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation/>

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Developed in partnership between many water stakeholders, the *World Water Development Report 2016*³, being released regionally today, advances dialogue, advocacy and action around the water-jobs-livelihoods nexus – offering useful insights about the integration of the sustainable development agenda. The report illustrates the linkages between SDG6 on water and SDG8, which calls for “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. It recognizes the relationship between decent work and water, focusing on how access to clean and affordable water supports health, livelihoods and the economy, while also highlighting how meeting our water needs can create decent jobs.

This agenda is especially relevant for our ESCAP member States because our region is home to 60 per cent of the world’s population and generates one third of the world’s GDP. Our shared prosperity and future growth depends very directly on water availability and equitable access.

I would like to focus today on six elements of the *World Water Development Report 2016*.

First, water and sanitation gaps are extremely costly. Nearly 1.7 billion people in Asia and the Pacific live without access to improved sanitation⁴, costing countries in our region the equivalent of between 0.5 per cent and 7.2 per cent of annual GDP⁵ - primarily in terms of costs to health, labour, post-disaster vulnerability and a range of other impacts. In South-East Asia, the average cost is 2 per cent of GDP, whereas in South Asian countries, it is 6 per cent of GDP.

Second, cost recovery is low, but inequities are sharpened as the poor pay more and the rich pay less for water. In some Asia-Pacific cities, the costs of one cubic metre of water from a vendor can be as much as 100 times that of the cost through an installed household connection. In meeting these needs there are also employment and livelihood opportunities. In this regard, the *World Water Development Report 2016* draws attention to how community-based approaches can meet such needs, while diversifying revenue and income, in support of wider community empowerment.

Third, increasing water efficiency is critical for balanced and sustainable growth and development. Increasing the productivity per unit of water can help improve opportunities for economic diversification, growth, employment, income generation and improved nutrition. For instance, efficiencies in agricultural water use, which currently accounts for about 70% of total freshwater withdrawals globally, would allow significant additional water for competing productive sectors, while meeting the demands of people as well. Changing industrial uses of water and ensuring effective pricing are further challenges which require innovation. For example, it has been estimated that the current total ‘water-footprint’ of producing a single cotton shirt is about 2,700 litres. It actually takes about 140 litres of water to produce a single cup of coffee and 11,000 litres to produce just one pair of jeans⁶.

Fourth, investment in local water infrastructure is essential. The World Health Organization has estimated that investing \$1 in water and sanitation brings as much as \$34

³ UN-Water (2016) World Water Development Report on Water and Jobs

⁴ World Water Development Report 2015.

⁵ ESCAP, UN-Habitat, AIT (2015). Policy Guidance Manual on Wastewater Management with a Special Emphasis to Decentralized Wastewater Treatment Systems

⁶ *A Comprehensive Introduction to Water Footprints*, Hoekstra, AY, 2009.

http://www.pseau.org/outils/ouvrages/waterfootprint_comprehensive_introduction_to_water_footprints_en.pdf

in economic returns⁷, as well as healthier populations and more sustainable environments. In the urban sphere, access to clean water and to safe sanitation is an acute problem, especially for the urban poor. Meeting such needs can make a vital contribution to urban health, and through increased income opportunities, reduce a key source of inequality.

Fifth, sustainable solutions for water and job security call for recognizing the linkages across SDGs and leveraging these systemically across water-related SDG targets. Meeting both the right to work and to health, as well as their relationships to the right to quality water and safe sanitation, is essential to the development of water sectors across our region.

Sixth, promoting policies that bring employment opportunities, as well as raising awareness about water's centrality to economic growth, requires cooperation and partnerships at all levels. Implementing the SDGs and achieving their many sub-agendas, can only be successful through meaningful partnerships.

In conclusion, I would like to thank ILO and UNESCO for their partnership in organizing this event. This collaboration on the *World Water Development Report 2016* has been a very positive example of the United Nations system 'delivering as one'.

The UN-Water and Asia-Pacific Water Forum networks must continue to highlight the centrality of water and sanitation to the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This, in turn, will facilitate the achievement of a range of other development targets as well.

I thank you.

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