Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) is a global partnership with over 200 members including national governments, external support agencies, civil society organizations, private sector organizations and other development partners. They all work together to increase political commitment to water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and to strengthen mutual accountability and effectiveness within the sector. The goal of SWA is sanitation, water and hygiene for all, always and everywhere – this is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals targets for WASH.

SWA held its sixth Sector Ministers’ Meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica on 4-5 April 2019 hosted by the Government of Costa Rica and co-convened by UNICEF and the Inter-American Development Bank. This – the first SWA ministerial meeting held in Latin America – was attended by over 250 people including over 50 ministers of water, sanitation and hygiene from around the world.

This meeting was part of an ongoing process of engagement with Ministers and other decision makers. The last such meeting, in 2017, resolved to develop sector financing strategies; to assess and strengthen sector policies, institutional arrangements, planning, monitoring and review systems to make the sector more efficient; and to streamline disaster preparedness into sector policies. Since then, SWA partners – both national governments and other organizations – have been working hard in-country on all these resolutions.

The purpose of this meeting was to make a difference, to move the dial, to change the world by a practical set of recommendations for ministers to take home, supported by the other SWA constituencies.

The central theme of this meeting was “Leave no-one behind”. This concept is underpinned by a human rights approach. Every person has equal human rights, and it is our collective duty to ensure that they are realized for all people, regardless of who they are, where they live or what they do. With ambitious global developments goals, it is easy to go for the low-hanging fruits first, at the expense of attention to the hardest to reach. To achieve universal access, we need a deliberate and targeted focus on those people who are marginalized, vulnerable, who have no voice, or they will be left behind indefinitely.

Under the over-arching theme of leaving no-one behind, the meeting focused on strong leadership, sustainable finance, and government-led participatory planning, monitoring and accountability. The meeting started with a global overview of the current status of the WASH sector, leading into a discussion on how to leave no-one behind. Participants then took stock of progress at a more detailed level in small group discussions, then examined financing strategies to leave no-one behind, also in small groups, and debated how the concept of mutual accountability is working in practice. The next discussions were on ensuring no one is left behind, and on making the most of partnership and collaboration. A short closing session summarized learning to date and pointed the way forward, including previewing some future SWA activities.

The general tone of the meeting balanced a sober awareness of the magnitude of the task with excitement about progress being made. There were many positive animated conversations and mutual learning between Ministers. In all sessions, the participants insisted that we need to focus on leaving no one behind and putting the last first. As one Minister expressed it so elegantly: “Either we all make it, or nobody makes it”. Numerous examples of good progress came from around the world, spanning policy, strategies and
implementation successes. Some highlights of the discussions both in Plenary and in Ministerial Dialogues included:

- Finance was the most important topic that ran through all the sessions of the Meeting.
- Many speakers confirmed that investments in WASH lead to economic development that generates more tax revenue and help businesses and people to flourish. Politicians can derive a political dividend from this.
- Transparent and predictable regulation is vital to enable investments in WASH and to win the trust of the customers. Tariff reforms and increases can then be achieved if individual customers can see that those increases generate an improved service.
- “Shit Matters” stated the President of Costa Rica. Indeed, it was great to see sanitation and hygiene no longer being a taboo topic, more and more in the news, more openly discussed. The participants of the meeting were acclaimed as “faeco-warriors”.
- Several speakers emphasized that there is no point in having good health systems without good water and sanitation. WASH is the best investment that can be made in health.
- The commitments tabled at the meeting by so many countries and other partners were a sign that the sector understands the importance of international cooperation and accountability.

The actions and next steps that I propose include:

- Fulfil your obligations as governments and embrace human rights as guiding principles.
- Identify who are the people who have been left behind and assess how you can address those people’s needs.
- Establish systems that integrate laws, a strong regulatory framework, policies and, institutions that can ensure you are able to deliver services for all. A better-performing sector becomes more credit-worthy.
- By the time of the next SWA Finance Ministers’ Meeting in 2020, develop financing strategies for WASH for all, specifically for the people you have identified: reducing the financing gap; reforming tariffs; integrating the WASH programme into overall national plans and budgets; persuading the Minister of Finance and of Health that WASH is a good investment for them both, not an expense.
- Be courageous, take risks! Considered investment in sanitation and water for all will pay off for your population.

The Ministers of water and sanitation were gathered here in the right place at the right time – SDG 6 is a very difficult one, and WASH may not be a glamorous sector, but it is a profoundly important topic on which to be a Minister. WASH is a national priority issue, not a sectoral issue. As Chair of SWA, I congratulate countries on their successes to date, and I urge everybody who attended this meeting to implement the ideas and plans discussed here in order to reduce inequalities and serve the people who are always left behind. Leaders must lead from the front. You are not alone: as the President of Costa Rica reminded us, don’t believe the people who say it is impossible.