Input to the Concept Papers on each of the five interactive dialogues of the UN 2023 Water Conference from the Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting (Beirut, 18-19 May 2022)

Key messages and recommendations resulting from the Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting (Beirut, 18 - 19 May 2022) are provided as input to the concept notes of the five interactive dialogues as identified during the one-day preparatory meeting for the Conference convened by the President of the United Nations General Assembly on 25 October 2022.

The Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting was held in collaboration with the League of Arab States in preparation for the United Nations conference for the global midterm comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028. The aim of the meeting was to assess regional progress towards the Water Action Decade objectives, and to discuss related challenges, opportunities and the ways to accelerate achievement.

The meeting provided a platform for presenting national and regional initiatives and key actions that demonstrate the commitment of the Arab countries to the international water goals. The outcomes will guide regional mechanisms for decision- and policy- making on water-related topics. The meeting gathered representatives from Arab States from relevant ministries and national institutions and representatives from regional and international organizations as well as United Nations organizations, international and regional financial institutions, academia, private sector, and civil society.

(1) Water for Health: Access to WASH, including the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation (SDG 6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 17);

- Despite being ahead of global averages on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 targets on access to water and sanitation services, significant disparities remain between urban and rural areas, and situations of conflict and occupation present difficulties to ensure access to these services. 48 million people in the region lack basic access to drinking water and nearly 75% of them are in rural areas.
- Water and sanitation services are human rights, not just a commodity, and should be available to all, especially poor and vulnerable groups, irrespective of their ability to pay for the service. Access of individuals to safe drinking water and sanitation services should be a priority and should not be affected by water allocations to other sectors. Water accounting and auditing can be used to support the decision for equitable systems of water allocation.
- To improve service delivery, increased investment in both the technical and human resources capacities of water operators and water infrastructure is needed.
- The complexity and systemic nature of water services should be taken into consideration when addressing challenges faced by communities, water service providers and governments during protracted conflicts. Furthermore, in both anticipating and responding to protracted conflicts and other crises, humanitarian and development actors need to strengthen their partnerships

- The international community and humanitarian organizations should move quickly to relieve suffering of people in Arab countries whose water situation is critical as a result of war and conflict.
- Development interventions need to be aligned with national priorities with greater cooperation needed between humanitarian and development agencies, to strengthen the resilience of water service before and during protracted crises.
- Conflicts, occupation and sanctions affect the ability to invest in water services and ensure the continuity in the delivery of water services for all.
- Access to water in conflict situations is gravely curtailed by direct attacks on water operators, looting and destruction of infrastructure, as well as by the indirect impact of loss of human resources due to emigration and displacement. The cumulative effect is a long-term and progressive decline in water and sanitation service delivery. Hence, to guard against de-development and decline of water services as a result of protracted conflicts, the need arises for bolstering resilience of water services to conflict-related and other hazards, both before and during crises. Moreover, international humanitarian law should be respected when ensuring water for all under conditions of conflict
- Occupation of Palestine has a direct impact on water resources for the Palestinian people resulting in the depletion of water and financial resource
- Access to water can affect a range of human rights such as the right to life, property, health, food, safe drinking water, sanitation, decent work, a healthy environment, an adequate standard of living, cultural and other rights. It is essential to address issues related to water through an approach based on applicable human rights law and to pay particular attention to the disproportionate effects on people in vulnerable situations, particularly rural communities, people living in arid regions, and those facing water scarcity, desertification, drought, and land degradation.
- Countries within and/or bordering crisis zones and facing water scarcity, and those that host large numbers of refugees and displaced persons should receive special support.

(2) **Water for Sustainable Development: Valuing Water, Water-Energy- Food Nexus and Sustainable Economic and Urban Development** (SDG 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and SDGs 2, 8, 9, 11, 12);

- Efforts to improve water use efficiency have achieved mixed success in the region. While some regional progress was achieved at early on with the adoption of the SDGs and formulation of indicator methodologies, lack of data renders it difficult to assess progress. Globally, water use efficiency (WUE) is estimated at US$ 19 per cubic meter, while in the Arab region it is estimated at $10 per cubic meter for the year 2019.
- Water-related ecosystem are important for the region, particularly freshwater ecosystems such as wetlands that are shrinking and for biodiversity, as they are habitats for plants and animals.
- Improving water use efficiency and water productivity would have positive benefits for domestic, agricultural and industrial water services, and also encompasses efforts such as reducing non-revenue water, increasing cost recovery and financial sustainability
- Irrigated agriculture uses a major share of water while producing a low economic output in the Arab Region, which negatively impacts WUE. Reflecting WUE in water reallocation regimes need to take the local socioeconomic, environmental and food security context into consideration.
- Non-revenue water is a major problem that results in the actual loss of water resources and reduces the financial sustainability of water utility operations
- Energy costs are an important component affecting the ability to deliver water services and ensure cost recovery

- Extend support to water operators operationally in terms of human capacity development to improve the operation of water resources and the cost recovery of operations.
- Increase national-level capacities to enhance the monitoring of water-use efficiency across sectors and provide guidelines for decision-makers and water resource planners to improve the allocation of water resources at country level
- Improve cost recovery in government-run projects by engaging the private sector and local communities, through collaborative, clear and transparent frameworks
- Improve efficiency in the provision of water services, determine the exact economic value of water in different sectors without neglecting the social and cultural values, and review strategies to enhance financial returns.
- Calculate and reduce water loss resulting from production, post-harvest losses and food waste
- Shift from "sustainability of supply" to "sustainability of consumption" through the adoption of structural, socio-political and economic policy instruments, the latter being the most effective and can enhance cost recovery.
- Improve agricultural water management by raising irrigation efficiency and productivity through modern farming and irrigation systems, adopting smart farming systems, selecting drought and salt tolerant crops, increasing R&D, providing farmers with appropriate training to adopt modern farming system and increase their participation in decision making
- Keep water security at the centre of the WEF nexus because food and energy security cannot be achieved without it.
- Enhance capacity and knowledge on the benefits and opportunities of using treated wastewater.
- Consider the energy needs and costs to ensure the delivery of non-conventional water resources. This requires a water-energy nexus lens and drawing upon renewable energy sources that could create green job opportunities, particularly for youth
- Support the use of non-conventional water resources in water-scarce countries through appropriate technology transfer, financing, and capacity development that engage national and regional institutions and research centres, and local knowledge
- Include in public policies the promotion of production and use of non-conventional water and linking it to public health and food production.

(3) Water for Climate, Resilience and Environment: Source to Sea, Biodiversity, Climate, Resilience and DRR (SDGs 6.5, 6.6, 7, 11.5, 13, 14, 15); affordable and clean energy, sustainable cities, climate action, life below water, life on lands

- Adaptation is all about water in the water-scarce Arab Region
- The Arab Region received 8.5 times more debt than grants and 3.5 times more support for mitigation than adaptation; Non-concessional debt remains the most common form of support to the region (2013-2019); support is skewed towards mitigation and is not reaching the most vulnerable. At the regional level, 6 Arab LDCs received just 5% of total commitments and 18% of adaptation commitments
- Climate change affects water availability and demand in the region; the region is among the most vulnerable to climate change in the world.
- Resilience overcomes vulnerability at regional/national/basin levels. Water vulnerability to climate change is not only about impacts, but also about adaptive capacity
- Extreme events and resilience: droughts/floods are recurrent and require investments in resilience and recovery
- Promote the implementation of science-based assessment to inform action on water and climate and establish a common regional knowledge base shared by regional stakeholders and partners to inform cooperation on water and climate

- Mainstream climate across water and water-dependent sectors, like agriculture, and increase access to climate finance for adaptation in the water sector
- Join actions that address climate and water issues to reduce risks and save lives. Close cooperation between authorities working on climate and water could be promoted for example through joint review of planned or ongoing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) and National Adaptation Plans (NAP) actions

(4) Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Water Cooperation, Cross Sectoral Cooperation, including Scientific Cooperation, and Water Across the 2030 Agenda (SDG 6.5, 6.b and SDGs 16, 17); peace justice and strong institutions/ partnerships for the goals

- The Arab region is not on track to achieve target 6.5. Financing dimension showed the least progress between 2019 and 2021 regional reporting.
- Regional challenges to achieve IWRM: water scarcity, climate change, water pollution, funding, political will
- Wide disparities exist between countries in the region and between countries within the same subregion in establishing institutions and engaging stakeholders for IWRM implementation
- Multistakeholder engagement and a participatory approach is necessary to support IWRM, including engagement of civil society organizations, academia and research institutions, experts, private sector and youth. Some progress has been made in increasing engagement at the design level, but insufficiently at the decision-making and implementation levels.
- Gender mainstreaming policies in the water and wastewater sector needed to increase inclusion and empowerment
- IWRM is essential for alleviating the impacts of increasing freshwater scarcity in the Arab region, including groundwater and shared water resources.
- Involving stakeholders in decision making and maximizing the role of youth and women as well as the private sector in terms of contributing to operation, maintenance and project financing through public-private partnership projects.
- In order to advance progress on IWRM SDG indicator 6.5.1, the following is crucially needed: coherent governance within and across sectors, improving availability and access to data and information, leveraging innovation and technologies, unleashing female and youth potential and improving transboundary cooperation.
- Effective coordination and legislation; capacity development; data sharing; improved master planning and management at basin level, stronger political will, multi-stakeholder engagement and a participatory approach to support achievement of IWRM.
- Evidence-based decision-making and policy coherence to support the development of effective policies, laws and plans.

- All Arab States depend on transboundary water resources to meet their water needs, except for one (Comoros).
- The number of Arab countries reporting on transboundary water (SDG 6.5.2) increased from 10 States in 2017 to 15 States in 2020.
- Challenges include: lack of funding, lack in data availability and data exchange; especially on groundwater resources, with riparian countries; lack of technical and financial resources to collect data, regardless if there is a standing water cooperation agreement or not
- The most important accomplishments for countries with transboundary water cooperation agreements are securing funding and improvement in water management.

- The international community must do more to prevent human-induced water scarcity and displacement, not only within States but equally in a transboundary context and in areas under occupation.
- Lack of cooperation in transboundary watercourses may aggravate climate change impacts, the vulnerability to climate change, and climate variability. Drawing upon science to support policy and collaborative actions is essential to mitigate the water crisis, address water stress and overcome water scarcity under changing climate conditions.
- Widen the circle of participation and identify win-win solutions and science-based policy making that can foster water cooperation. Cooperation should include sharing data, monitoring, forecasting and warning and capacity development, among other measures
- Develop mechanisms for cooperative and knowledge-based water management and to establish a governance structure for transboundary cooperation including legal, technical and financial mechanisms.
- Establish research centres for shared water resources, that cover data exchange, data collection and feasibility studies for possible projects and that address climate change impacts.
- Implement capacity development programs, especially in developing countries, to build water negotiation and mediation capacities. This contributes to preventing conflicts and building cooperation opportunities and to establishing regional stability and security through political dialogue and water diplomacy.
- Promote cross-sectoral partnerships, cooperation, technologies and financing mechanisms as well as institutional frameworks that link water and other relevant sectors

(5) Water Action Decade: Accelerating the implementation of the objectives of the Decade, including through the UN Secretary-General's Action Plan.

Main accelerators identified to advance work on water related targets were grouped into the following main pillars:

1- Financing water

- International concessional funding is needed as well as public and private investments in the water sector. Governments are encouraged to improve the enabling environment regulatory frameworks and explore new approaches for encouraging investment in environmentally sustainable water and sanitation-related infrastructure and services, while ensuring the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.
- Water sector should be supported by enhanced access to innovative and blended financing. Examples include Islamic Development Bank's efforts to work with philanthropic organizations or Green Climate Fund and opportunities presented by ESCWA's Climate/SDGs Debt Swap and Donor Nexus Initiative.
- The preparation of bankable water projects should be improved through, for example, reducing non-revenue losses, improving technical and financial efficiency, improving governance and increasing transparency, including need for cost-recovery and ensuring the inclusion of vulnerable groups.
- Water utilities' operation and maintenance and efficiency should be improved to improve their credit worthiness.
- Private sector engagement needs to be encouraged through improved data monitoring and reporting, enhanced certainty on cost-recovery and credit guarantees.
- Collaboration between bilateral donors and private banks should be encouraged to provide grants/credits/human resources to support the delivery of water services.

- Funding should be directed to projects that better respond to country water priorities.
- Countries should be supported, especially in fragile or conflict situations, to access funding opportunities and ensure financial sustainability of projects.
- Financing for water projects can be increased by twinning water objectives with other development objectives related to health, human rights, food security and climate resilience.
- Sustainable financing, regulation, monitoring, reporting and maintenance mechanisms need to be incorporated into water-related project interventions.

On climate finance for the water sector:

- There is an insufficient number of accredited agencies in the region eligible to access multilateral climate funds.
- More climate finance is needed for adaptation and specifically for adaptation related to water. This finance should be in the form of grants and not debts.
- More funding should be directed towards smart technologies and non-conventional water resources.
- Donors and global funds should be encouraged to reduce the time needed for the review and disbursement of funds. Onsite monitoring and oversight of projects, although beneficial, may increase the cost of implementation if it's too sophisticated or cumbersome.
- Funding should be prioritized to the most vulnerable countries in the region and more specifically to the most vulnerable areas to climate change.

2- Data to inform decision-making, monitoring and implementation

- Data availability, accessibility and sharing should be improved especially in transboundary settings to better inform decision-making. Collaboration across regions and countries can support greater sharing and access to data which may pose challenges for one Arab country to access on its own.
- The establishment of national and regional water data platforms is needed to inform water management.
- The use of new technologies, such as earth observation and big data, combined with improved data analysis should be encouraged. The adoption of Deep Learning and Artificial Intelligence to be also encouraged in water resources management.
- Management Information Systems (MIS) and Decision Support Systems (DSS) can be established at national, integrated, and comprehensive levels for water sector monitoring, modelling and decision-making support while taking advantage of modern technologies in all aspects of hydro-informatics.
- Remote sensing should be used to support risk management, disaster risk management and monitoring water-related ecosystem.

3- Innovation

- Need to foster an enabling environment to encourage innovation, technology access and private sector engagement in the water sector.
- Innovation is not limited to technology only, it is also about knowledge.
- Water for Jobs: funding of start-ups is needed to encourage young entrepreneurs.
- Innovation should be encouraged in early warning centres and institutions to reduce disaster risks.

- Innovation should draw upon local solutions and indigenous knowledge, and it requires intensified R&D and linkages across sectors. Opportunities exist for localizing in the desalination industry to reduce costs.
- Private sector can help with innovation, upscaling and dissemination.
- Surface and groundwater resources management can be improved by innovations in governance

4- Capacity development and regional knowledge networks

- Regional cooperation and partnerships support the achievement of the Decade's goals. For resource mobilization, using the comparative advantages of various partners increases synergy and is an effective way to mainstream water initiatives and interventions, as well as enhance efficiency and impact.
- Water education and knowledge should start from an early stage, including training youth on groundwater.
- Capacity development programs that provide start-ups with entrepreneurial, finance and marketing skills as well as technical training for water demand management and water-saving technologies should be implemented.
- Capacity development on water diplomacy should be implemented.
- Professional training in different areas of water is needed to strengthen knowledge and innovation.
- Farmers should be trained on modern and efficient irrigation systems through the establishment of irrigation consultancy services.

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