

Water Action Agenda

Concept note outlining its operations

1. Background

Water and sanitation run across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with impacts across all sectors of society. Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) – to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all – is alarmingly off track. At the current rate of progress, the world will not reach the SDG 6 targets or realize the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation by 2030 and we need to accelerate progress up to four times¹. The lack of progress means that water could be a deal breaker for achieving the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, water has the potential to be a dealmaker to leverage and achieve all the SDGs, as well as other related global agendas, such as the Sendai Framework, New Urban Agenda, Convention on Biological Diversity, and Paris Agreement.

Through the Water Action Decade 2018-2028, the global community commits to advance the water agenda by energizing existing programmes and projects and inspiring water action to achieve the 2030 Agenda, in particular SDG 6. The UN Secretary-General's Plan: Water Action Decade 2018-2028 outlines an ambition to advance progress across sectors. The UN system and its partners launched the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, which forms a part of the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs by 2030, to unify the global community and deliver fast results at all appropriate scales at the country level. Successfully addressing the global water challenges is fundamental to the UN system's work on Our Common Agenda, which sets the direction towards a future of global cooperation and inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism.

2. UN 2023 Water Conference – A watershed moment

In March 2023 the world will come together during the UN 2023 Water Conference convened by the UN General Assembly. General Assembly resolution [A/RES/73/226](#) established the midterm review of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028 and resolution [A/RES/75/212](#) details its modalities. The Conference will comprise an opening and a closing ceremony, six plenary meetings and five interactive dialogues², and the mandated outcome document of the Conference is a summary of its proceedings. Co-hosts of the Conference are the Republic of Tajikistan and the Kingdom of Netherlands. UN DESA, with the support of UN-Water, forms the secretariat for the Conference.

The co-hosts of the Conference developed the Conference' [Vision Statement](#) which states that the Conference and its preparatory process are based on three principles: Inclusive, Action-oriented and Cross-sectoral. Inclusivity is both in terms of (a) the Conference process to ensure inclusiveness, and in terms of (b) the results to leave no one behind.

The UN 2023 Water Conference is a unique opportunity for the world community. It is the first UN conference on water in almost 50 years and comes at a time when there are urgent needs for water action. The world is facing unprecedented challenges, including the devastating impacts of climate change, the looming food crisis and the on-going battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Water can

¹ <https://www.unwater.org/publications/summary-progress-update-2021-sdg-6-water-and-sanitation-for-all/>

² The finalized themes for the interactive dialogues are outlined here:

https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/22-02166%20USG%20Letter%20to%20MS_2023%20Water%20Conference%20and%20Interactive%20Dialogues_wn_Final.pdf

help to solve these crises; for example, water is instrumental for mitigation as well as adaptation in tackling the climate crisis. The Conference needs to mobilize all sectors, actors and countries and create the political momentum needed to act. The Conference will unite the world to combat the global water challenges.

3. Water Action Agenda - Addressing the global water crisis

A main outcome of the Conference will be the Water Action Agenda. The Water Action Agenda is the collection of all water-related voluntary commitments to accelerate progress in the second half of the Water Action Decade 2018-2028 and second half of the 2030 Agenda.

Building on on-going efforts and utilizing the political momentum created by the Conference, the Water Action Agenda will mobilize action across countries, sectors and stakeholders to meet the global water and sanitation related goals and targets. It will turn the political momentum created by the UN 2023 Water Conference into tangible and ambitious action to get progress on track. As such, the Water Action Agenda will further increase the momentum and political support for advancing on the globally agreed water-related goals and targets, while relying on and strengthening existing agreements and processes. It will be inclusive of all relevant stakeholders, integrated across sectors, aligned with other on-going intergovernmental processes and bring transformative actions for the Water Action Decade 2018-2028 in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The key building blocks of the Water Action Agenda are:

1. **Commit to action:** Mobilizing voluntary commitments to action across countries, sectors and stakeholders, aimed at accelerated implementation and improved impact towards achieving SDG 6 and other water-related goals and targets. Voluntary commitments will be gathered, showcased and tracked on a dedicated platform.
2. **Sustain and scale up implementation:** All stakeholders have a role to play to drive the implementation of the Water Action Agenda and to ensure follow up with partners on what works for replication and scaling up.
3. **Follow-up and review processes:** Showcasing successes and learning from what works and what does not. The High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) and inter-governmental, private sector and NGO fora across key sectors will be utilized. Analyses of water-related progress across sectors and other SDGs and global frameworks will be done annually.

Through the virtuous cycle of committing, implementing and reviewing, and through peer-learning among actors, the Water Action Agenda will enable replication and scaling up of what works and bring successful solutions to global scale.

4. Learning from other sectors and building on existing structures

To inform its design, the Water Action Agenda is learning from similar process in other sectors and is building on already existing structures of the Water Action Decade and feed into upcoming summits such as the SDG Summit, the Summit for the Future, UNFCCC COP processes and the Sendai Framework.

Many other sectors have successfully mobilized commitments to advance progress towards global targets. For example, the United Nations Ocean Conference mobilised voluntary commitments to accelerate the implementation of SDG 14. The Global Compact on Refugees gathers commitments by States, organizations, businesses, academics and refugees to advance the Compact objectives. UN

Energy launched a global roadmap and energy compacts through its High-level Dialogue on Energy. The Sanitation and Water for All partnership tracks its partners' commitments in the context of a mutual and reciprocal accountability mechanism. The United Nations Food Systems Summit identified five Action Tracks that functioned as the starting point of coalitions of actions which could help national governments and multi-stakeholders adopt on a voluntary basis, transformational pathways and associated policy and behavioural shifts towards more sustainable food systems.

These examples show the importance of a support mechanism or the networking capacity to connect commitments and partners, to ensure implementation, evaluation, validation, replication, and scaling up. This enabling environment demands long term commitment (continuity and consistency), advocacy, outreach, organizational capacity and resources. Building this into the follow-up process and the structures and instruments is critical to the success of the Water Action Agenda.

5. Operationalizing the Water Action Agenda - key building blocks

5.1 Commit to action

Voluntary commitments are mandated in the modalities resolution for the UN 2023 Water Conference. Leading up to the Conference all stakeholders will be able to make commitments, and collectively they will make up the core of the Water Action Agenda, which will be launched at the Conference. Voluntary commitments are mobilized through a process that involves all stakeholders and builds ownership at the local, national, regional and global levels across sectors and actors, as appropriate including through online and/or in person workshops, webinars, and regular outreach and campaigns.

The platform³ to collect voluntary commitments is custom built as part of the SDG Acceleration Action platform and will be managed by UN DESA. New voluntary commitments can be added to the platform also after the Conference. The platform will integrate the current SDG 6 Action Space hosted at the UN-Water website as well as link with and leverage other relevant water-related commitment platforms. Similar to the Ocean Conference commitment platform, once a commitment is made it is featured on the Water Action Agenda platform as well as on the SDG Acceleration Action platform. Continuous efforts will be made to showcase notable commitments, e.g. through the official Conference website, blogs, and short videos. In addition, there will be opportunities for highlighting voluntary commitments during the official processes of the UN 2023 Water Conference and its related meetings.

Commitments will be substantial, innovative and transformative. They will be concrete, future- and results oriented and will include the cross-sectoral aspects of the 2030 Agenda. Member States are encouraged to bring together leadership to share best practices and lead the development of commitments, together with the youth, women, indigenous people, local communities, NGOs, private sector etc., to ensure a participatory process that results in useful, concrete and progressive voluntary commitments with the collective leadership and governance in place to drive these commitments towards implementation, scaling and replication. The Water Action Agenda will

³ <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/water/register>. Elements that can be covered in the commitment platform and form include level and geographical scope of the commitment (local, national, regional, global), links to other SDGs, partnerships, and how it aims to accelerate progress (e.g. as linked to the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework accelerator areas: finance, capacity development, governance, data, innovation).

mobilize voluntary commitments from across sectors, with a focus on integrated, holistic and transformative solutions that highlight interlinkages across SDGs in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda.

The voluntary commitments can be largely grouped into three main categories:

- **Foundational commitments:** Commitments from across the world that need the acknowledgement and empowerment of being part of the Water Action Agenda. Often small in scale, size and reach but meaningful at the level of the commitment, for example from schools, communities, innovators, etc. There could be hundreds or even thousands from across the world - the more the better.
- **Institutional commitments.** By governments, civil society, private sector, academia, coalitions etc. These might be dozens, with large-scale impact and to be scaled up and replicated.
- **Gamechangers:** Commitments by coalitions of partners that lead to systems change, rooted in deep understanding of the systems failures and with longer term commitments to realize systems change. These might be only 3 to 5.

A set of guiding principles will be developed for the commitments to support their design and submission. Guiding principles may include:

- a. **Substantial:** commitments linking and contributing directly to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – inclusive, integrated, future proof (sustainable), action-oriented and measurable.
- b. **Innovative:** commitments identifying lock-ins and/or gaps, design and invest in the process and strategy, develop, design and test, implement and scale.
- c. **Transformative:** commitments leading to a major change in how things are done and in the lives and livelihoods of people who benefit.
- d. **Scalable:** commitments that are (economically) scalable based on additional available resources.
- e. **Replicable:** commitments focusing on building coalitions and partnerships to replicate and scale up.

Voluntary commitments that meet all guiding principles can be specifically recognised in order to highlight those that are innovative, transformative etc. In addition, to capture interlinkages, a tagging system can be used for the commitments. The themes of the interactive dialogues, the SDGs and accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework can be used to tag commitments. Also, there will be a due diligence process for the commitments before they are added to the online platform.

The process for mobilizing voluntary commitments is focused on involving all stakeholders and build ownership at the national level across sectors and actors. For example, in the UN system outreach to all UN Resident Coordinators is one key activity, as well as supporting countries' dialogues for the Water Action Agenda as needed. The OECD and UN-Water Roundtable on Financing Water on 7-9 February 2023 will be key to involve the financial sector and develop transformative commitments. Outreach to other SDG communities is essential, for example through the food and agriculture community through dedicated briefings in Rome and to the Committee on Food Security, UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) COP15 as well as UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP27. A meeting of UN Principals may also be convened in advance of the UN 2023 Water Conference.

5.2 Sustain and scale up implementation

Once voluntary commitments are made, their implementation will be sustained through the mobilization and support of all stakeholders as needed and depending on their scale. All stakeholders across sectors are expected and encouraged to drive the implementation towards the globally agreed water-related goals and targets at the country level in an inclusive and action-oriented manner, including government stakeholders, the United Nations system, relevant international financial institutions, private sector, civil society (including youth) and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

The UN system will support the implementation, building on the UN reform and anchored in the reinvigorated UN Resident Coordinators system, the new generation of UN Country Teams, the Common Country Analyses and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. In this context, UN-Water's engagements at the country level is already focusing on facilitating connections to expertise, data and resources as needed, strengthening of cross-sectoral inter-agency coordination and integration, and supporting SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework-related initiatives aimed at accelerating progress in countries, which will help to match and translate Water Action Agenda commitments to needs on the ground as appropriate.

The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework and its unified efforts across the five accelerator areas will be instrumental to coordinate the support, as appropriate. Financing, capacity development, data and information, innovation and governance will all need to be prioritized. Example initiatives include the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6, the SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative, the World Water Quality Alliance, the Water and Climate Coalition, the Hand Hygiene for All initiative, among others. With the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework already constituting a UN-wide strategy on water, its operationalization will be essential to sustain the implementation towards the globally agreed water-related goals and targets. For example, UN-Water is developing a strategic document to guide UN Country Teams and partners in countries to advance on water and sanitation. As another example, actors like the UN Global Compact, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the World Economic Forum and OECD could, as appropriate, be instrumental to sustain and scale implementation of the Water Action Agenda for developed and developing countries and private sector stakeholders.

How could this look schematically? While this will vary greatly depending on the type of voluntary commitment, below is an illustrative example for one type of commitments showing how the UN system is mobilized at the country level to support and sustain the implementation of commitments.

- a. After submission of the voluntary commitment, UN DESA, with the support of UN-Water as appropriate, will review the commitment and, based on the country specific context, the UN-Water family will inform the UN Resident Coordinator and UN Country Team (UNCT) to offer support to deliver the commitment while avoiding possible duplication of efforts.
- b. The UN Resident Coordinator and UNCT will work with the government counterparts to coordinate programmes and projects on the ground together with relevant partners to ensure that the Water Action Agenda commitments will be anchored in the existing relevant national development plans and UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and to deliver on the commitments, including links to the regional level as relevant, in line with agencies' roles in the commitment and their mandates.
- c. The UN-Water family will support the sustained and scaled up implementation as appropriate, including the mobilization of resources to make sure commitments are realized.

5.3 Follow-up and review processes

There will be three main follow-up and review processes for the Water Action Agenda, which build on and leverage existing processes:

1. An annual pivotal event on the margins of the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF).
 - a. E.g. Water Action Agenda Special Event (which will build on and develop further the current SDG 6 Special Event⁴), including:
 - i. An analysis of water-related progress, across sectors and other SDGs and global frameworks
 - ii. Success stories and lessons learned
 - iii. New commitments to the Water Action Agenda
2. Other inter-governmental fora across key sectors.
3. Other relevant major water-related events.

The follow-up and review processes for the Water Action Agenda will be anchored in the annual Special Event, which will review the progress on the Water Action Agenda, share lessons learned, and mobilize new commitments. The event will at the same time allow Member States to discuss current information on the progress of SDG 6 implementation, SDG 6 interlinkages with SDG's under review at HLPF and against the backdrop of current crises (e.g. pandemics, food crisis, energy crisis, droughts, etc.). For the event, volunteers will be called on to be on stage to self-report on their commitments. Every annual Special Event will be supported by background documentation, and as such enable self-reporting while avoiding creating additional reporting processes. The event will have three main components:

- **An analysis of water-related progress**, across sectors and other SDGs and global frameworks, will be developed for and presented at the Special Event. It will analyze progress on SDG 6 and the Water Action Agenda across sectors and other SDGs using existing monitoring frameworks and build on existing monitoring initiatives such as the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 and SDG 6 country acceleration case studies.
- **Success stories and lessons learned** will be showcased about commitments to incentivize delivery and share best practices.
- **New voluntary commitments to the Water Action Agenda** can be announced as part of the Special Event.

In addition to the Special Event at the margins of the HLPF, the Water Action Agenda will be integrated into other sectors' inter-governmental fora, both for its implementation and its follow-up and review. Examples include UNFCCC COPs, the CBD COPs, the Committee on World Food Security, the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, relevant forum of the energy sector, the World Health Assembly and the UN Environment Assembly⁵.

Other relevant major water-related events will also be leveraged as opportunities to showcase commitments, mobilize new commitments and facilitate peer-learning, including the Dushanbe Water Process, the Stockholm World Water Weeks, the World Water Fora, the Regional Commissions' Sustainable Development Fora etc.

⁴ This is currently an informal Special Event of HLPF, jointly convened by the UN DESA USG and the UN-Water Chair as part of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework.

⁵ For a complete list, please see pages 18-19 of the UN-Water Inventory: <https://www.unwater.org/app/uploads/2019/05/UN-Water-Inventory-2019.pdf>

In general, it is important to recognize the differences in scope and nature between the different types of commitments (foundational, institutional and gamechangers) and that all types of commitments are important. The follow-up and review processes will aim to highlight achievements and lessons learned across scales and different types of commitments, while at the same time adjusting the modalities and scope of the follow-up and review processes depending on the type of commitment as needed.

6. Role of stakeholders

All stakeholders across sectors are expected and encouraged to commit and drive the implementation towards the globally agreed water-related goals and targets at the country level in an inclusive and action-oriented manner. Specific key roles of stakeholders for the Water Action Agenda are expected to be:

- **Governments:** Foster necessary policy environment, including ensuring incentives and inclusive governance for implementation to happen.
- **UN system:** Build and capitalize on the UN reform and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework in order to support and sustain implementation and be a neutral platform to commit, follow-up and review.
- **IFIs:** Provide financing and leverage additional financing to implement the Water Action Agenda.
- **Civil society, including youth, women and indigenous people:** Implement, support, advocate, and participate in follow-up and review.
- **Private sector:** Invest, implement and commit to action.
- **Multi-stakeholder partnerships:** Advocate and support implementation by bringing stakeholders together.

7. Indicative timeline up to the UN 2023 Water Conference

- June 2022: Dushanbe Water Process.
- June 2022: Oceans Conference.
- July 2022: SDG 6 Special Event at the HLPF.
- August 2022: Stockholm World Water Week.
- October 2022: Preparatory meeting convened by the President of the General Assembly.
- November 2022: UNFCCC COP 27.
- December 2022: 37th UN-Water Meeting.
- December 2022: UN-Water Summit on Groundwater.
- February 2023: OECD and UN-Water Roundtable on Financing Water.
- January/February 2023: Meeting of UN Principals in advance of the UN 2023 Water Conference.
- March 2023: UN 2023 Water Conference.
- July 2023: Incorporation of the Water Action Agenda in the global review of SDG 6 during the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) as follow-up to the UN 2023 Water Conference, including through the SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2023.
- September 2023: Presentation of an updated Water Action Agenda during the UN General Assembly ministerial week, the SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future.
- 2024-2030: Annual reviews of the Water Action Agenda during the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

- 2028: Final report of the International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018-2028 and an analysis for further acceleration of the Water Action Agenda.
- 2030: Final review of the Water Action Agenda.

8. Annex – Schematic overview of Water Action Agenda operations

