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**2023 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**

New York, 22 March –24 March 2023

**Interactive dialogues**

**Interactive dialogue 5: Water Action Decade**

**Concept paper prepared by the Secretariat**

*Summary*

The present paper was prepared pursuant to paragraph 9(d) of UN General Assembly resolution [75/212](#), in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General of the 2023 United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018-2028 (hereinafter: UN 2023 Water Conference) to prepare concept papers on each of the themes of the interactive dialogues, taking into account the relevant water-related processes of the Assembly and other possible contributions. The present paper concerns interactive dialogue 5, entitled “Water Action Decade: Accelerating the Implementation of the Objectives of the Decade, including through the UN Secretary-General’s Action Plan”. The current concept paper focuses entirely on the progress and future of the International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development” (2018–2028).

## I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

1. As part of the organizational arrangements mandated in A/RES/75/212, the UN Secretary-General should prepare concept papers on the themes of the five interactive dialogues to be held at the UN 2023 Water Conference. The first four Dialogues and their corresponding concept papers are strongly thematic focusing on sets of specific SDGs. The current concept paper informs the fifth Dialogue that will focus entirely on the progress and future of the International Decade for Action “Water for Sustainable Development” (2018–2028) – further referred to as “the Decade.” The concept paper is key to Dialogue discussions as the entire UN 2023 Water Conference is motivated by the mid-term review of the Decade.

2. The Decade was designed to complement the process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, moving away from silos and integrating and aligning efforts at the global level. The objectives of the Decade were formulated in the UN [Secretary-General’s Plan: Water Action Decade 2018-2028](#):

- a) Advance sustainable development
- b) Energize implementation of existing programmes and projects; and
- c) Mobilize action to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The facilitate action, the objectives of the Decade are pursued through four workstreams:

- a) Facilitating access to knowledge and the exchange of good practices
- b) Improving knowledge generation and dissemination
- c) Pursuing advocacy, networking and promoting partnerships; and
- d) Strengthening communication for implementation of the water-related SDGs.

3. The many activities under these workstreams are closely aligned with the global work on water-related SDGs and other water-related global agreements, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development.

4. The 2022 [Secretary-General’s Report on the midterm review of the Decade](#) highlighted accomplishments over the first five years of the Decade and pinpointed some key actions, events, and lessons learned. The current concept paper draws on some elements of the report but aims to provide ideas on how to move forward to make the Decade a success and help achieve SDG 6 and other water-related goals and targets. It explores how the outcomes of the previous events and initiatives at the midway point can accelerate the progress in the next five years of the Decade – by interpreting those outcomes in terms of the accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework that aims to deliver swift results at an increased scale.

5. The UN 2023 Water Conference and the voluntary commitments that Member States and relevant stakeholders will submit to the Conference, also known as the Water Action Agenda, will provide an avenue through which continued, and hopefully accelerated progress can be made in the achievement of the objectives of the Decade, SDG 6 on water and sanitation and other global water-related goals and targets.

## II. THE WATER ACTION DECADE AT THE MIDPOINT: OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRESS

6. The year 2023 is not only the middle of the Decade, but also is the middle point of the 2030 Agenda. Hence, the state of the progress towards the SDGs in the first seven years of the 2030 Agenda period is closely related to the progress towards the Decade’s objectives. A snapshot on the progress of water-

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<sup>1</sup> This Concept Paper has benefitted from contributions from Member States, UN system and a diverse group of stakeholders and add the following urls: <https://sdgs.un.org/conferences/water2023/documentation> and [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/final\\_water\\_consultation\\_report\\_19\\_oct.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/final_water_consultation_report_19_oct.pdf)

related SDGs is given below. It should be noted that in addition to chronic and consistent lack of data on almost all water-related SDG indicators (which in itself is a major impediment to accurate assessment of progress nationally and globally), the most recent data available is generally two or more years old, although in many cases the state of the progress specifically for 2023 - the midway point of the Decade – can be ascertained via trend analysis.

### Progress of SDG 6 and SDG 11.5<sup>2</sup>

7. More elaborate updates on SDG 6 and SDG 11.5 can be found in the other four Dialogue concept papers, but to review in brief:

**SDG 6.1 and 6.2 (Safe and affordable drinking water/End open defecation and provide access to sanitation and hygiene).** From 2015 to 2020 the percentage of the population using safely managed drinking water services, safely managed sanitation and handwashing facilities with soap and water at home increased, from 70 to 74%; from 47 to 54%; and from 67 to 71%, respectively. This currently leaves 2 billion and 3.6 billion people without required standards of drinking water and sanitation services respectively, and 2.3 billion people still lack handwashing facilities with soap and water.

**SDG 6.3 (Improve water quality, wastewater treatment and safe reuse).** Globally, only 44% of household wastewater is not safely treated, but this number reflects data from less than 25% of countries worldwide. With regards to water quality, similar problems of data exist as there is a lack of data for at least 3 billion people on the quality of the water they rely upon. Of 89 countries reporting, 60% of water bodies have good ambient water quality.

**SDG 6.4 (Increase water-use efficiency and ensure freshwater supplies).** Water use efficiency increased by 10% between 2015 and 2018 with only 26 countries reporting a decreased in water use efficiency during that period. The number of people living in water-stressed countries of the world is 2.3 billion with 733 million of those living in high or critically water-stressed nations.

**SDG 6.5 (Implement integrated water resources management).** In 1992 all countries committed to implement Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) as a means of ensuring sustainable and equitable water use. Thirty years later, 107 countries are still not on track to have sustainably managed water by 2030. Transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers are shared by 153 countries. But only a small proportion of (32) countries reported high (90% or more) coverage of their transboundary waters by operational arrangements in 2020.

**SDG 6.6 (Protect and restore water-related ecosystems).** Freshwater species and habitats are being lost at faster rates than any others.<sup>3</sup> Some 67% of the world's wetlands that existed in 1900 are estimated to have been lost, and the rate of loss is accelerating. Rivers and lakes are also changing rapidly with 20% of the world's river basins experiencing rapid changes in the area covered by surface waters during the last five years.

**SDG 6.a (Expand water and sanitation support to developing countries).** While Overseas development assistance (ODA) commitments rose 9% from 2015 to 2019, actual disbursements remained steady at US\$ 8.8 billion during the same time period.

**SDG 6.b (Support local engagement in water and sanitation management).** Of the 109 countries reporting, 2/3 of them have participation of communities in all water and sanitation subsector decision-making. Actual high levels of community and user participation for collaborative management and decision-making is only found in 14 of those countries.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all figures come from UN-Water, 2021: [Summary Progress Update 2021 – SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all](#). Version: July 2021. Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>3</sup> Brondizio, E.S.; Settele, J.; Díaz, S. and Ngo, H.T. (eds) (2019) Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, Bonn: IPBES.

**SDG 11.5 (Reduce the adverse effects of natural disasters).** The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction projects that medium- to large-scale disaster events could occur at an average rate of 1.5 per day by 2030 - a 40% increase from 2015.<sup>4</sup> The IPCC projects that about one third of global land areas will suffer at least moderate drought by 2100.<sup>5</sup>

8. The above snapshot reiterates that the world is not on track to achieve SDG 6 and related goals and targets by 2030. This was the case even before COVID-19 and the pandemic has further increased the challenge. Accordingly, the activities carried out during the first half of the Decade have focused on getting water-related SDGs back on track to be achieved by 2030. A summary of some of these key actions and initiatives is given below under the four work streams of the Decade.

### **Progress on the four work streams of the Decade Action Plan**

9. Over the course of the first half of the Decade, intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder initiatives have advanced the objectives of the Decade through its four work streams. The below highlights a few examples under each stream.

#### ***1. Facilitating access to water-related knowledge and the exchange of good practices***

10. The UN-Water's Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 facilitated the exchange of good practices on SDG 6 monitoring and reporting. More recently, UN-Water established the SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative (coordinated by UNESCO and UNDESA) to accelerate water-related capacity development actions at the global scale. The SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative acknowledges that a systemic approach to developing capacities at country level, and sharing methods and good practices between countries, are essential enablers to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs and is the main catalyst also for other identified SDG 6 accelerators.

#### ***2. Improving water knowledge generation and dissemination***

11. The SDG 6 data portal was developed and launched compiling country data to report on global progress made towards SDG 6 and its associated targets. The strategic plan for the ninth phase of the Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme, (2022-2029), which essentially coincides with the second half of the Decade, identifies key water priority areas to support Member States in achieving water-related SDGs and other water-related global priorities. The Accountability for Water Coalition<sup>6</sup> generates and shares knowledge on how accountability for SDG 6 delivery can be strengthened and embedded at local, national and global scales, and identifies methodologies which enhance positive outcomes in 8 of 10 cases, and the factors which determine success.

#### ***3. Pursuing water advocacy, networking and promoting partnerships and action***

12. The Decade website was established to support the advocacy for the Decade, illustrating countries' activities and commitments, and the road map for the UN 2023 Water Conference on the Midterm Review of the Decade. UN-Water coordinates the annual global public campaigns for World Water Day (22 March) and World Toilet Day (19 November) and the production of the United Nations World Water Development Report. The CEO Water Mandate launched the industry-driven Water Resilience Coalition of 30 corporate members, which aims to elevate global water stress to the top of the

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2022). [Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2022: Our World at Risk: Transforming Governance for a Resilient Future](#). Geneva.

<sup>5</sup> Douville, H., K. Raghavan, J. Renwick, R.P. Allan, P.A. Arias, M. Barlow, R. Cerezo-Mota, A. Cherchi, T.Y. Gan, J. Gergis, D. Jiang, A. Khan, W. Pokam Mba, D. Rosenfeld, J. Tierney, and O. Zolina, 2021: Water Cycle Changes. In *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S.L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, N. Caud, Y. Chen, L. Goldfarb, M.I. Gomis, M. Huang, K. Leitzell, E. Lonnoy, J.B.R. Matthews, T.K. Maycock, T. Waterfield, O. Yelekçi, R. Yu, and B. Zhou (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 1055–1210.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.accountabilityforwater.org/>

corporate agenda and preserve the world's freshwater resources through collective action. Another multi-stakeholder initiative, the Water and Climate Coalition, led by WMO, addresses water and climate data and information gaps, and supports national water-centric climate change mitigation and adaptation actions. The Global Water Operators Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA) - an international network created to support water operators through Water Operator's Partnerships (WOPs) with the objective of strengthening their capacity, enhancing their performance and enabling them to provide a better service to more people has been at the forefront of facilitating learning between different utilities globally.

13. At COP26, 26 Signatories including national governments, companies, banks and NGOs launched the Declaration for Fair Water Footprints, committing them to accelerate delivery of SDG 6 by 2030 through action in global supply chains to ensure zero pollution, sustainable withdrawals, universal WASH, promotion of nature and drought and flood resilience.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***4. Strengthening communication actions for implementation of the water-related SDGs***

14. The United Nations World Water Development Report (UN WWDR) provides insight into the main global trends and challenges in freshwater resources management, coordinating the work of some 70 UN-Water members and partners worldwide. In the past five years of the Decade, the UN WWDR communicated to decision makers the knowledge, tools, best practices and in-depth analyses in the focused topics of groundwater, valuing water, climate change, leaving no one behind, nature-based solutions. The theme for the UN WWDR for the year of the UN 2023 Water Conference is "Accelerating change through partnerships and cooperation". In 2021, UN-Water also published a summary progress report inform global policymakers about overall progress made towards SDG 6 and about the needs regarding acceleration.<sup>8</sup>

15. Over the first five years of the Decade, UN Member States held several key global meetings that contributed to the midterm review of the Decade and provided input for the preparatory process for the UN 2023 Water Conference itself. These include but are not limited to the Water Dialogues for Results, Bonn 2021; the 9th World Water Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2022; The 4th Asia-Pacific Water Summit in Kumamoto, Japan in 2022, the High-level International Conference on the International Decade for Action "Water for Sustainable Development", 2018–2028, in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, the High-level Symposium on Water at the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, various water weeks and regional and global preparatory meetings.<sup>9</sup>

16. The progress of the second half of the Decade hinges on Member States, the UN system and relevant stakeholders' initiative and commitments to accelerate the implementation of SDG 6 and other water-related goals and targets. The UN 2023 Water Conference provides an opportunity to jump start the process by raising the profile of water, getting new and ambitious pledges to action and enabling water-related actors, especially Member States, to put in place the required framework to address this critical issue that impacts the success of the entire 2030 Agenda.

17. The aforementioned meetings, as part of the preparatory process to the UN 2023 Water Conference, however, already provide a start to this process by laying out key actions to support the acceleration of SDG 6. The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework themes namely: Financing, Data and information, Capacity development, Innovation, and Governance, will be used to frame their conclusions as a way to give a clear path forwards in terms of recommendations, which will be outlined in Section III.

#### **Suggested actions from the preparatory process leading up to the UN 2023 Water Conference**

In support of the Midterm Review of the International Decade for Action, "Water for Sustainable Development", 2018–2028, the international community took action through a number of events

<sup>7</sup> <https://fairwaterfootprints.org/>

<sup>8</sup> UN-Water, 2021: [Summary Progress Update 2021 – SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all](#). Version: July 2021. Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>9</sup> For a complete list of preparatory events for the UN 2023 Water Conference, please see United Nations, 2022: Midterm comprehensive review of the implementation of the International Decade for Action, "Water for Sustainable Development", 2018–2028, Report of the Secretary General, UN doc A/77/249.

and processes, highlighting the need for urgent action towards the implementation of water and related priorities. This section highlights some of the key outcomes of these events. While not exhaustive, this offers a synopsis of the international community's ambition and common priorities related to water. They are organized around the five accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework.

## ***1. Financing***

### *Magnitude of financing*

18. Attract additional investment from private and public sources and support financial risk-mitigation measures. There needs to be a shift to discourage projects that increase risk and exposure to risk. Increase direct financial flows towards water management and resource protection to target more specifically the needs to address these issues.

### *Governance of financing*

19. Effective financing requires good governance, therefore, capacities to absorb funds and implement funded projects need to be developed as well as the establishment of sound policies and regulations and strong institutions that will mobilize both actors and resources. Fees and charges for abstraction and discharge should be reformed to fund Integrated Water Resources Management and strengthen incentives. To better ensure that funds get to the end-user, establish mechanisms of transparency and accountability. Measure project outcomes to increase the efficiency of funds. Adjust significantly low water prices financed by inefficient subsidies.

### *Use of financing*

20. While more funding and financing would be beneficial to address water and sanitation issues, there is significant value to be had in effectively and efficiently using existing funding, e.g., public funds and ODA that is focused more on unprofitable projects. Additional areas to concentrate on in terms of financing are to plan and allocate resources for maintenance, management and monitoring. Also, the increasing impacts of climate change should be considered by assessing water-related risks and opportunities – and enhance scale and accessibility of global climate financing for water.

### *Targeted groups for financing*

21. To level the playing field in terms of addressing water-related issues, it will be important to earmark grants to communities in situation of vulnerability and marginalisation, e.g., women and Indigenous Peoples. As part of this, and to improve community oversight and accountability mechanisms, prioritise resourcing for civil society.

## ***2. Data and information***

### *Data differentiation and type*

22. A necessary step to “leave no one behind” is to disaggregate data (household, gender, age, etc.). For policymakers, donors and community leaders to be able to understand water-related challenges and opportunities, it is crucial to disaggregate data in a consistent and reliable manner for targeted policies that will promote an equitable distribution of resources.

### *Capacity for data acquisition*

23. Many countries are still behind in their capacity to collect and analyze data, which hinders being able to address water problems. Therefore, it is vital to increase the technical capacity for data acquisition and invest in data-collecting institutions. On an institutional level, it is important to strengthen inter-departmental coordination of data collection.

#### *Data monitoring*

24. To achieve SDG 6, it is necessary to improve the efficiency of national water data collection through the UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative on SDG 6. To help with this, develop needs-oriented and cross-sectoral monitoring systems that are utilizing and not duplicating existing systems, that include standards to support data system integration, but also drive innovative and cost-effective data, e.g., through satellite and blockchain technologies. At the same time, recognize other ways of producing knowledge and data, including through the methods of citizen science and Indigenous Peoples. With all types of data and data collection, the accuracy of data should be ensured through reviews and audits.

#### *Data democratization and access*

25. A challenge remaining at all levels is access to data. All stakeholders should have access to water-related data and information. Aligned with this there should be clear accountabilities in place of data reporting, especially when it comes to impact on policy development. For example, incentives could be put in place for disclosure of water use (withdrawal, discharge and reuse) and WASH impacts from all major users and impacting industries. This could also be done through the promotion of water footprinting to make the cost of water use transparent to change consumer behaviour. In a transboundary setting, data sharing could be improved to increase transparency.

#### *Data for policymaking*

26. Decision makers' capacity to make better-informed policy decisions related to water increases with access to quality and timely data for planning and implementation. Enabling access to this data is only part of the challenge, however, as the data should also be translated to be better utilized for evidence-based policy, planning and investment.

### **3. Capacity development**

#### *Stronger capacity development mechanisms*

27. No SDG 6 targets or other water-related goals and targets are possible to achieve without a sufficiently trained workforce. Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen capacities of national and local institutions, through well-identified capacity development process with specific goals. This can be done in many ways. First, by bolstering technical, vocational, secondary and tertiary education on water-related subject matters. Other more practical methods can be utilized as well, such as on-the-job training, and peer-to-peer learning. Focus capacity development programmes on both technical but also leadership-related skills supporting organizational processes like policy reform, organizational change, program management, human resources and mediation and facilitation skills. The use of research and innovation as well as the application of new and innovative technologies and digitalization can be used as a means to strengthen the technical capacity of individuals and institutions.

#### *Enabling capacity development*

28. Capacity development requires enabling conditions to support and align the capacity needs with the demands. It is important to ensure that enough financial and human resources are available to conduct comprehensive and goal-oriented capacity development programmes, but to do so design more progressive forms of financing capacity development programmes at country level beyond small-scale

individual projects. This will allow for more strategic and long-term planning and implementation of capacity development programmes.

#### *Partnership and network building*

29. Success addressing water issues does not happen without working across sectors so cross-sectoral learning for emerging challenges is necessary as a tool for a holistic approach to solving water-related problems. To achieve this, existing partnerships mechanisms and networks must be strengthened and broadened to be more inclusive of non-water sectors. To help with this and address the professional gap in water and sanitation as a whole, a global coordination mechanism should be created for the implementation of capacity development processes.

#### *Expanding support to the most marginalized*

30. Water issues will not be solved until the most marginalized groups can actively engage in addressing the problems, therefore, capacity development support of groups that often remain excluded but that can contribute to improving water security, e.g., Indigenous Peoples, civil society, youth and women, should be prioritized so they can actively play a role in global strategies and policy processes. Youth, women and Indigenous Peoples should also be included in capacity development programme design.

#### *Global South leadership*

31. There is much value to be gained from the sharing of experiences and knowledge related to capacity development in the Global South. Expand South-South cooperation by establishing structural, and coordinated/facilitated cooperation mechanisms, especially with regards to capacity development.

### **4. Innovation**

#### *Governance and legal systems*

32. New way of governing can be achieved through the integration of research, technology and governance while acknowledging different ways of producing knowledge, research and technologies. Also new multilevel governance mechanisms can be established through structural cooperation between academia, government and technology providers. Throughout this, innovation should take place for transparency, accountability and participation and can be a key part in developing innovative corporate governance models.

#### *Financial*

33. To be able to work in different, more novel ways, it will require the expansion of funding for research on innovative approaches to water management and governance. Innovation in financing methods themselves could be carried out through the strategic use of budget and regulatory tools for sustainable water management.

#### *Knowledge and data*

34. It will be crucial to innovate educational methods to keep pace with new requirements and types of knowledge for the changing water jobs landscape. To close the gap in understanding between the research community, policymakers and the civil society, requires acknowledging different and innovative ways of producing knowledge but also engaging communities in a participatory way. The expansion of international cooperation on research and innovation can help with these endeavours. Specifically, the promotion of creating Living Labs in specific settings can address specific problems.

#### *Technical and physical*

35. It will be important to use innovative methods to increase efficiency of water use but to think of efficiency in a multifaceted way, e.g., not only what is produced per unit of water but what are its benefits in terms of sustainability. Recognize that water practices or innovations benefits have more than instrumental benefits, they have other cultural values, specifically for Indigenous Peoples that think of values of respect, reciprocity and relatedness, in a way, they enact their rights because they first fulfil their obligations that are grounded in caring of water and nature. Also innovative in nature, governments should support eco-innovation and upscaling in urban water services delivery and sanitation and wastewater management by easing policy blockages to innovation and research on water efficient approaches along the social, economic, institutional, and environmental spectrums of water and sanitation service provision value chain.

## **5. Governance**

### *Stakeholder engagement in planning and management*

36. To be more inclusive and ensuring that no one is left behind, include rural women and girls, people with disabilities and people in situation of vulnerability in water-related planning and decision-making processes. To achieve this will require raising awareness on water with communities and other sectors through dialogues at local and national levels.

### *Governance implementation*

37. Long a challenge, it is more important than ever to increase coordination and cooperation for water-related actions across sectors, institutions, stakeholder groups and funding institutions to ensure optimal implementation and reduce fragmentation, from local to global levels. To avoid competition between water management/governance paradigms, integrated water resources management (IWRM), the water-food-energy-nexus and peace and security should all be linked. None of this will be possible without addressing the human resources gap in water and sanitation in an inclusive manner. To ensure they reach the end-user, allocate sufficient resources for water-related activities. Informal settlements and rapidly expanding metropolitan areas will need their water governance to be improved to address their water-related needs. Governments should encourage utilization of private sector investment in innovation, research, and development through structured collaborations with the public utilities. To achieve all this, accountability by all actors should be prioritised supported by clarity of duties and effective sanctions.

### *Governance monitoring*

38. To improve water governance, it is important to implement mechanisms to measure its progress, but also be aware that it is necessary to ameliorate and monitor other governance factors, e.g., civil service law, public sector remuneration, decentralization, social protection, citizen-oriented planning, and anti-corruption as they relate to water and sanitation, to ensure that the entire governance system can succeed.

### *Global water governance*

39. To raise the profile of water on the global agenda, provide a spokesperson to reach out to and work with other sectors at the highest levels and to help mobilize efforts to carry out the implementation of the outcomes of the UN 2023 Water Conference, it is recommended to appoint a special envoy on water to the United Nations. Connecting with the sectors is critical if SDG 6 is to be achieved, therefore, it will be important to interlink the SDG 6 review process with other sectors at the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF). Along those lines, when Member States present their Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF, it is important to support them to overcome the water-related challenges they have identified.

## **6. Conclusion**

40. Despite advances that have been made with regards to the Decade's objectives, much remains to be accomplished, especially with regards to the implementation of SDG 6. Halfway through the Decade and halfway through the 2030 Agenda, the world is sorely off track to meet its water-related goals and targets. What might be known as one of the biggest successes of the Decade is that it led to the UN 2023 Water Conference, a milestone not just during the Decade period, but in global water governance writ large. The Conference offers an opportunity for transformative change with regards to how water and sanitation issues are addressed moving forward. The Water Action Agenda will play a key role in making these changes happen.

## **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

41. The Decade offers a unique opportunity to stimulate change in that it is the sole political process within the UN system related to water. How can the Decade, with a large push from the milestone event of the UN 2023 Water Conference and its Water Action Agenda, help make the transformative changes that are needed to address the current and future water challenges? Here are some recommendations:

### **Financing**

42. *Looking for ways to accelerate progress, it is time to look at finance in a different way. A shift is required from project level analysis to enabling conditions, linked to the above. Priorities need to be set with more targeted actions, and that justice should play an increased role in those priorities. And, ultimately, projects that increase risk and exposure to risk should be discouraged.*

43. The time is now to shift the thinking on financing water and sanitation and take new approaches. Financing is not merely about more money but using what money does exist in a more efficient and effective manner. It is not solely about more bankable projects but setting up the enabling conditions for investments. The question should not be so much about the project but what makes water sense. The world must double down on what is successful and redirect financial flows to where the financing is effective. The global development finance architecture needs to be reformed, as governments need more cash in hand to address the challenges that are facing them. Governments must also advance ambitious policies that provide companies with the clarity and confidence they need to unlock further investments in water solutions. At the center of all of the above, justice must be at the core of decision-making around financing water and sanitation to leave no one behind. None of the above would be possible without building institutional and human capacities to mobilize financial resources from domestic sources including from the private sector.

44. There is a need for vastly greater multilateral cooperation and more reliable and sustained financing to both support new innovations and investments at scale in the water economy. Through the work, cooperation and coordination of the Member States and the scientific community and civil society, through regular intergovernmental meetings and the work of the committee of scientific experts, a global water fund should be created, like the global climate fund, to increase investment in the water and sanitation sector, which is still insufficient.

45. Key messages on financing of water and sanitation need to be developed and addressed to the Ministers of Finance in UN Member States. Similarly, mechanisms for regular dialogue between water and environment line ministers and ministries and those of finance should be established.

**Data and information**

46. *Given water resources are becoming less predictable, the knowledge, science and data that have been generated and used in the past need to be revisited to better equip society's knowledge to policy to action pathway to address water challenges of the future. Incorporating the use of traditional knowledge can also provide benefits.*

47. There exist inherent gaps in data and information for decision making and investment planning in the sector at the local levels including city or municipal levels. It is desirable that governments promote national efforts towards strengthening local authorities including cities and municipalities capacities collect, process, and manage up to date comprehensive data tailored to effectively meet local demands for decision making and advance evidence-based planning and investments in the water and sanitation sector. Furthermore, substantial investments of time, resources, technologies, and coordination are needed to enable the local authorities, municipalities, and cities to adopt new data systems which is often hampered by low capacities, bureaucratic, resource constrained, and policy challenged national environments. Improving coordination among the stakeholders, improving data access, and strengthening standardization of monitoring indicators across diverse levels of water and sanitation sector governance will provide a greater foundation for data usability by different sector players.

48. Information on water quality, quantity, distribution, access, risks, and use is essential for effective decision-making. Yet there are significant gaps in water data and decision-making systems, and there is a need for scientific water data based on climate change. There is a need to enable policy makers to use quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data, tailored to the needs, and robust monitoring mechanisms to develop effective cross-sectoral policies, so that no one is left behind. Effective, accessible, and public data collection and monitoring systems should be put in place, including civil society, citizen science and traditional and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge in the design and implementation of information systems.

49. To make the challenges of water and other sectors visible it could be advantageous to set up an expert panel, independent of governments, which would make it possible to ensure the coherence of the scientific work already carried out for the sharing of water-related knowledge among the Member States and to ensure continuity between them. Indeed, the quality of scientific information differs considerably between the different water-related challenges, yet all major water challenges need to be informed by up-to-date knowledge from science and practice to address the growing global challenges related to the SDGs.

50. Water, just like carbon, can have a footprint and consequently a budget. At a global, regional, national or basin level, the latest science can now inform us how much water can be appropriated for consumptive use sustainably without transgressing the planetary boundaries for water. Such water footprint tools coupled with the development of global water-related taxonomies and robust ratings methodologies can spur water finance, such as by incorporating them in existing ESG rating systems, and drive accountability in corporations.

**Capacity development**

51. *There is a need for capacity development like never before. Not only is there a professional gap in water and sanitation, but it is one that is growing. The world needs to be equipped with skilled professionals at all levels to address current problems and future demands. Education and labour need to align to attract, educate, train and retain skilled professionals, especially women, as demands change over time.*

52. The challenge to meet the water and sanitation workforce needs of the future is a major obstacle that will require a transformative, whole-of-society approach. Attracting and training a workforce, however, is just one aspect of this, as it will require a wider societal dialogue that prioritizes water and

sanitation and creates an enabling environment and institutional framework to confront the massive challenges ahead. To achieve this, a global multi-stakeholder alliance of organizations from water/sanitation, agriculture, health, education, labour and economic development will need to come together to create an enabling policy environment for collaborative frameworks between the education sector, sector employers (public, private, NGOs), trade unions and employees, assess the water and sanitation workforce to determine where the needs are and what skills are increasing in demand to achieve water security and close the water and sanitation workforce professional gap.

53. There is a strong need to address critical capacity bottlenecks that still plague sustainable water and sanitation service provision in informal settlements, urban low-income areas, and peri-urban zones in view of their special situation. The removal of these bottlenecks including technological, services models, financing mechanisms and operations and maintenance at the municipality, city, and utility levels that inhibit good management of water and sanitation services in underserved and deprived areas will increase inclusivity and accountability to the people.

### **Innovation**

54. *While progress has been made, there has not been the breakthrough necessary to achieve the water and water-related goals and targets. The water community needs to innovate in all themes, which includes the other four accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework. The effort to do so needs to be intensified many times over, as there will be no success without approaching the challenges in new ways to develop capacities and upscale and sustain solutions.*

55. Facilitate, demonstrate and scale-up science-based solutions, technologies and innovations, including open science, citizen science, women and youth-led initiatives, as well as traditional and indigenous knowledge to achieve more effective and climate-resilient water and sanitation management in line with national priorities and circumstances.

56. Decision-makers need to combine traditional knowledge with modern technology and innovative methods by involving multiple stakeholders to increase efficiency of water use and ensure sustainable water management, especially in water-stressed areas and transboundary basins. Research and development, innovative technical as well as financial solutions, but also new inclusive governance and circular business models are a must when working towards accelerated cross-sectoral implementation of SDG 6.

57. Water-oriented “living labs” are real life demonstrations of the type of research and innovation, with intervention based on a cross-sectoral approach. The EU Water4All partnership launched in 2022 supports the development of water-oriented living labs and innovation.

58. Innovation is key to increasing efficiency, equity, and sustainability of the global water system. This could include innovation in water reclamation technology, managed aquifer recharge technologies, water-efficient agriculture, and energy efficient equipment and processes for water treatment. Critically, innovations have to be scaled up and adopted globally to drive down costs and ensure global equity.

### **Governance**

#### ***Inclusiveness***

59. *Communities and groups of people in situations of vulnerability and/or marginalisation (i.e., women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, people living with disabilities, etc.) need to be not only prioritized, but included in decisions that impact them.*

60. Include provisions for citizen participation in legal and administrative frameworks, put in place tools to ensure inclusive, informed, and effective participation of all stakeholders, take measures to ensure equitable representation of women, youth, people living with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples in water management. Empower and enable citizens, civil society, women, young people, groups in situations of vulnerability and/or marginalisation, and the media to fulfil their key roles, including communication, participation, convening, consumer choice, and accountability monitoring.

***Decreasing fragmentation between levels and within and outside the water community***

61. *Cooperating and coordinating across sectors is no longer a luxury, but an imperative. The water community, at all levels, cannot achieve its goals by working on its own. While the water community understands water's importance to sustainable development, it needs to be consistently proactive in its overtures to engage with other sectors.*

62. Water governance, from the local to the global level, is highly fragmented, with closely related roles and responsibilities for water scattered and assigned to different entities. There is a need to establish a cooperative, cross-sectoral approach by establishing vertical and horizontal governance, based on cooperation between all stakeholders, sectors and countries, to manage conflicting and cross-sectoral interests and ensure accountability, strengthen policy coherence through effective cross-sectoral coordination, in particular between water and environment, health, energy, agriculture, industry, spatial planning and land use policies. To this end, a "freshwater" segment should be included in UN sustainable development themes and international conferences on these specific issues. The FAO-proposed National Water Roadmaps can not only be a way to bridge silos, but also be a basis for commitments at the governmental level and the acceleration of the implementation of SDG 6.

63. This multi-sectoral approach will enable sustainable management and wise use of resources, drawing on the experiences, needs and recommendations of all stakeholders. This requires close cooperation between scientists, academics, politicians and parliamentarians, civil society, youth, marginalized people, non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations.

***Global water governance***

64. *While water and sanitation solutions are very local in nature, there is still much work to be done at the global level to create the best supporting structure to assist where help is needed most and to move forward together towards sustainable water and sanitation management worldwide.*

65. A call for the Secretary-General of the United Nations to appoint a UN Special Envoy on Water should seriously be taken under consideration. Such an envoy can give a unified "voice and a face" to the vital resource and could ensure that water remains a priority in the political agenda inside and outside the UN. The Special Envoy should help draw attention to this vital resource and integrate water issues into intergovernmental initiatives on climate, food security, energy, environment, health, and other relevant sectors that are closely related to the availability and management of water resources. The Special Envoy could also support the mobilization of additional funding and secure the follow-up of the outcomes of the UN 2023 Water Conference.

66. The global governance structure on water needs improvement in multiple ways. At the global level, building on the outcome of the Bonn Dialogues' Key Messages, we need to strengthen dialogue on water within the UN at its core and ensure effective coordination and coherence of the UN's work on water, in particular by strengthening UN-Water and the enhancement of a UN system-wide approach to water. Recommendations for concrete action to strengthen the coordinative function of UN-Water, and thus to render UN system delivery on SDG 6 and other water-related SDGs and targets more efficient might provide better grounds for discussions with UN Member States. The interlinkages between SDGs,

such as the link between freshwater and marine waters, considering the full water cycle, must be addressed as part of SDG implementation.

67. In view of the current fragmentation of water governance, one of the key elements for improving international water policy would be the establishment of regular intergovernmental meetings within the United Nations, potentially around the High-level Political Forum and/or other relevant United Nations bodies, dedicated to all freshwater and sanitation challenges. This would meet the needs and expectations and allow Member States, scientists, members of the different UN agencies, civil society and the private sector to come together to discuss water issues, its intersection with all the other SDGs, and ways to achieve all the goals of the 2030 Agenda and follow-up on the voluntary commitments of the Water Action Agenda. This dialogue space could maximize its impact by using the specific knowledge of existing global agencies and would link knowledge from science and practice to the work of governments. In sum, this space for dialogue would simplify and become the reference point for intergovernmental work on water, allowing for greater coherence of work.

68. Achieving SDG 6 and other water-related goals and targets is not possible without working hand-in-hand with other sectors. The Decade is a powerful mechanism within the UN system that can interact with other international initiatives. More effective coordination between the Decade and the 2030 Agenda, Sendai Framework, Paris Agreement and the New Urban Agenda needs to be a priority to help bridge the gap between water and other sectors. Effective and coherent international cooperation between these international mechanisms is needed to strengthen integration of activities that (1) have water at their core, (2) use water or (3) have an impact on water.

#### **The Decade and the Water Action Agenda**

69. The Water Action Agenda that is to emerge from the UN 2023 Water Conference will be comprised of voluntary commitments, potentially some that are transformative in nature. The Decade, through its various workstreams on knowledge exchange and generation, advocacy and communications connected to the water-related SDGs, should use its functions to help facilitate efforts towards the achievement of the commitments of the Water Action Agenda. This will be mutually beneficial to both the commitments and the Decade, demonstrating its potential for effectiveness.

70. The Water Action Agenda will serve as a catalyst for actions and commitments by all stakeholders. To ensure its effectiveness through the end of the Decade, Member States must build on this agenda and encourage and support such initiatives and commitments. To ensure synergy between politics and society in the implementation of this agenda, and to ensure that water is constantly on the political agenda, it will be necessary to improve trust and commitment in water policy and to promote stakeholder engagement. Political leadership is essential to improve water governance around the world, as the challenges are not only in designing governance programs, but also in implementing them.

#### **IV. GUIDING QUESTIONS**

1. How can Member States, the Decade and the UN system help implement and follow up on the commitments made in the Water Action Agenda? What global governance and political leadership is needed? How can the stronger accountability and incentives needed for SDG 6 delivery be embedded and scaled through the Water Action Agenda?
2. How effective is the Decade at the political level? What would be success or failure of the Decade in five years' time?
3. How can the water community best utilize a Special Envoy for Water to raise the profile of water and accelerate the achievement of SDG 6?

4. How do you see water in a post-2030 Agenda?

5. How can we strengthen multilateralism around water through collaboration between national and multilateral actors? How can we strengthen collaboration/connections between the local and global levels?