Preparatory Process of the 2026 United Nations Water Conference

Note by the Secretary-General of the Conference

I. Introduction

The General Assembly, in its resolution 78/327, decided to convene the 2026 United Nations Water Conference, co-hosted by the Republic of Senegal and the United Arab Emirates, from 2 to 4 December 2026 in the United Arab Emirates,

In the same resolution, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General of the Conference to prepare a background note proposing themes for the six interactive dialogues, in consultation with Member States and stakeholders, supported by UN-Water and relevant United Nations entities,

The present note is submitted in response to that request. It draws upon written inputs and consultations with Member States, regional groups, United Nations entities, intergovernmental organizations, and different stakeholder groups. It is intended to support Member States in finalizing the proposed themes of the six interactive dialogues at the preparatory meeting to be convened by the President of the General Assembly on 9 July 2025.

II. Outcomes of Consultations on Possible Themes for the Interactive Dialogues

Consultations on possible themes for the 2026 UN Water Conference were held between May 2024 and April 2025. These included:

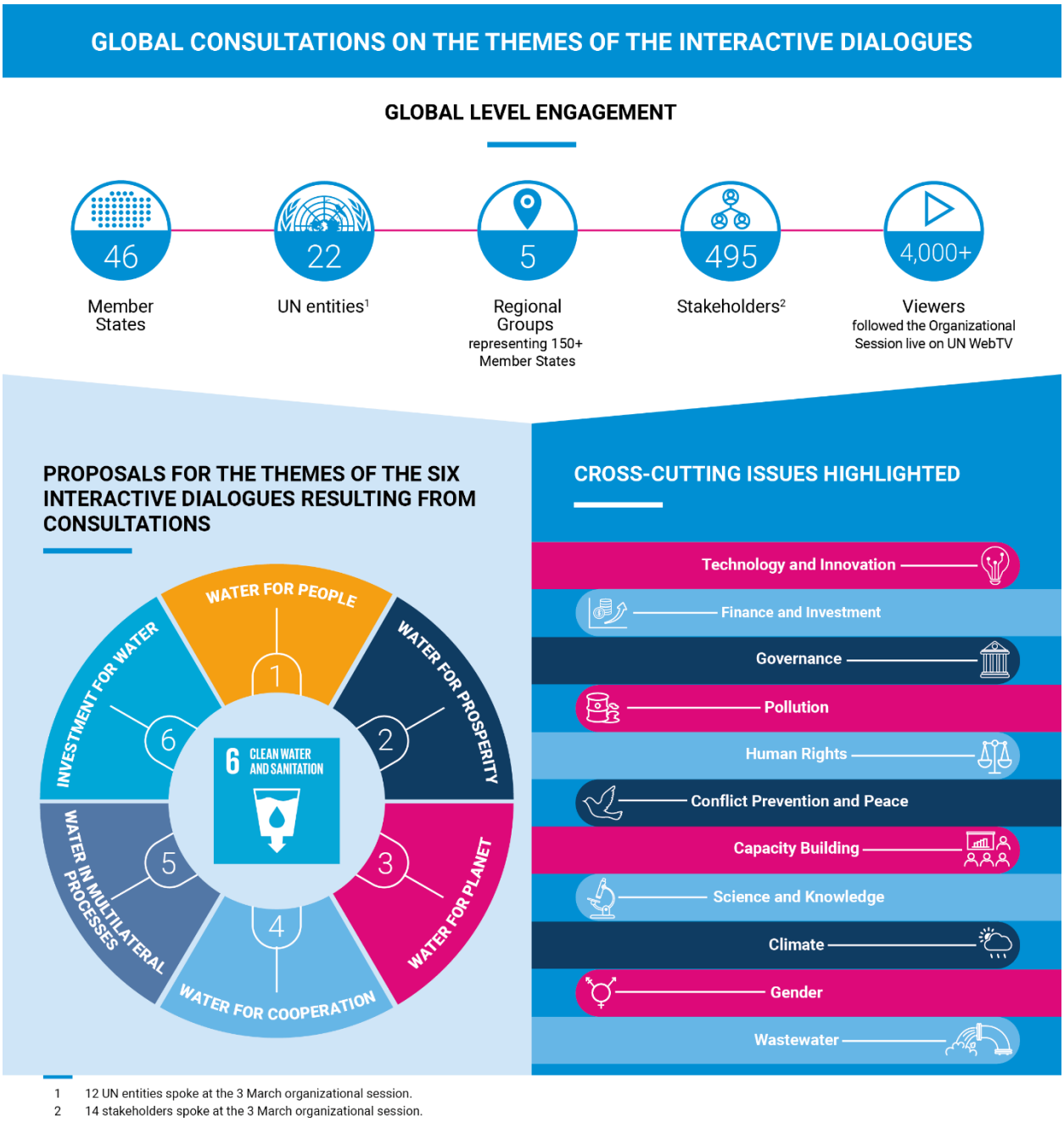
- An organizational session convened on 3 March 2025 at the UN Headquarters in New York, where 72 participants – including 45 Member States and groups, 14 NGOs, 12 UN system entities and 1 permanent observer presented their recommendations;
- Written submissions from Member States, regional groups, and the UN system based on a letter sent from UN DESA Under-Secretary-General following the 3rd March Organizational Session (21 additional inputs were received between 11 March– 11 April);
- Online stakeholder briefing/ webinar on 18 March, which included 895 participants;
- An online stakeholder consultation launched on the 2026 UN Water Conference website (11 March - 11 April), where 495 written inputs were received.

In addition, informal consultations and discussions were convened by the co-hosts starting in May 2024, including on the margins of key global milestones (e.g., 10th World Water Forum

Bali Indonesia, World Water Week 2024 Stockholm Sweden, 79th session of the UN General Assembly, Cairo Water Week 2024, UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) Baku Azerbaijan, the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16) Riyadh Saudi Arabia and the 40th and 41st UN-Water Meetings New York USA and Rome Italy.

Member States and stakeholders expressed strong support for a Conference that builds on the outcomes of the UN 2023 Water Conference while advancing new and emerging priorities and focusing on implementation. Many emphasized the urgency of taking action, as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development enters its final five years.

Based on a thorough consideration of the formal and informal inputs received, building on the themes of the 2023 interactive dialogues, and ensuring the adequate attention to all aspects of Sustainable Development Goal 6—including its eight targets and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework—as well as broader links to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its pillars, the co-hosts of the 2026 UN Water Conference propose the following themes, noting their interconnected nature.



1 12 UN entities spoke at the 3 March organizational session.
2 14 stakeholders spoke at the 3 March organizational session.

III. Proposed Themes for the Interactive Dialogues, and rationale for each

Water for People: The human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies

Context

During the UN 2023 Water Conference, Interactive Dialogue 1 focused on “Water for Health” and highlighted the urgent need to close the global Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

access gap as a matter of public health, equity, and resilience. The dialogue underscored the vital role of WASH in preventing disease, reducing child mortality, enabling safe health care delivery, and supporting gender equality and dignity, particularly for women, girls, and people in vulnerable settings. A recurring message was the need for stronger integration of WASH within national health plans, climate policies, and emergency preparedness strategies as well as the importance of investing in WASH for schools, health care facilities, and humanitarian contexts. The dialogue reinforced the idea that accelerating progress on WASH is essential to achieving SDG 3 (health), SDG 6 (water and sanitation), and multiple other goals. It called for political leadership, increased financing, and improved accountability to deliver on commitments and ensure no one is left behind.

The proposed theme for this dialogue in 2026 would focus on SDG 6 targets 6.1 (drinking water), 6.2 (sanitation and hygiene), and 6.3 (wastewater and water quality). It would also build on the connections with SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (health), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 10 (inequalities).

Data and Trends

As of 2024, more than 2.2 billion people still lack safely managed drinking water, 3.5 billion are without safely managed sanitation, and 2 billion people still lack basic hygiene services.[1] Around the world, 77% of schools have a basic drinking water service in 2023, while 447 million children lacked a basic drinking water service at their school.[2] Seven out of 10 women and girls aged 15 and older are mainly responsible for fetching water, compared to men and boys[3] – placing them at risk of gender-based violence and undermining their health, education, and economic participation. Rural communities continue to lag significantly behind their urban counterparts, with access to basic WASH services often three times lower in rural areas.

At the same time, water quality is deteriorating in many regions. Untreated wastewater, agricultural runoff, industrial effluents, and plastic pollution are contaminating freshwater sources, exacerbating waterborne diseases and undermining both environmental and human health. This is particularly acute in vulnerable and conflict-affected areas, where service disruption, population displacement, and infrastructure breakdown further compound health risks. UNICEF estimates that 420 million children (nearly one in five) will

[1] UN-Water, 2024. Summary Brief: Mid-term status of SDG 6 global indicators and acceleration needs. Version: August 2024. Geneva, Switzerland.

[2] UN-Water, 2024. Summary Brief: Mid-term status of SDG 6 global indicators and acceleration needs. Version: August 2024. Geneva, Switzerland.

[3] Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022: special focus on gender. New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO), 2023.

be living in areas affected by armed conflict and fragility and by 2030,[4] and that children under the age of 15 who are living in conflict are on average nearly three times more likely to die from diseases linked to unsafe water and sanitation than from direct violence.[5] In 2022, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced, mostly by conflict: 40% were children. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) recognizes a crucial role for WASH in managing crisis-related mobility. [6] Climate change is intensifying water scarcity and variability, placing additional stress on water availability and disproportionately affecting the most marginalized communities.

Challenges

With only five years left to achieve the SDGs, progress towards SDG 6 continues to be well below the pace needed to meet the targets by 2030. Chronic underinvestment in resilient WASH infrastructure, especially in rural and underserved areas, limits the expansion of equitable services. A whole systems transformation is required to address these challenges. Weak governance, institutional fragmentation, lack of capacity, aging infrastructure that has not been managed or maintained for sustainable service delivery, and inadequate regulatory enforcement often lead to poor service quality and unequal access.

To ensure the enjoyment of the rights to water and sanitation by all, the needs of those furthest behind must be prioritized, including women, girls, persons with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, slum dwellers, asylum seekers, among others. Gender and social inequalities with women, girls, persons with disabilities, and displaced populations mean they are frequently excluded from decision-making and left without services that meet their specific needs. Climate change further complicates the landscape, undermining the reliability of water sources and increasing the frequency and intensity of water-related disasters. Meanwhile, water pollution and insufficient wastewater management continue to jeopardize human and ecological health. With rapid population growth and accelerating urbanization, there is an additional strain on already fragile water and sanitation systems, particularly in informal settlements and peri-urban areas.

[4] UNICEF, 'UNICEF & Sustaining Peace: Strengthening the Socio-Economic Foundations of Peace through Education, Young People's Engagement & WASH', 2020 (UNICEF Thematic Paper Contribution United Nations Secretary-General's 2020 Peacebuilding & Sustaining Peace Report)

[5] UNICEF, 'Fast facts: WASH in conflict', 2019 https://www.unicef.org/stories/fast-facts-water-sanitation-hygiene-conflict

[6] IOM, Global WASH Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026.

Despite the recognition of safe drinking water and sanitation as human rights in several international human rights treaties[7] as well as through UN General Assembly Resolutions 64/292 (2010) and UN Human Rights Council resolution 15/9 (2010), progress remains insufficient. A lack of disaggregated data and weak accountability mechanisms make it difficult to monitor progress or ensure policies and investments are reaching the populations most in need.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, there are significant and timely opportunities to accelerate progress. Embedding human rights principles into national legal and policy frameworks and budgets strengthens accountability and guide investments toward those left behind. Human rights-based approaches to WASH can empower communities to participate and hold duty-bearers accountable. Gender-responsive and socially inclusive programming can address longstanding disparities. The elimination of discrimination and inequalities accelerates the achievement of universal access to water and sanitation for all.

Improving water quality through better regulation and investment in sustainable wastewater treatment and sustainable water infrastructure is essential. Integrated approaches, such as the One Health Framework, can foster collaboration across sectors to address water-related risks. In humanitarian and fragile contexts, strengthening the WASH humanitarian-development-peace nexus can ensure that emergency responses are resilient, and linked to longer-term development outcomes.

Realizing the human rights to water and sanitation requires a shift in how we design and deliver services to achieve equitable distribution—placing people at the center, targeting inequality, and anchoring actions in legal obligations. When fulfilled, these rights serve as a powerful catalyst for healthier communities, stronger economies, and more equitable societies.

[7] Article 24, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 14, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Article 28 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and in Articles 11 and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Water for Prosperity: Valuing water, Water-Energy-Food nexus, advancing integrated and sustainable water resource management, wastewater and water-use efficiency across sectors, and economic and social development

Context

Building on the momentum of Interactive Dialogue 2 at the UN 2023 Water Conference, which focused on "Water for Sustainable Development", this interactive dialogue proposes to continue this perspective by emphasizing: integrated water resource management (IWRM); cross-sectoral efficiency including in the water-food-energy nexus; and water's true cost and benefits. The outcomes of the UN 2023 Water Conference as well as the discussions held during Interactive Dialogue 2 highlighted the urgency of systemic water management to create a long-term vision for water resilience and a need for increased investments in innovative water technologies and sustainable water management practices.

In 2026, this interactive dialogue is proposed to focus on operationalizing these insights to promote sustainable economic and social development, boost job creation, increase urban-rural resilience, and accelerate the achievement of social, economic and environmental goals in the water sector. By exploring the water-energy-food nexus and valuing and managing water efficiently across all sectors, this second interactive dialogue is suggested to reflect a growing recognition that water can be more than a natural resource and provides an opportunity to discuss how water can create a foundation for prosperity through coordinated, forward-looking action, with a focus on developing countries and vulnerable communities in the context of climate change. As a fundamental prerequisite for all industrial activities, water can be a vehicle for growth if managed sustainably.

The proposed theme of interactive dialogue 2 would focus on SDG 6 targets 6.3 (wastewater and water quality), 6.4 (water-use efficiency), and 6.5 (integrated water resources management) with interlinkages to SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

Data and Trends

Recent data underscores global progress on the UN 2023 Water Conference's call to move beyond siloed interventions and build a water-resilient economy that considers the needs of all water users and utilizes synergies between them. As of 2024 reporting, countries are increasingly producing more economic value with less water, driven in large parts by successful efforts to make agriculture less water-intensive. Water is a fundamental driver of the world's agrifood systems, which are not only highly dependent on water but also hold significant potential to conserve this limited resource. As the largest contributor to global freshwater withdrawals, the agricultural sector holds a key role in ensuring sustainable water management and can prevent further depletion of water resources while sustaining food production.

Recent monitoring data on industrial wastewater highlights that industrial water users still discharge the majority of their effluent untreated. The limited number of countries reporting on SDG 6.3.1, which represent 8% of the world's population, safely treat only 27 % of industrial wastewater. This shortfall exemplifies the challenges still faced by ecosystems and downstream water users.

Global water management trends show a positive improvement in IWRM implementation from 49 % to 57 % between 2017 and 2023.[8] These global shifts in water and wastewater management also mark a slow but steady pivot from "more pipes and pumps" toward cross-sector efficiency, the application of digital information systems and valuing water as a strategic asset. As global water demand is growing, these trends will require further acceleration to ensure that water can be a driver for prosperity.

Challenges

Despite positive trends in IWRM implementation and water-use efficiency, the pace of change remains too slow, constrained by cross-sectoral competition for limited water resources and by insufficient coordination among water users. At current trajectories the global target to achieve 91 % IWRM implementation by 2030 will not be met until mid-century, leaving billions of people in countries with fragmented water management structures, weak cost-recovery mechanisms, and chronically under-funded basin authorities. Meanwhile an estimated 113 billion m^3 of untreated household wastewater each

[8] United Nations Environment Programme, 2024. Progress on implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management. Mid-term status of SDG indicator 6.5.1 and acceleration needs, with a special focus on climate change

year continues to threaten rural livelihoods and fragile ecosystems[9]. The undervaluation of water in national accounts deters private capital and slows the implementation of circular economy pilots and climate-resilient water infrastructure. Additionally, limited technical and human capacities further hampers innovation uptake.

Even water-scarce areas that have boosted water-use efficiency face climbing demand from agriculture, energy, and rapid urbanization amid less predictable precipitation patterns[10]. If not addressed, these compounding obstacles will keep the full promise of the water-food-energy nexus approach and its potential for green jobs and equitable prosperity just out of reach. As the most water-intensive sector responsible for total withdrawals of 72% of the world's freshwater[11], agrifood systems transformation is of critical importance, as food demand is projected to climb by 50% by 2050[12] compared to 2012. In addition, the energy sector [13] accounts for around 10% of global freshwater withdrawals, mainly due to the high water demand of steam turbines in thermoelectric power plants. Hydropower plants, which generate 17% [14] of the world's electricity can additionally strain downstream farmers whenever reservoir levels are held back to allow peak electricity generation.

Opportunities

There are clear opportunities to scale innovative technologies, to diversify water supplies by utilizing safe water reuse and decentralized water treatment systems. Potable and non-potable reuse schemes, for example for food production, that close the supply loop not only ease pressure on conventional water sources but also unlock the value of treated wastewater, creating new value chains in water, nutrient, and resource recovery. Other non-conventional water sources that may be utilized depending on local contexts include seawater desalination and rainwater harvesting. Conventional water sources offer opportunities for innovation as well. Groundwater, the world's main source of domestic

[9] The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the World Health Organization (WHO), 2024. Progress on the proportion of domestic and industrial wastewater flows safely treated – Mid-term status of SDG Indicator 6.3.1 and acceleration needs, with a special focus on climate change, wastewater reuse and health.
[10] FAO & UN-Water. 2024. Progress on change in water-use efficiency – Mid-term status of SDG Indicator 6.4.1 and acceleration needs, with special focus on food security and climate change, 2024. Rome, FAO.
[11] UN-Water, 2023. Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023.
[12] FAO, 2020. WASAG - The Global Framework on Water Scarcity in Agriculture.
[13] International Energy Agency, 2023. Clean energy can help to ease the water crisis.
[14] International Energy Agency, 2021. Hydropower Special Market Report.

(household) water[15], can be replenished through managed aquifer recharge and, where alternatives are scarce, made usable via brackish groundwater desalination.

Additionally, scaling innovations that address water efficiency challenges, such as water-resilient food systems and artificial intelligence-driven leak detection systems, can curb water losses and embed greater resilience in water management schemes. Integrating these new technologies into existing water management schemes will require physical infrastructure investments and the training of technical staff to build and operate these non-conventional water systems, creating new jobs in the circular economy.

Climate adaptation finance mechanisms offer potential vehicles to enable IWRM-aligned investments, particularly when proposals frame water as a co-benefit for food, energy, industry, and ecosystem outcomes. Embedding natural-capital accounting, full-cost pricing and digital metering in national and local budgets can make water projects more bankable and attract private capital while maintaining equity through subsidy and rebate programs. Together, these levers provide a pragmatic path for countries to translate high-level pledges into cross-sector water governance to achieve sustainable economic development.

Water for Planet: Climate, Biodiversity, Desertification, Environment, Source to Sea, Resilience, Disaster Risk Reduction

Context

At the UN 2023 Water Conference, Interactive Dialogue 3 on "Water for Climate, Resilience and Environment", the fact that the water crisis is exacerbated by climate change was highlighted as an urgent global challenge. With climate change, population growth and increasing disaster risk putting growing pressure on water resources, the need for countries to develop and upgrade resilient water infrastructure and emergency preparedness was emphasised along with the need for integrated water resources management and the integration of water, climate, biodiversity, desertification and environmental policies and plans.

Water solutions are central to tackling global climate, biodiversity, desertification, and environment-related challenges and to building resilient societies and economies. As water is the primary medium through which people experience climate change, the use and

[15] United Nations, 2022. UN World Water Development Report 2022: Groundwater - Making the invisible visible.

effective management of water resources, including groundwater, are fundamental for climate adaptation as well as to manage increased risks from floods, droughts, sea-level rise and accelerated glacier melt. Water management is also central for climate mitigation (e.g. for the clean energy transition and removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere). Healthy and functioning freshwater ecosystems are essential for preserving biodiversity, filtering pollutants and nutrients to protect oceans, and serving as carbon sinks. Sustainable groundwater management is critical, with groundwater quantity and quality disrupted by climate change through altered recharge patterns, increased risk of contamination, and accelerated saltwater intrusion.

The proposed theme for this dialogue in 2026 would focus on SDG 6 targets 6.3 (wastewater and water quality) and 6.6 (freshwater ecosystems). It would also build on the connections with SDG 11 (sustainable cities), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (oceans), and SDG 15 (land).

Data and Trends

As of 2024, over 50% of countries report degradation in one or more water-related ecosystem type, with river flow declines recorded in 402 basins and significant surface water loss in 364 basins compared to the average 2000-2019 baseline.[16] Global water quality shows signs of decline, while more than half of the world's major aquifers are being depleted faster than they can be naturally replenished[17]. Wetlands are among the ecosystems with the highest rates of decline, loss, and degradation, with 85% of wetlands being lost and freshwater species populations declining by 81%[18] since 1970.

Nine out of ten disasters triggered by natural hazards during the last decade were water-related. [19] The impacts of climate change disrupt freshwater systems through altered precipitation patterns, sea level rise, intensified droughts, and flooding. Sustainable water management is increasingly critical for building resilience against climate change and for climate mitigation and carbon sequestration.[20] Vulnerability to climate change impacts in transboundary basins is increased due to limited cooperation: only 50% of transboundary basins have implemented coordinated or joint alarm systems for floods.[21] Forest loss is

[16] UNEP (2024). Progress on Water-related Ecosystems. Mid-term status of SDG Indicator 6.6.1 and acceleration needs, with a special focus on Biodiversity
[17] United Nations University, 2023. Interconnected Disaster Risks: Risk Tipping Points. Bonn, Germany.
[18] United Nations 2023. The Sustainable Development Goals Report. New York, United States.
[19] Figure taken from Sendai Framework Monitor, 2010-2019. Available at https://sendaimonitor.undrr.org/
[20] UN-Water, 2024. UN-Water Analytical Brief on Water for Climate Mitigation. Geneva, Switzerland
[21] UNECE, UNESCO and UN-Water, 2024. Progress on Transboundary Water Cooperation: Mid-term status of SDG Indicator 6.5.2, with a special focus on Climate Change – 2024

impacting freshwater systems through increased soil erosion, reduced water quality, and altered hydrological cycles.[22]

Challenges

Climate change, population growth and unsustainable consumption are intensifying pressure on water, food, energy and ecological systems. Rising climate variability is driving more frequent and severe water-related disasters, which account for the majority of natural hazards globally. The scale and cost of water-related disasters continue to grow, causing significant losses and damages to people, nature, economic assets and infrastructure. For example, nearly 95% of infrastructure loss from 2010 to 2019 was linked to water-related disasters, over 3 billion people were affected by droughts and floods since 2000, and current costs of droughts are estimated to exceed $307 billion annually.[23] [24]

Freshwater ecosystems' ability to buffer climate impacts is being undermined by human-induced degradation, including deforestation and wetland loss, which exacerbates flooding, landslides and reduces water retention. Up to one-third of rivers in developing countries face serious pollution, while freshwater biodiversity continues to decline. Glacial melt has reached record levels, with the largest losses recorded in the past three years. Water scarcity, pollution and extreme events heighten the risk of pests, disease and long-term environmental degradation, including aridification and desertification, disrupting livelihoods and human health and threatening economic development and food security.

Opportunities

Strengthening climate-resilient water management presents a key opportunity to advance adaptation, mitigation and disaster risk reduction. Universal early warning systems, with prioritization for least developed countries and small island developing states, are essential. Nature-based and hybrid infrastructure solutions offer complementary benefits, enhancing resilience while supporting biodiversity and delivering socioeconomic gains. And source-to-sea as well as whole-of-basin approaches offer practical solutions for adaptation and resilience. In addition, agrifood systems are essential for solving major interlinked challenges facing the planet: water scarcity, climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation, food insecurity and poverty.

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[22] UN DESA, 2024. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024. June 2024. New York.
[23] Thomas, R., Davies, J., King, C., Kruse, J., Schauer, M., Bisom, N., Tsegai, D., Madani, K., 2024. Economics of Drought: Investing in Nature-Based Solutions for Drought Resilience – Proaction Pays. A joint report by UNCCD, ELD Initiative and UNU-INWEH, Bonn, Germany; Toronto, Canada.
[24] See Sendai Monitor database, available at https://sendaimonitor.undrr.org/

Integrated water resources management provides an actionable framework to balance competing water demands across sectors such as agriculture, energy and forestry. Sustainable land-use management and healthy soils are essential for enhancing climate resilience, protecting biodiversity, preventing desertification, and supporting ecosystems from source to sea. Strengthening intergovernmental coordination across climate, water, biodiversity, and desertification processes, can help drive coherent action, including at the country level through Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and other national strategies.

Stakeholder participation and cross-sectoral exchange of best practices—including between the water and climate communities—are necessary to scale climate-resilient water solutions. And as financing remains a major challenge where global investment needs range from $6.7 trillion by 2030 to $22.6 trillion by 2050 to meet SDG 6 targets[25] water-related climate finance remains limited, representing about 3% of total climate finance. [26] Addressing this gap will require leveraging funding streams across sectors and clearly articulating the multiple co-benefits of water investments.

Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Water Cooperation, including Scientific Cooperation, and inclusive governance

Context

Interactive Dialogue 4 on "Water for Cooperation" held during the UN 2023 Water Conference underscored that strengthening water cooperation, particularly at the transboundary level, is critical for advancing sustainable development and regional integration, fostering peace, and promoting collaboration across sectors. Transboundary cooperation on surface and groundwater, guided by international water law principles, has consistently enabled countries to forge and implement mutually beneficial solutions. The urgency of establishing or reinforcing legal and institutional agreements to manage growing competition over shared water resources and prevent conflict was stressed.

Effective cooperation further requires systematic data and knowledge sharing, enhanced investment in hydrological information, and the use of integrated water resources management that links water with agriculture, energy, health, environmental and other sectors. The discussion highlighted the need for scaled-up and better coordinated public

[25] OECD. 2022. Financing a Water Secure Future. Paris.
[26] Climate Policy Initiative. 2021. Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2021.

and private financing, alongside political commitments and inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement for transboundary and cross-sectoral water cooperation. Advancing water cooperation and governance demands capacity-building at all levels (international, regional, national, and local) to reach agreements and manage water's complex cross-sectoral ties. Such advances may boost climate resilience. Water cooperation relies on wide-ranging multi-stakeholder engagements and partnerships, including with civil society, concerned populations, local communities, the private sector, women and youth. Water should be a priority in bilateral and multilateral cooperation at all levels.

The proposed theme for this dialogue in 2026 will focus on SDG 6 targets 6.5 (integrated water resources management & transboundary cooperation), 6.a (international cooperation), and 6.b (stakeholder participation). Water cooperation across borders, within countries, and across sectors generate benefits that accelerate progress across all Sustainable Development Goals, in particular promoting peace (SDG 16) and strengthening partnerships (SDG 17).

Data and trends

Transboundary waters account for 60% of the world's freshwater flows. More than 3 billion people worldwide depend on transboundary water resources. While there has been some progress, among the 153 UN Member States with transboundary waters, only 43 have operational agreements that cover 90% or more of their shared rivers, lakes and aquifers, and at least 20 countries lack any such arrangements.[27] Cooperation between countries over their transboundary waters has long been challenging. Climate change now deepens the challenge, threatening the equitable and sustainable management of shared rivers, lakes, and aquifers by altering water availability and increasing both the frequency and severity of extreme events. Approximately 40% of countries lack sufficient institutional and technical capacity to reconcile competing sectoral water demands and to withstand mounting pressures, including those linked to climate change, leaving them at risk of falling further behind.

Between 2015 and 2022, Official Development Assistance (ODA) disbursements directed to the water sector declined by 5%. Overall, nearly one third of countries reported that donor funds are poorly aligned with national water sector plans, overwhelmingly in low-income countries. For the participation of users and local communities in rural drinking water and water resources management, over 90% of countries reported having procedures, defined

[27] UNECE, UNESCO and UN-Water, 2024. Progress on Transboundary Water Cooperation: Mid-term status of SDG Indicator 6.5.2, with a special focus on Climate Change – 2024.

in law or policy. However, less than one third of countries reported high or very high participation of users and local communities, where participation is mostly constrained by a lack of financial and human resources.[28]

Challenges

Progress towards effective transboundary water cooperation remains impeded by the limited and uneven geographic coverage of operational arrangements, the lack of joint mechanisms for climate change adaptation and disaster-risk reduction, persistent data gaps, insufficient legal, financial and institutional capacities, and weak linkages to national IWRM processes.

Declining ODA or water supply and sanitation, together with the limited alignment of donor funds with national water sector plans, continues to constrain infrastructure development while jeopardizing the reliability of services. Governance at the sub-national level is constrained by insufficient financial and human resources. These shortages also limit users and local communities from actively taking part in water and sanitation management.

Opportunities

Cooperation needs to be linked to major sources of public and blended finance so that joint projects and partnerships can move rapidly from plan to implementation. It is critical to embed transboundary and cross-sector cooperation, alongside mechanisms that empower local communities to co-design, monitor, and adapt solutions to national planning cycles to align sectoral investments and build resilience. Closing persistent data and information gaps and fostering data exchange will optimize shared water management. Scientific cooperation including collaborative data generation, knowledge sharing, and joint capacity building will enable evidence-based policy to address interconnected water challenges.

The current political spotlight on water needs to be sustained through accountable follow-up mechanisms to keep the issue at the center of the global peace, climate and development agenda. There are tangible opportunities to transform the political momentum into concrete progress on water cooperation, including aligning ministerial mandates, earmarking budget lines, and strengthening transboundary legal frameworks. For example, six countries acceded the Convention on the Protection and Used of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) after the UN 2023 Water Conference, increasing membership to 55 and broadening its geographic reach.

[28] UN-Water, 2024. Summary Brief: Mid-term status of SDG 6 global indicators and acceleration needs. Version: August 2024. Geneva, Switzerland.

Strengthening legal frameworks governing shared waters can enable more countries and basins to benefit from robust and harmonized regulations. Cooperation generates economic, social, environmental and political benefits, such as improved agricultural output, hydropower production, flood protection, and access to clean water and sanitation.

Global and regional partnerships are playing an increasingly pivotal role in bringing together policy mandates, finance, open data, and technology. These partnerships unlock larger blended-finance flows, strengthen scientific cooperation and data sharing, and accelerate research and innovation. Linking international expertise and resources with regional institutions and local actors, multi-level partnerships can enable systematic capacity building, catalyze knowledge transfer, and embed inclusive governance. Expertise can also be shared through south-south, north-south and triangular modes of cooperation and partnerships. By ensuring engagement with civil society, women, youth, and private-sector actors, these partnerships create governance systems that are more inclusive, transparent, accountable, and responsive to diverse needs. Multi-stakeholder dialogues, including both inter- and intra-generational, make water cooperation resilient over time and accelerate collective decision making.

Water in Multilateral Processes: SDG 6, the 2030 Agenda and beyond, and global water initiatives

Context

Building on Interactive Dialogue 5 — Water Action Decade: Accelerating the Implementation of the Objectives of the Decade, including through the Secretary-General's Action Plan — held at the UN 2023 Water Conference, the proposed 2026 interactive dialogue 5 will focus on SDG 6, the 2030 Agenda, and beyond, and how water is integrated across all global processes.

The interactive dialogue 5 in 2023 generated several key ideas and proposals, many of which have seen significant progress. Notably, the appointment of the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water in 2024 marked a step forward in transforming the UN's multilateral engagement on water. In addition, based on the resolution 77/334, introduced after the UN 2023 Water Conference, the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation was also launched. This same resolution called for convening water conferences in 2026 and again in 2028 to sustain momentum and promote accountability.

At its core, interactive dialogue 5 in 2026 is proposed to explore the platforms, frameworks, and spaces available for international dialogue on water issues, integrating insights from all dialogues of the 2026 UN Water Conference, as well as look at how water is addressed in the broader global, multilateral and intergovernmental processes. This proposed dialogue will support the achievement of all the SDG 6 targets and is relevant for the entire 2030 Agenda, in particular SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

Data & Trends

Despite SDG 6 being significantly off track, progress has been made. The most recent SDG 6 Progress Report, based on the 2024 Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-SDG 6) data drive, shows gains across eight global indicators since the previous reporting cycle in 2020 (6.1.1, 6.2.1a, 6.2.1b, 6.3.1 domestic, 6.4.1, 6.5.1, 6.6.1, 6.b.1). It also shows one indicator showing no change since it could not be assessed (6.3.1 industrial), and four experiencing declines (6.3.2, 6.4.2, 6.5.2, 6.a.1). [29] This interactive dialogue will consider progress on SDG 6 and related water-related goals in the 2030 Agenda and beyond, including the Water Action Agenda and the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation, to identify effective implementation pathways. Water is a key integrating element—reaching water and sanitation targets impacts progress across all SDGs. Evidence-based monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will enhance learning and accountability in advancing the global water agenda.

There is a growing prioritization to embed water within intergovernmental processes, as demonstrated by the integration of water-related considerations in the Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, UNCBD, UNCCD) and other global events. New data and analyses underscore the role of water in key areas such as clean energy, climate mitigation[30] and adaptation, food systems, digitalization, and ecosystem restoration.

Gathering evidence on these linkages will enable countries to deal with emerging challenges and anticipate future water challenges.[31] Interactive dialogue 5 in 2026 can offer a forum to discuss the mechanisms needed for sustained knowledge exchange, data sharing, and implementation accelerators through 2030 and beyond.

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[29] UN-Water, 2024. Summary Brief: Mid-term status of SDG 6 global indicators and acceleration needs. Version: August 2024. Geneva, Switzerland.

[30] UN-Water, 2024. Analytical Brief: UN-Water Analytical Brief on Water for Climate Mitigation. Geneva, Switzerland.

[31] Global Commission on the Economics of Water, 2024. The Economics of Water: Valuing the Hydrological Cycle as a Global Common Good.

Challenges

Nearly 50 years after the first UN Water Conference, the UN 2023 Water Conference reignited global attention and led to mandates for the 2026 UN Water Conference on SDG 6 and the 2028 Final Comprehensive Review Conference on the Water Action Decade. Yet, this resurgence occurs within a volatile multilateral landscape. Political commitments at the global level for sustainable water management are higher than before, however they have not been matched by the required finance or action on the ground and resources and commitment available for intergovernmental dialogue are diminishing. In response to a changing landscape, the UN has initiated reform efforts through UN 2.0 and UN80 to modernize structures, priorities, and operations. The challenge now is to maintain the positive momentum generated in 2023 and to sustain a meaningful global water dialogue and action. Despite progress, water has not been given prominent attention in global processes including the Rio Conventions, the G20 and other UN Processes such as the Summit of the Future and the UN Food Systems Summit. A further challenge is the lack of accountability and monitoring mechanisms on water which are needed for countries to have a meaningful global dialogue.

Opportunities

The proposed title of this dialogue "Water in Multilateral Processes" points to a set of opportunities for the international community. For example, this dialogue can take up the question: how water currently features in different political and global processes. Another opportunity is to identify how water can feature in global processes beyond 2030. More broadly, this is a key time to consider the future of water dialogues and action. In addition, building on the UN 2023 Water Conference, this discussion will set the foundation for the UN Water Conference in 2028 which will review the International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development, 2018 – 2028.

Processes and milestones leading to 2030 such as the Pact for the Future and the 2027 SDG Summit are further opportunities to embed water beyond 2030. In this regard, investment pathways and the six transformative transitions identified by the UN Sustainable Development Group are important.

Investments for Water: Financing, technology & innovation, and capacity building

Context

Delivering on global water-related goals, including SDG 6, requires a robust enabling environment, as articulated in the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework. This includes not only sufficient and accessible financing but also timely, disaggregated data and information systems, cutting-edge technology and innovation, strengthened institutional and human capacities, and inclusive and effective governance for accelerating progress.

The UN 2023 Water Conference emphasized the need to scale up enabling conditions as a prerequisite for achieving tangible outcomes across all dimensions of the water agenda. Investing in water and sanitation is not solely about increasing financial resources; it entails a comprehensive approach that includes tools, technologies, institutional capacity, policy instruments, and partnerships. These investments not only serve human needs but also generate broad economic and social benefits, including job creation, climate resilience, and improved health outcomes. Particular attention must be given to combating water scarcity, droughts, desertification, and biodiversity loss through sustainable investments. The 2026 UN Water Conference will provide a platform to assess progress and address persistent gaps in implementation support, particularly in countries most in need.

The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework—launched in 2020 as part of the UN Secretary-General's Decade of Action—mobilizes UN agencies, governments, civil society, and the private sector around five accelerators: financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation, and governance. It also plays a pivotal role in guiding the implementation of the Water Action Agenda, a core outcome of the UN 2023 Water Conference, and broader water-related goals and targets.

This dialogue is directly linked to all targets under SDG 6, with particular emphasis on the SDG 6 means of implementation targets 6.a (international cooperation and capacity-building) and 6.b (participation of local communities). It also supports progress across the 2030 Agenda, including SDG 4 (education), SDG 9 (infrastructure and innovation), and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

Data and trends since 2023

Financing and investments for water remains a significant challenge. As of late 2024, only 8.9% of total official development assistance was allocated to water supply and sanitation sectors, according to the OECD.[32] The UN 2024 progress update on the Water Action Agenda indicated that fewer than 40% of the 800+ voluntary commitments made at the 2023 UN

[32] OECD (2024). Creditor Reporting System (CRS) Aid Activity Database.

Water Conference included a defined financial framework.[33] The UN-Water GLAAS 2024 report found that only 25% of responding countries reported having sufficient human and financial resources to fully implement their national WASH Plans.[34] And according to the World Bank, the global water investment gap is estimated at US$6.7 trillion through 2030. In addition, private sector participation is considerably low. According to the World Bank Private Participation in Infrastructure (PPI) Database, US$3.2 billion in new water sector public-private partnerships (PPPs) were registered globally in 2023, up from US$2.7 billion in 2022.[35] However, private sector participation remains modest overall—estimated at less than 2% of total investment in the water sector—highlighting a persistent under-leveraging of private capital.

Persistent challenges also include gaps in technology and innovation, limited research and development, and insufficient capacity building. The International Benchmarking Network for Water and Sanitation Utilities (IBNET) reported a 15% increase in the adoption of smart metering technologies globally from 2022 to 2024, though the adoption rate in low-income countries remained below 5%.[36] In addition, the UNESCO Science Report 2024 highlighted a 6.4% increase in global spending on water-related R&D between 2022 and 2023, with over 60% of new investments concentrated in five high-income economies.[37] The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) recorded a 9% global increase in graduate degrees awarded in water science and engineering between 2022 and 2024. However, this remains comparatively lower than R&D investment in sectors such as energy and health. Additional data from the SDG 6 Capacity Development Blueprint suggests that only 38% of countries report having adequate institutional capacity for integrated water resources management, underscoring the scale of the capacity challenge.[38]

Challenges

Persistent underinvestment in water infrastructure and services, especially in low-income and climate-vulnerable countries, continues to hinder progress. Limited access to climate finance and low private sector participation further constrains innovation and implementation. This is further exacerbated by declining trends in ODA for water and

[33] UN DESA & UN-Water (2024). Progress Update on the Water Action Agenda Commitments.
[34] UN-Water, 2024. GLAAS 2022: Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water. Geneva: WHO.
[35] World Bank, 2024. Private Participation in Infrastructure Database.
[36] IBNET, 2024. Benchmarking Water Utilities Performance Worldwide.
[37] UNESCO, 2024. UNESCO Science Report: The Race Against Time for Smarter Development. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
[38] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024. Data on tertiary education by field of study.

sanitation, which places additional pressure on domestic and alternative financing mechanisms.

A lack of coordination across governance levels, sectors, and stakeholders reduces the effectiveness of water policy. Many institutions face capacity constraints in data management, enforcement, and inclusive engagement, while digital divides limit equitable access to water technologies. Inadequate mobilization of key stakeholder groups—including civil society, youth, women, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities—weakens accountability and innovation systems. These interconnected challenges highlight the urgent need for system-wide transformation and coordinated global action.

Opportunities

Mobilizing innovative financing models, such as blended finance, outcome-based funding, and water bonds, can help close the funding gap. In the context of diminishing ODA, strengthening domestic resource mobilization will also be essential to ensure sustained financing for water and sanitation services. Leveraging digital innovation—e.g., AI, big data, blockchain—for real-time water monitoring and predictive management is an opportunity. Promoting inclusive governance frameworks that integrate indigenous knowledge, gender-responsive planning, and multi-stakeholder participation. Scaling up capacity development through collaborative international efforts—including South-South, North-South, and triangular cooperation—via online learning platforms, and regional centers of excellence is needed. Framing water investments as essential for long-term economic development and climate resilience can attract new partners and enhance political commitment. Strengthening partnerships across sectors and borders will be key to aligning finance, technology, and skills. These efforts are instrumental in accelerating progress on SDG 6 and its related targets, and in advancing the broader 2030 Agenda.