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**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, 22–24 March 2023

Item 9 of the provisional agenda*

Interactive dialogues

**Interactive dialogue 5: Water Action Decade: accelerating
the implementation of the objectives of the Decade,
including through the United Nations Secretary-General’s
Plan: Water Action Decade 2018–2028**

Concept paper prepared by the Secretariat

Summary

The present paper was prepared pursuant to paragraph 9 (d) of General Assembly resolution [75/212](#), in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General of the 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, to be held in 2023, to prepare concept papers on each of the themes of the interactive dialogues. It concerns interactive dialogue 5, entitled “Water Action Decade: accelerating the implementation of the objectives of the Decade, including through the United Nations Secretary-General’s Plan: Water Action Decade 2018–2028” and is focused entirely on the progress and future of the Water Action Decade.

* [A/CONF.240/2023/1](#).



I. Introduction¹

1. As part of the organizational arrangements mandated in General Assembly resolution [75/212](#), the Secretary-General of the Conference should prepare concept papers on the themes of the five interactive dialogues to be held at the 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. The first four dialogues and their corresponding concept papers are strongly thematic, focusing on sets of specific Sustainable Development Goals. The present concept paper informs the fifth dialogue, which will be focused entirely on the progress and future of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028. The paper is key to dialogue discussions, as the entire United Nations 2023 Water Conference is motivated by the midterm review of the Decade.

2. The Water Action 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 United Nations Secretary-General’s Plan: Water Action Decade 2018–2028, namely:

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

3. To facilitate action, the objectives of the Water Action Decade are pursued through four workstreams:

- (a) Facilitating access to knowledge and the exchange of good practices;
- (b) Improving knowledge generation and dissemination, including new information relevant to water-related Sustainable Development Goals;
- (c) Pursuing advocacy, networking and promoting partnerships and action;
- (d) Strengthening communication actions for implementation of the water-related Sustainable Development Goals.

4. The many activities under the workstreams are closely aligned with the global work on water-related Sustainable Development Goals and other water-related global agreements, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the Paris Agreement on climate change of 2015 and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development.

5. In his report on the midterm comprehensive review of the implementation of the Water Action Decade issued in 2022 ([A/77/249](#)), the Secretary-General highlighted accomplishments over the first five years of the Decade and pinpointed some key actions, events and lessons learned. The present concept paper draws on some elements of the report but is aimed at providing ideas on how to move forward to make the Decade a success and help to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all) and other water-related Goals and targets. It explores how the outcomes of the previous events and initiatives at the midway point can accelerate progress in the next five

¹ The present concept paper has benefited from contributions from Member States, the United Nations system and a diverse group of stakeholders. See also <https://sdgs.un.org/conferences/water2023/documentation> and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “United Nations 2023 Water Conference: Global Online Stakeholder Consultation for the Proposed Themes of the Interactive Dialogues – summary report”, October 2022.

years of the Decade – by interpreting those outcomes in terms of the accelerators of the Goal 6 Global Acceleration Framework, which is aimed at delivering fast results at an increased scale.

6. The United Nations 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 for continued and, hopefully, accelerated progress in the achievement of the objectives of the Water Action Decade, Sustainable Development Goal 6 and other water-related Goals and targets.

II. The Water Action Decade at the midpoint: opportunities for progress

7. The year 2023 marks not only the middle of the Water Action Decade but also the middle point of the 2030 Agenda. Hence, the state of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the first seven years of the 2030 Agenda period is closely related to progress towards the Decade's objectives. A snapshot of progress towards the achievement of water-related Goals is provided below. It should be noted that, in addition to a chronic and consistent lack of data on almost all water-related Goal indicators (which in itself is a major impediment to accurate assessment of progress at the national and global levels), the most recent data available are generally two years old or more, although, in many cases, the state of progress specifically for 2023 – the midway point of the Decade – can be ascertained by means of a trend analysis.

A. Progress of Sustainable Development Goal 6 and target 5 of Goal 11²

8. More elaborate updates on Sustainable Development Goal 6 and target 5 of Goal 11 can be found in the other four dialogue concept papers, but a brief review is provided below:

- *Sustainable Development Goal 6, targets 1 and 2 (“By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all” and “By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations”).* 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 per cent, from 47 to 54 per cent and from 67 to 71 per cent, respectively. This currently leaves 2 billion and 3.6 billion people without drinking water and sanitation services meeting the required standards, respectively, and 2.3 billion people still lack handwashing facilities with soap and water.
- *Sustainable Development Goal 6, target 3 (“By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally”).* At the global level, only 44 per cent of household wastewater is not safely treated, but this number reflects data from less than 25 per cent of countries worldwide. With regard to water quality, similar data problems exist, as there is a lack of data for at least

² Unless otherwise indicated, all figures come from UN-Water Technical Advisory Unit, *Summary Progress Update 2021: SDG 6 – Water and Sanitation for All* (Geneva, 2021).

3 billion people on the quality of the water that they rely upon. Sixty per cent of water bodies in 89 countries reporting have good ambient water quality.

- *Sustainable Development Goal 6, target 4* (“By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity”). Water use efficiency increased by 10 per cent between 2015 and 2018, with only 26 countries reporting a decrease in efficiency during that period. The number of people living in water-stressed countries is 2.3 billion, 733 million of whom live in highly or critically water-stressed nations.
- *Sustainable Development Goal 6, target 5* (“By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate”). In 1992, all countries committed to implementing integrated water resources management as a means of ensuring sustainable and equitable water use. Thirty years on, 107 countries are still not on track to have sustainably managed water by 2030. Transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers are shared by 153 countries; however, only a small proportion (32 countries) reported a high (90 per cent or more) coverage of their transboundary waters by operational arrangements in 2020.
- *Sustainable Development Goal 6, target 6* (“By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes”). Freshwater species and habitats are being lost at faster rates than any others.³ Some 67 per cent 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 per cent of the world’s river basins experiencing rapid changes in the area covered by surface waters over the past five years.
- *Sustainable Development Goal 6, target a* (“By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies”). While total aid increased by almost 20 per cent from 2017 to 2020, aid for water and sanitation fell by more than 5 per cent during the same period, from \$9.8 billion to \$9.2 billion.
- *Sustainable Development Goal 6, target b* (“Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management”). Communities participate in all water and sanitation subsector decision-making in two thirds of the 109 countries reporting. Actual high levels of community and user participation in collaborative management and decision-making are only found in 14 of those countries.
- *Sustainable Development Goal 11, target 5* (“By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations”). The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction projects that medium- to large-scale disaster events could occur

³ Eduardo Brondizio and others, eds., *The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (Bonn, Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019).

at an average rate of 1.5 per day by 2030 – a 40 per cent increase from 2015.⁴ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects that about one third of global land areas will suffer at least moderate drought by 2100.⁵

9. The snapshot above illustrates yet again that the world is not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 and related Goals and targets by 2030. This was the case even before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic further increased the challenge. Accordingly, the activities carried out during the first half of the Water Action Decade have been focused on getting water-related Goals back on track to ensure their achievement by 2030. A summary of some of those key actions and initiatives is provided below under the four workstreams of the Decade.

B. Progress on the four workstreams of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Plan: Water Action Decade 2018–2028

10. Over the course of the first half of the Water Action Decade, intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder initiatives have advanced the objectives of the Decade through its four workstreams. The outline below highlights a few examples under each stream.

1. Facilitating access to knowledge and the exchange of good practices

11. The UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Sustainable Development Goal 6 facilitated the exchange of good practices on Goal 6 monitoring and reporting. More recently, UN-Water established the Goal 6 Capacity Development Initiative (coordinated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs) to accelerate water-related capacity-development actions at the global level. The Capacity Development Initiative acknowledges that a systemic approach to developing capacities at the country level and sharing methods and good practices among countries are essential enablers to accelerate the achievement of the Goals and the main catalyst for other identified Goal 6 accelerators.

2. Improving knowledge generation and dissemination, including new information relevant to water-related Sustainable Development Goals

12. The Sustainable Development Goal 6 data portal was developed by compiling country data with the aim of reporting on global progress made towards Goal 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 Water Action Decade, identifies key water priority areas to support Member States in achieving water-related Goals and other water-related global priorities. The Accountability for Water Coalition⁶ generates and shares knowledge on how accountability for Goal 6 delivery can be strengthened and embedded at the local, national and global levels, and identifies methodologies that enhance positive outcomes in 8 out of 10 cases, as well as the factors that determine success.

⁴ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2022: Our World at Risk – Transforming Governance for a Resilient Future* (Geneva, 2022).

⁵ Hervé Douville and others, “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*, Valérie Masson-Delmotte and others, eds. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁶ See www.accountabilityforwater.org/.

3. Pursuing advocacy, networking and promoting partnerships and action

13. The Water Action Decade website was established to support the advocacy for the Decade, illustrating countries' activities and commitments and the road map for the United Nations 2023 Water Conference. 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*. CEO Water Mandate launched the industry-driven Water Resilience Coalition, which comprises 30 corporate members and is aimed at elevating global water stress to the top of the corporate agenda and preserving the world's freshwater resources through collective action. Another multi-stakeholder initiative, the Water and Climate Coalition, led by the World Meteorological Organization, 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, an international network created to support water operators through partnerships among them 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 at the global level.

14. At the twenty-sixth session of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 26 signatories, including national Governments, companies, banks and non-governmental organizations, launched the Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints for Climate-Resilient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Development, thereby committing to accelerating the delivery of Sustainable Development Goal 6 by 2030 through action in global supply chains to ensure zero pollution, sustainable withdrawals, universal water, sanitation and hygiene for all, the promotion of nature and drought and flood resilience.⁷

4. Strengthening communication actions for implementation of the water-related Sustainable Development Goals

15. The *United Nations World Water Development Report* 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 Water Action Decade, the Report communicated to decision makers knowledge, tools, best practices and in-depth analyses in the focused topics of groundwater, valuing water, water and climate change, leaving no one behind and nature-based solutions for water. The theme of the Report for 2023 is "Accelerating change through partnerships and cooperation". In 2021, UN-Water also published a summary progress update to inform global policymakers about overall progress made towards Sustainable Development Goal 6 and the need for acceleration.⁸

16. Over the first five years of the Water Action Decade, 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 United Nations 2023 Water Conference itself. These include the Water Dialogues for Results, held in Bonn, Germany, in 2021; the ninth World Water Forum, held in Dakar in 2022; the fourth Asia-Pacific Water Summit, held in Kumamoto, Japan, in 2022; the second High-level International Conference on the International Decade for Action "Water for Sustainable Development", 2018–2028, held in Dushanbe in 2022; the High-level Symposium on Water at the United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, held in Lisbon in 2022; and various water weeks and regional and global preparatory meetings.⁹

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

⁸ UN-Water Technical Advisory Unit, "Summary progress update 2021".

⁹ For a complete list of preparatory events for the United Nations 2023 Water Conference, see [A/77/249](#).

17. Progress in the second half of the Water Action Decade hinges on Member States, the United Nations system and relevant stakeholders' initiative and commitments to accelerating the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 and other water-related Goals and targets. The United Nations 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 framework required to address this critical issue, which has an impact on the success of the entire 2030 Agenda.

18. As part of the preparatory process for the United Nations 2023 Water Conference, the aforementioned meetings, however, already provide a start to that process by laying out key actions to support the acceleration of progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 6. The Goal 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 provide a clear path forward in terms of recommendations, which are outlined in section III below.

C. Suggested actions from the preparatory process to the United Nations 2023 Water Conference

19. In support of the midterm comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade, the international community took action through a number of events and processes, highlighting the need for urgent action towards the implementation of water-related priorities. The present section highlights some of the key outcomes of those events. While not exhaustive, the list offers a synopsis of the international community's ambition and common priorities related to water. They are organized around the five accelerators of the Sustainable Development Goal 6 Global Acceleration Framework.

1. Financing

(a) Magnitude of financing

20. There is a need to attract additional investment from private and public sources and support financial risk-mitigation measures. There must also be a shift to discourage projects that increase risk and exposure to risk. Direct financial flows towards water management and resource protection must be increased to target those issues more specifically.

(b) Governance of financing

21. Effective financing requires good governance; therefore, capacities to absorb funds and implement funded projects need to be developed, and sound policies and regulations and strong institutions that will mobilize both actors and resources must be established. 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, there is a need to establish mechanisms of transparency and accountability; measure project outcomes to increase the efficiency of funds; and adjust low water prices financed by inefficient subsidies significantly.

(c) Use of financing

22. While more funding and financing would be beneficial to address water and sanitation issues, there is significant value in effectively and efficiently using existing funding, for example, public funds and official development assistance that is focused more on unprofitable projects. Additional areas to concentrate on in terms of financing are the planning and allocation of resources for maintenance, management

and monitoring. In addition, the increasing impacts of climate change should be considered by assessing water-related risks and opportunities and enhancing the scale and accessibility of global climate financing for water.

(d) Targeted groups for financing

23. To level the playing field in terms of addressing water-related issues, it will be important to earmark grants to communities in situations of vulnerability and marginalization, such as women and Indigenous Peoples. As part of that effort, and to improve community oversight and accountability mechanisms, resourcing for civil society must be prioritized.

2. Data and information

(a) Data differentiation and type

24. A necessary step to “leave no one behind” is to disaggregate data (e.g. by household, gender and age). 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.

(b) Capacity for data acquisition

25. Many countries are still behind in their capacity to collect and analyse data, which hinders their capacity to address water problems. It is therefore vital to increase technical capacity for data acquisition and invest in data-collecting institutions. At an institutional level, it is important to strengthen the interdepartmental coordination of data collection.

(c) Data monitoring

26. To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6, it is necessary to improve the efficiency of national water data collection through the UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Goal 6. To help with this, there is a need to develop needs-oriented and cross-sectoral monitoring systems that use rather than duplicate existing systems and that include standards to support data system integration, but also drive innovative and cost-effective data, for example, through satellite and blockchain technology. At the same time, other ways of producing knowledge and data must be recognized, including through the methods of citizen science and Indigenous Peoples. As with all types of data and data collection, the accuracy of data should be ensured through reviews and audits.

(d) Data democratization and access

27. 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 accountability with regard to data reporting, especially when such data have an impact on policy development. For example, incentives could be put in place for disclosure of water use (withdrawal, discharge and reuse) and water, sanitation and hygiene for all impacts from all major users and the industries concerned. This could also be done through the promotion of “water footprinting” to make the cost of water use transparent in order to change consumer behaviour. In a transboundary setting, data-sharing could be improved to increase transparency.

(e) Data for policymaking

28. The 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 those data is only part of the challenge, however, as the data should also be translated for better use for evidence-based policy, planning and investment.

3. Capacity development**(a) Stronger capacity-development mechanisms**

29. No Sustainable Development Goal 6 targets or other water-related Goals and targets can be achieved without a sufficiently trained workforce. It is therefore imperative to strengthen the capacities of national and local institutions, through well-identified capacity-development processes with specific goals. This can be done in many ways, and first by bolstering technical, vocational, secondary and tertiary education on water-related subject matters. Other more practical methods can also be used, such as on-the-job training and peer-to-peer learning. Capacity-development programmes must be focused on both technical and leadership-related skills supporting organizational processes, such as policy reform, organizational change, programme 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 to strengthen the technical capacity of individuals and institutions.

(b) Enabling capacity development

30. Capacity development requires enabling conditions to support and align the capacity needs with the demand. Is it important to ensure that enough financial and human resources are available to conduct comprehensive and goal-oriented capacity-development programmes, but to do so, more progressive forms of financing capacity-development programmes need to be designed at the country level beyond small-scale individual projects. This will allow for more strategic and long-term planning and implementation of capacity-development programmes.

(c) Partnership and network building

31. Success in addressing water issues does not occur without working across sectors; cross-sectoral learning for emerging challenges is therefore a necessary tool for adopting a holistic approach to solving water-related problems. To achieve this, existing partnership 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.

(d) Expanding support for the most marginalized

32. Water issues will not be solved until the most marginalized groups can actively engage in addressing the problems; therefore, capacity-development support for groups that often remain excluded but that can contribute to improving water security, such as Indigenous Peoples, civil society, young people and women, should be prioritized so that they may play an active role in global strategies and policy processes. Young people, women and Indigenous Peoples should also be included in the design of capacity-development programmes.

(e) Global South leadership

33. There is much value to be gained from the sharing of experiences and knowledge relating to capacity development in the global South. South-South cooperation should therefore be expanded by establishing structural and coordinated or facilitated cooperation mechanisms, especially with regard to capacity development.

4. Innovation

(a) Governance and legal systems

34. A 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. New multilevel governance mechanisms can also be established through structural cooperation among academia, government and technology providers. Throughout this process, innovation with regard to transparency, accountability and participation should be encouraged, as it can play a key role in developing new corporate governance models.

(b) Financial

35. Working in different, more novel ways will require the expansion of funding for research on innovative approaches to water management and governance. Innovation in financing methods themselves could be brought about through the strategic use of budget and regulatory tools for sustainable water management.

(c) Knowledge and data

36. It will be crucial to innovate in terms of educational methods to keep pace with new requirements and types of knowledge in the changing water jobs landscape. Closing the gap in understanding between the research community, policymakers and civil society requires acknowledging different and innovative ways of producing knowledge and of engaging communities in a participatory way. The expansion of international cooperation on research and innovation can help with those endeavours. Specifically, the promotion of living labs in specific settings can address specific problems.

(d) Technical and physical innovation

37. It will be important to use innovative methods to increase the efficiency of water use and to think of efficiency in a multifaceted way, for example, not only what is produced per unit of water but what its benefits are in terms of sustainability. Water practices or innovations must be recognized as more than just instrumental benefits. They embody other cultural values, in particular for Indigenous Peoples, such as respect, reciprocity and relatedness. In a way, the first reason for Indigenous Peoples to enact their rights is to fulfil their obligations to care for 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

(a) Stakeholder engagement in planning and management

38. To ensure better inclusion and that no one is left behind, rural women and girls, people with disabilities and people in situations of vulnerability must be included in

water-related planning and decision-making processes. Achieving this will require raising awareness about water among communities and other sectors through dialogues at the local and national levels.

(b) Governance implementation

39. 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 the local to the global level. To avoid competition between water management and governance paradigms, integrated water resources management, 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 that resources reach the end user, sufficient resources must be allocated to water-related activities. Water governance in informal settlements and rapidly expanding metropolitan areas will need to be improved to address water-related needs in those areas. Governments should encourage the use of private sector investment in innovation, research and development through structured collaborations with public utilities. To that end, accountability by all actors should be prioritized and supported by establishing clear duties and effective sanctions.

(c) Governance monitoring

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

(d) Global water governance

41. To raise the profile of water on the global agenda, there should be a spokesperson for reaching out to and working with other sectors at the highest levels and helping to mobilize efforts to carry out the implementation of the outcomes of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference. It is therefore recommended that a special envoy for water be appointed at the United Nations. As connecting with the sectors is critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6, it will be important to interlink the review of that Goal with other sectors at the high-level political forum and to support Member States in overcoming the water-related challenges identified in their voluntary national reviews for the forum.

6. Conclusion

42. Despite advances made towards the Water Action Decade's objectives, much remains to be accomplished, especially with regard to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6. Halfway through the Decade and 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 has led to the United Nations 2023 Water Conference, a milestone not just during the Decade period but in global water governance as a whole. The Conference offers an opportunity for transformative change with regard to how water and sanitation issues are addressed moving forward. The Water Action Agenda will play a key role in bringing about those changes.

III. Recommendations

43. The Water Action Decade offers a unique opportunity to stimulate change in that it is the sole political process related to water within the United Nations system. Listed below are some recommendations as to how the Decade, with a large push from the milestone event of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference and its Water Action Agenda, can help to make the transformative changes that are needed to address the current and future water challenges.

A. Financing

44. In order 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. Priorities need to be set with more targeted actions, and justice should play an increased role in those priorities. Ultimately, projects that increase risk and exposure to risk should be discouraged.

45. The time has come to shift the thinking on financing water and sanitation and take new approaches. Financing is not merely about more money but about using what money there is in a more efficient and effective manner. It is not just about more bankable projects but about setting up enabling conditions for investments. The question should not be so much about the project as about what makes “water sense”. The world must strengthen what is successful and redirect financial flows to where financing is effective. The global development finance architecture needs to be reformed, as Governments need more cash in hand to address the challenges that they face. Governments must also advance ambitious policies that provide companies with the clarity and confidence needed to unlock further investments into water solutions. In addition, justice must be at the core of decision-making around water and sanitation financing 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.

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

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

B. Data and information

48. Given that 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 improve the interface between knowledge, policy and action in order to address future water challenges. Incorporating the use of traditional knowledge can also provide benefits.

49. There exist inherent gaps in data and information for decision-making and investment planning in the sector at the local level, including the city and municipal

levels. It is desirable that Governments promote national efforts towards strengthening the capacities of local authorities, including cities and municipalities, to collect, process and manage up-to-date comprehensive data tailored to meet effectively the local demand 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 local authorities, municipalities and cities to adopt new data systems, as they are often hampered by low-capacity, bureaucratic, resource-constrained and policy-challenged national environments. Improving coordination among stakeholders, improving data access and strengthening the standardization of monitoring indicators across various levels of water and sanitation sector governance will provide a more solid foundation for data usability by different sector players.

50. 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 policymakers to use good-quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data, tailored to their 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 that include civil society, citizen science and traditional and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge in the design and implementation of information systems should be put in place.

51. To make the challenges of water and other sectors visible, it could be advantageous to establish a panel of experts, independent of Governments, which would make it possible to ensure the coherence of the scientific work already carried out for sharing water-related knowledge among Member States. Indeed, the quality of scientific information differs considerably among the various 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.

52. Water, just like carbon, can have a footprint and, consequently, be costed. At a global, regional, national or basin level, the latest science can now provide information on how much water can be appropriated for sustainable consumptive use without transgressing the planetary limits for water. Such water footprint-related tools coupled with the development of global water-related taxonomies and robust rating methodologies can spur water finance, for example, by incorporating them in existing environmental, social and governance rating systems, and drive accountability in corporations.

C. Capacity development

53. There is an unprecedented need for capacity development. Not only is there a professional gap in water and sanitation, but that gap is widening. The world needs to be equipped with skilled professionals at all levels to address current problems and future demand. Education and labour need to be aligned to attract, educate, train and retain skilled professionals, especially women, as demand changes over time.

54. Meeting the need for a future water and sanitation workforce is a major obstacle that will require a transformative, whole-of-society approach. Attracting and training a workforce, however, is just one aspect of the issue, as what is required is a wider societal dialogue that prioritizes water and sanitation and creates an enabling environment and institutional framework to confront the massive challenges ahead. To that end, a global multi-stakeholder alliance of organizations involved in water and sanitation, agriculture, health, education, labour and economic development will

need to come together to create an enabling policy environment for collaborative frameworks among the education sector, sector employers (public and private sectors and non-governmental organizations), trade unions and employees, assess the water and sanitation workforce to determine where the needs are and what skills are increasingly in demand to achieve water security and close the water and sanitation workforce professional gap.

55. There is a strong need to address the 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 those bottlenecks, including technological bottlenecks, services models, financing mechanisms and operations and maintenance issues at the municipality, city and utility levels that impede the good management of water and sanitation services in underserved and deprived areas, will increase inclusivity and accountability to the people.

D. Innovation

56. While progress has been made, the breakthrough necessary to achieve the water and water-related Sustainable Development Goals and targets has not happened. The water community needs to innovate in all themes, including the other four accelerators of the Goal 6 Global Acceleration Framework. The effort to do so needs to be redoubled, as there will be no success without approaching the challenges in new ways to develop capacities and upscale and sustain solutions.

57. Science-based solutions, technologies and innovations, including through open science, citizen science and women and youth-led initiatives, as well as traditional and Indigenous knowledge, must be facilitated, demonstrated and scaled up to achieve more effective and climate-resilient water and sanitation management in line with national priorities and circumstances.

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

59. Water-oriented living labs are real-life demonstrations of research and innovation, with intervention based on a cross-sectoral approach. The European Union Water4All Partnership launched in 2022 supports the development of water-oriented living labs and innovation.

60. Innovation is key to increasing the efficiency, equity and sustainability of the global water system. It 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 at the global level to drive costs down and ensure global equity.

E. Governance

1. Inclusiveness

61. Communities and groups of people in situations of vulnerability or marginalization, such as women, young people, Indigenous Peoples and people living with disabilities, need to be not only prioritized but included in decisions that affect them.

62. Provisions for citizen participation must be included in legal and administrative frameworks, tools must be put in place to ensure the inclusive, informed and effective participation of all stakeholders, and measures must be taken to ensure the equitable representation of women, young people, people living with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples in water management. Citizens, civil society, women, young people, groups in situations of vulnerability or marginalization must be empowered and enabled, as do the media in order to fulfil their key roles, including communication, participation, convening, consumer choice and accountability monitoring.

2. Decreasing fragmentation among levels and within and outside the water community

63. Cooperation and coordination across sectors are 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 the importance of water to sustainable development, it needs to be consistently proactive in its overtures to engage with other sectors.

64. Water governance, from the local to the global level, is highly fragmented, with closely related roles and responsibilities for water scattered across and assigned to different entities. There is a need to adopt 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 and strengthen policy coherence through effective cross-sectoral coordination, in particular among water and environment, health, energy, agriculture, industry, spatial planning and land use policies. To that end, a “freshwater” segment should be included in United Nations sustainable development themes and international conferences on those specific issues. The national water road maps proposed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations can be not only a way to bridge silos but also a basis for commitments at the governmental level and the acceleration of the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6.

65. This multisectoral approach will enable the 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, young people, marginalized people and non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations.

3. Global water governance

66. 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 in order to assist where help is needed most and move forward together towards sustainable water and sanitation management worldwide.

67. A call for the Secretary-General to appoint a special envoy for water should be taken under serious consideration. Such an envoy could give a unified “voice and a face” to the vital resource and ensure that water remains a priority in the political agenda within and outside the United Nations. The special envoy should help to 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 to the outcomes of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference.

68. The global governance structure on water needs improvement in multiple ways. At the global level, building on the outcome of the key messages from the Water Dialogues for Results held in Bonn, dialogue on water needs to be strengthened within the United Nations at its core and effective coordination and coherence of the work of the United Nations on water needs to be ensured, in particular by strengthening UN-Water and enhancing a United Nations system-wide approach to water. Recommendations for concrete action to strengthen the coordinative function of UN-Water, and thus to render United Nations system delivery on Sustainable Development Goal 6 and other water-related Goals and targets more efficient, might provide better grounds for discussions with Member States. The interlinkages among Goals, such as the link between freshwater and marine waters, considering the full water cycle, must be addressed as part of the Goal implementation.

69. 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 on sustainable development 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 United Nations agencies, civil society and the private sector to come together to discuss water issues, its intersection with all the other Sustainable Development Goals and ways to achieve all the Goals of the 2030 Agenda and follow up on the voluntary commitments of the Water Action Agenda. This space for dialogue 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 would simplify and become the reference point for intergovernmental work on water, allowing for greater coherence of work.

70. Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 and other water-related Goals and targets is not possible without working hand in hand with other sectors. The Water Action Decade is a powerful mechanism within the United Nations system that can interact with other international initiatives. More effective coordination among the Decade and the 2030 Agenda, the Sendai Framework, the Paris Agreement and the New Urban Agenda needs to be a priority to help to bridge the gap between water and other sectors. Effective and coherent international cooperation between those international mechanisms is needed to strengthen the integration of activities that: (a) have water at their core; (b) use water; or (c) have an impact on water.

F. The Water Action Decade and the Water Action Agenda

71. The Water Action Agenda that is to emerge from the United Nations 2023 Water Conference will be comprised of voluntary commitments, some of which may be transformative in nature. The Water Action Decade, through its various workstreams on knowledge exchange and generation, advocacy and communications connected to the water-related Sustainable Development Goals, should use its function to help to 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 the latter's potential for effectiveness.

72. 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 Water Action 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 in and commitment to water policy and to promote stakeholder engagement. Political leadership is essential to improve water governance around the world, as the challenges lie not only in the design of governance programmes but also in their implementation.

IV. Guiding questions

73. The following are guiding questions:

(a) How can Member States, the Water Action Decade and the United Nations system help to implement and follow up on the commitments made in the Water Action Agenda? What global governance and political leadership are needed? How can the stronger accountability and incentives needed for Sustainable Development Goal 6 delivery be embedded and scaled through the Water Action Agenda?

(b) How effective is the Water Action Decade at the political level? What would mark the success or failure of the Decade in five years' time?

(c) How can the water community make best use of a special envoy of the Secretary-General for water to raise the profile of water and accelerate the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 6?

(d) How do you see water positioned in a post-2030 Agenda?

(e) How can multilateralism around water be strengthened through collaboration between national and multilateral actors? How can collaboration and connections between the local and global levels be strengthened?
