Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023

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Contents

Foreword

United Nations Secretary-General

Water is humanity's lifeblood, flowing across all forms of life, cultures and economies around the world. It is a human right and a common development denominator for shaping a better future.

But as this report makes clear, our increasingly unsustainable use of this precious resource is spelling disaster for people, prosperity and planet alike.

We are poisoning our water with pollution, draining it through overuse, and wreaking havoc on its natural cycle through climate change and unchecked urbanization, unsustainable consumption and production patterns and land development. Meanwhile, we face worsening water-related disasters, disease outbreaks, water shortages and deadly droughts.

Every year, underinvestment and inadequate maintenance in water management and critical infrastructure for sanitation, water treatment and storage directly affect billions of people, leaving them without access to clean, safe and healthy water.

Our world is dramatically – and dangerously – off-track to reaching our goal of safely managed water and sanitation for all by 2030.

Today, 2.4 billion people live in water-stressed countries, 420 million people still practice open defecation, and millions of women and girls spend hours every day fetching water.

The message is clear. We must change course to achieve universal access to water and sanitation.

This report demonstrates that such change is possible. It provides a series of key recommendations to transform our behaviour, pivot from vulnerabilities to opportunities, develop integrated strategies and accelerate targeted actions to drive progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 6.

We need governments and businesses to expand investments into clean water and sanitation systems that can reach all people, everywhere. This includes resilient infrastructure and wastewater treatment plants and ensuring that every person in the world is protected by early warning systems against natural disasters by 2027.

We need to reduce the pressures on our hydrological system and ensure good decision-making and smart, inclusive policies.

We need to develop innovative, efficient food systems to reduce the unsustainable use of water in food production and agriculture.

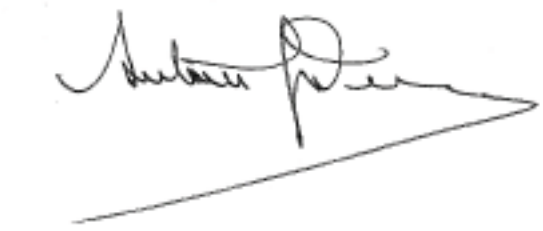
We need to design and implement a new global water information system to forecast and guide plans and priorities by 2030.

We need to integrate our approach on water, energy, ecosystems and climate to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and strengthen the resilience of communities.

And we need to continue to press for action to limit global warming to a 1.5°C rise, break our addiction to fossil fuels, embrace renewable energy and support developing countries every step of the way.

The 2023 United Nations Water Conference provided a fresh vision of hope and cooperation, gathering governments, businesses, youth, women, indigenous representatives, civil society and academia behind an ambitious Water Action Agenda.

Now is the time to bring this vision to life, and take transformative action to protect, sustainably manage and ensure equitable access to water and sanitation for all.



António Guterres

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Executive summary

The opportunity: Water and sanitation at a critical junction

With just seven years to go until the end of the United Nations Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), swift and purposeful action is needed to change course and accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

From 22 to 24 March 2023, over 10,000 participants from across society converged in New York for 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 (UN 2023 Water Conference). The common goal was to urgently tackle the water crisis and set the world on track to achieving SDG 6. At the end of the three-day conference, a new United Nations Water Action Agenda with over 800 commitments had "set sail".

Looking ahead, pressing questions remain on how to translate these commitments into action and deliver water and sanitation for all – the promise of SDG 6:

- How can progress towards SDG 6 be accelerated?
- How can the United Nations system support follow-up of the conference, including implementation of the Water Action Agenda?
- How can water be elevated as a priority on the global political agenda?

These are the questions that the *SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023* aims to answer.

THE CHALLENGES

Global water challenges comprise all freshwater-related matters. These include: surface water and groundwater resources; the sanitation cycle; the interface between fresh water and seawater; freshwater resources in terms of their quality, quantity, development, management, monitoring and use; disaster risk reduction; and climate-related water challenges.

"Too little, too much, and too dirty water" has become the mantra for the global water crisis, which is amplified by the impacts of climate change and further aggravated by other human activities.

THE STAKES

Water flows throughout the United Nations sustainable development agenda. SDG 6 is highly interlinked and synergistic with all other SDGs in the 2030 Agenda. Effectively managing water and sanitation is an essential solution to tackling pressing global challenges like climate

change, affordable and clean energy, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, disease pandemics and epidemics, disasters caused by natural hazards, conflict, extreme poverty and gender inequality. Failing on water and sanitation undermines all three dimensions of sustainable development: society, economy and the environment. It also undermines human rights, peace and security. Lack of progress on SDG 6 and other water-related targets can even threaten hard-won development gains in other areas.

The *SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023* builds on the lessons learned from SDG 6 implementation during the first half of the 2030 Agenda, to provide a "blueprint" to accelerate progress on water and sanitation. The report is a concise guide to delivering concrete results. It offers actionable policy recommendations directed towards senior decision makers in Member States, other stakeholders and the United Nations system, to get the world on track to achieve SDG 6 by 2030.

Prepared by the UN-Water family of Members and Partners, the report provides a forward-looking collective vision for sustainable and resilient water and sanitation management in the second half of the 2030 Agenda.

The data: Where does the world stand on SDG 6 at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda?

SDG 6 IN CONTEXT

The eight targets of SDG 6 include drinking water (target 6.1), sanitation and hygiene (6.2), wastewater treatment and ambient water quality (6.3), water-use efficiency and level of water stress (6.4), integrated water resources management (IWRM) and transboundary water cooperation (6.5), water-related ecosystems (6.6), international water cooperation (6.a) and community participation (6.b).

To support implementation of SDG 6, the General Assembly declared the period from 2018 to 2028 as the International Decade for Action, "Water for Sustainable Development" (Water Action Decade). The Decade promotes a move away from silos and encourages integration and alignment of global efforts. Its midterm review noted that progress towards achieving SDG 6 is severely falling behind, and that a much higher pace of implementation and increased cooperation and partnerships are needed across all targets.

To implement the Water Action Decade objectives, in 2018, General Assembly resolution 73/226 called for the UN 2023 Water Conference.

As the first United Nations conference on water in 46 years, the co-hosts of the UN 2023 Water Conference, the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Tajikistan, aimed to make it a turning point for the world. Among the many highlights of the conference, three are relevant to feature in the *SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023*: the United Nations Secretary-General's announcement on the consideration of the appointment of a Special Envoy for Water; the creation of the Water Action Agenda consisting of over 800 voluntary commitments; and the summary of proceedings by the President of the General Assembly.

SDG 6 PROGRESS AND TRENDS AT THE HALFWAY MILESTONE

Since the first SDG 6 synthesis report was published by UN-Water in 2018, it has been well documented that progress towards SDG 6 targets is alarmingly off track. Now,

at the midpoint to 2030, progress towards SDG 6 continues to be well below the pace needed to meet the targets by 2030.

The key messages on SDG 6 progress at the midpoint are as follows:

- To meet the global target of universal access by 2030, progress needs to increase six times faster for safely managed drinking water, five times faster for safely managed sanitation and three times faster for basic hygiene. Access to safely managed drinking water, sanitation and basic hygiene services is still out of reach for billions of people, particularly in rural areas and least developed countries (SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2).
- A significant portion (42 per cent) of household wastewater is not treated properly. Comparable data on total and industrial wastewater flows are lacking in many parts of the world. Although 60 per cent of the world's monitored water bodies have good ambient water quality, data gaps make it difficult to assess global trends and leave many at risk (SDG target 6.3).
- Water stress has increased globally. Some regions have experienced substantial increases over the past two decades, particularly in the most arid areas, which often rely on non-renewable water resources that will eventually run out. These conditions represent a serious concern for the sustainability of food production and for the resilience of agricultural systems in the face of the challenges posed by climate change (SDG target 6.4).
- Doubling the current rate of progress in IWRM implementation is necessary to meet global targets. Only one SDG region is on track to have all its transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers covered by operational arrangements by 2030 (SDG target 6.5).
- One fifth of the world's river basins are experiencing rapid changes in the area covered by surface waters, indicating flooding and drought events, which are associated with climate change and poor water resource management (SDG target 6.6).
- Official development assistance commitments to the water sector decreased by 12 per cent from 2015 to 2021, and actual disbursements decreased by 15 per cent over the same period, despite the increased funding needed to meet SDG 6 targets (SDG target 6.a).
- National policies and laws increasingly recognize participatory procedures, but implementation has been insufficient (SDG target 6.b).
- On average, United Nations Member States have data for around two thirds of the 12 SDG 6 global indicators. While this represents a major improvement compared to earlier years, there is still a significant knowledge gap.

Seven years remain until 2030. A business-as-usual approach will not suffice. A comprehensive step change in the pace of implementation is imperative to close the global gaps on all SDG 6 targets.

The blueprint: How to put SDG 6 progress on track

Right now, the world community needs a blueprint to put the management of water on a sustainable course – for this generation and those to come. In 2020, UN-Water launched the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework (GAF) as

a unifying initiative to deliver fast results, at an increased scale, towards the goal of ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030.

The five SDG 6 GAF "accelerators" offer blueprints for how to gain momentum for SDG 6 progress and implementation of the Water Action Agenda:

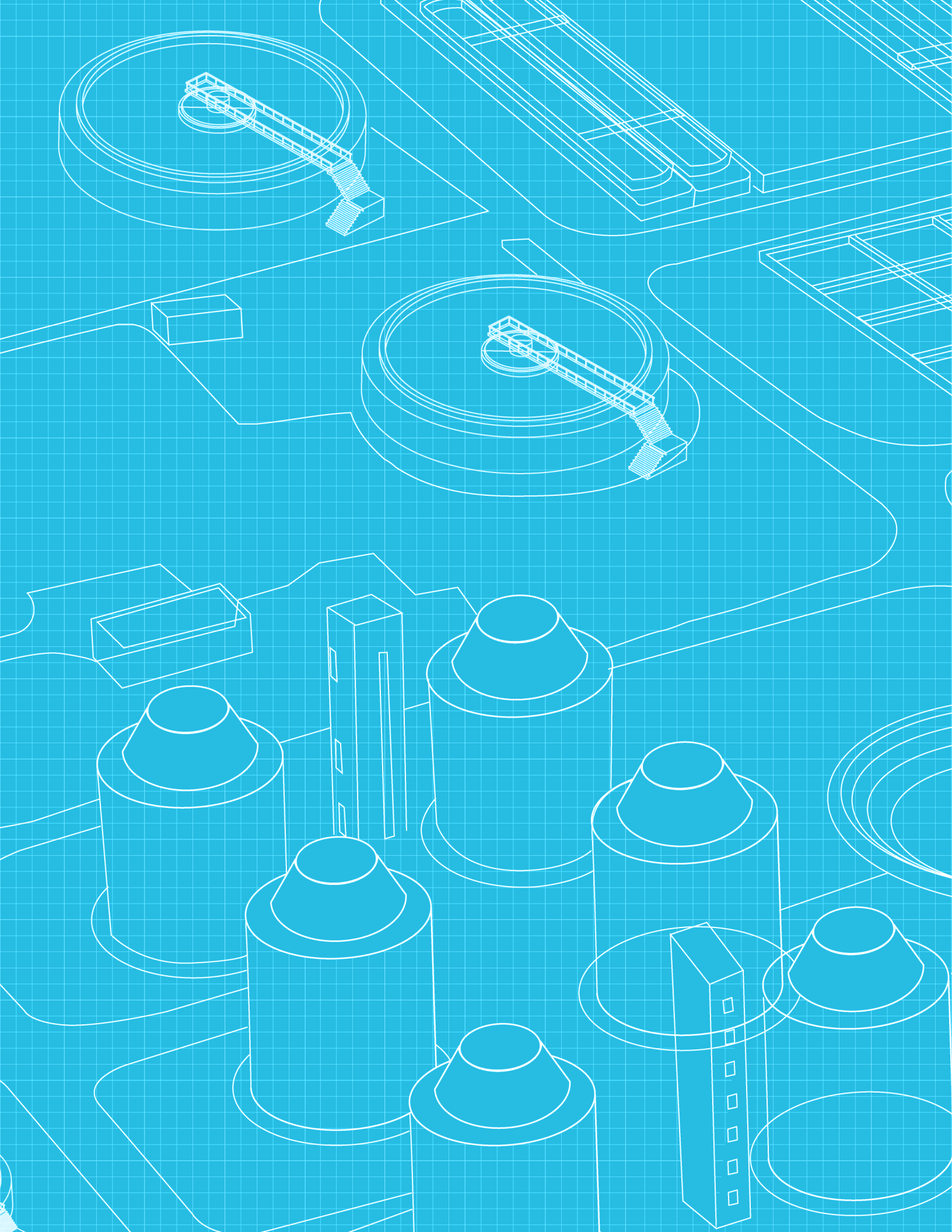
- **The blueprint for finance.** A widespread absence of enabling environments for efficient investment and spending, and a lack of well-prepared bankable projects and sustainable financing models make the water sector unattractive for investment. New investments must be attracted by better enabling environments, and existing finances must be used more efficiently and effectively. The global development finance architecture needs to be reformed to provide more funding to governments.
- **The blueprint for data and information.** In too many countries, policymakers lack credible and timely data for decision-making due to inadequate monitoring and reporting systems, and insufficient resources. National monitoring, reporting and data dissemination systems must be strengthened to cover all SDG 6 global indicators, combining data sets from all stakeholders. Earth observation technologies and improved data practices, such as standardization and disaggregation, can improve decision-making and reduce inequalities.
- **The blueprint for capacity development.** There are growing gaps in the water and sanitation workforce due to limited access to education, weak supportive frameworks, and poor rates of recruitment and retention of skilled staff, particularly women. Education and employers need to collaborate to promote water and sanitation "literacy" in curricula and to attract, train and retain workers, especially women and youth. There is a need for national-level workforce assessments and studies to determine current in-demand and future skills, with a view towards emerging technologies.
- **The blueprint for innovation.** From planning to implementation, innovation is too limited and slow to meet the need for rapid, transformative change. Innovative approaches can be sped and scaled up through supportive policies, utilizing technology such as artificial intelligence, and customizing innovations to local contexts.
- **The blueprint for governance.** Water governance is ineffective due to institutional weakness and fragmentation, and poor regulation, accountability and transparency. Improving policy coherence and collaboration across different sectors and national borders will magnify the effectiveness of water and sanitation management and support social cohesion and international peace.

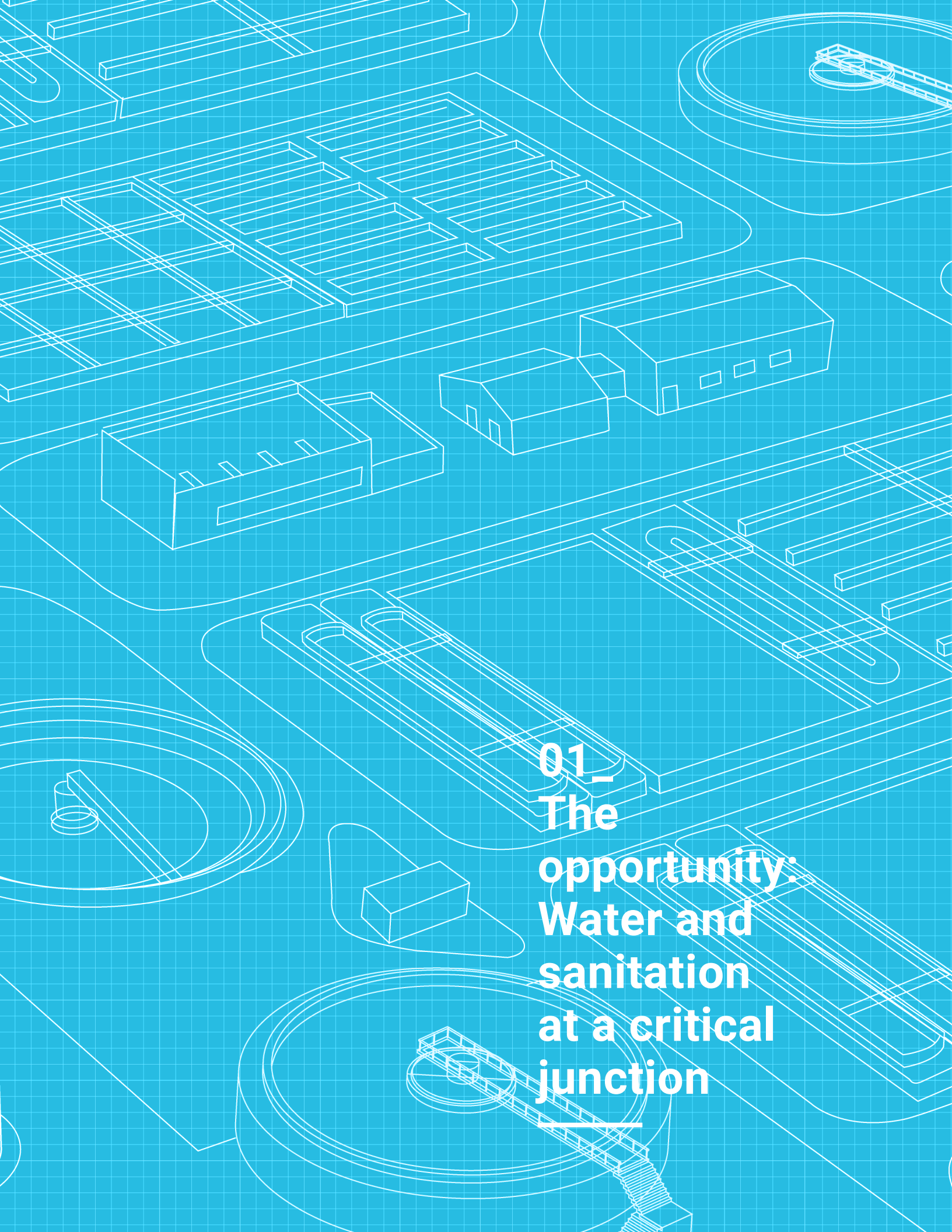
The system: How the United Nations can support SDG 6 acceleration

The UN 2023 Water Conference elevated water as a central United Nations priority. Rising to this new level of ambition will require dramatically stepping up efforts – across sectors, inclusively through multi-stakeholder coalitions and partnerships, and at all levels, from local to global. The United Nations system has a unique role to play in facilitating and supporting this transformational change through its main bodies, United Nations entities and UN-Water.

The United Nations system would be better able to contribute to this amplified action on water and sanitation, with:

- **Water mainstreamed in all relevant intergovernmental processes.** United Nations leadership, entities and Member States can play a fundamental role in integrating water into the agendas of global and regional efforts on climate change, health, biodiversity, food, energy and disaster risk reduction, among others.
- **Regular intergovernmental meetings and conferences.** These can ensure progress is measured and momentum maintained at the top of the global political agenda.
- **United Nations leadership convened at the highest level.** United Nations executive heads can help accelerate progress on SDG 6 and drive the Water Action Agenda through regular dialogue and decision-making.
- **A more effective country-level coordination interface.** The interaction between United Nations entities working on water and the United Nations development system, through the resident coordinator system, can be enhanced to bolster and upscale country-level SDG 6 acceleration.
- **A dedicated system-wide water and sanitation strategy.** SDG 6 GAF can be elevated and transformed into a United Nations system-wide strategy to operationalize inter-agency coordination for SDG 6 acceleration.
- **Strengthened United Nations agency water and sanitation programmes.** The upscaling of current programmes and development of new ones to address gaps and respond to emerging needs can augment United Nations system capacity to deliver on SDG 6 implementation.
- **A United Nations coordination office to enhance UN-Water's inter-agency mandate.** The addition of a coordination office to UN-Water's resources can strengthen the United Nations system's capacity to deliver results. Such a coordination office would serve the UN-Water inter-agency mechanism.





01_ The opportunity: Water and sanitation at a critical junction

1.1 Why this report matters now

With just seven years to go until the end of the United Nations Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), swift and purposeful action is needed to change course and accelerate progress on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

From 22 to 24 March 2023, over 10,000 participants from across society converged in New York – physically and virtually – for the first United Nations conference on water in 46 years. 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 (UN 2023 Water Conference) was co-hosted by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Tajikistan.

The conference brought together world leaders, civil society, business leaders, youth, scientists, academics, the United Nations system and others from across sectors including agriculture, energy, health, environment and water. The common goal was to urgently tackle the water crisis and set the world back on track to achieving SDG 6 (United Nations, 2023a).

At the end of the three-day conference, a new United Nations Water Action Agenda with over 800 commitments had "set sail" (United Nations, 2023b). The United Nations Secretary-General called for a "quantum leap in the capacity of Member States and the international community to recognize and act upon the vital importance of water to the world's sustainability and as a tool to foster peace and international cooperation" (United Nations, 2023c).

Looking ahead, pressing questions remain on how to translate these commitments into action and deliver water and sanitation for all – the promise of SDG 6:

- How can progress towards SDG 6 be accelerated?
- How can the United Nations system support follow-up of the conference, including implementation of the Water Action Agenda?
- How can water be elevated as a priority on the global political agenda?

These are the questions that this report aims to answer.

1.1.1 THE CHALLENGES

The first United Nations Water Conference (held in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977) warned about an impending water crisis if action was not taken (United Nations, 1978). The New York conference in 2023 acknowledged that the water crisis is already here, and that it is becoming worse.

Global water challenges comprise all freshwater-related matters. These include: surface water and groundwater resources; the sanitation cycle; the interface between fresh water and seawater; freshwater resources in terms of their quality, quantity, development, management, monitoring and use (i.e. domestic uses, agriculture and ecosystem requirements); disaster risk reduction; and climate-related water challenges (United Nations, n.d.a).

"Too little, too much, and too dirty water" has become the mantra for the global water crisis (Chen, 2018; Boyd, 2020; Global Commission on the Economics of Water, 2023):

- **Too little water** (due to drought, depletion of water resources, or lack of infrastructure and services) means people cannot get enough to

drink, wash or irrigate crops. Lakes and rivers can run dry – harming plants, fish and other wildlife, and eventually leading to desertification. Economic growth can be limited when there is insufficient water supply for agriculture, industry or urban development. Water shortages can also be a trigger for social tension and unrest within and among communities, and water disputes across international borders in the case of transboundary waters and aquifers.

- **Too much water** (from excessive rainfall, rapid melting of snow and ice, or rising sea levels, preventing drainage) means communities and ecosystems around the world are facing challenges. These include: loss of life and displacement; costly damage to homes, buildings and roads; polluted drinking water systems; spread of waterborne diseases related to overflowing sewerage; upsurges in disease-carrying mosquitos and pests; malnutrition and food insecurity; destruction of crops and livestock; flash floods; contaminated and eroded soils; landslides; and mudslides.

- **Too dirty or polluted water** (caused by accelerated urbanization, population growth, economic development, the quantity of domestic and industrial wastewater being generated and its overall pollution load) is increasing globally. Pollutants enter rivers, lakes and oceans, fertilizing blooms of algae that deplete oxygen, thus creating dead zones where little can survive. This further degrades freshwater biodiversity and species populations, and contaminates drinking water.

Many impacts of climate change are felt through water: more intense and frequent droughts, more extreme flooding, more erratic seasonal rainfall and accelerated melting of glaciers. These can have cascading effects on economies, ecosystems, biodiversity and societies. In addition, scientific evidence indicates the Earth's water cycle is changing, alongside continued human activities that aggravate the global water crisis (Van Dijk and others, 2022). The water emergency spans many levels – from local to national – crossing borders through transboundary rivers and aquifers, affecting everyone and every living thing.

This collective failure to address systemic risks related to water and to manage the most precious natural resource has calamitous consequences and future risks for people, the environment, economic growth and peace. In addition, the challenges are amplifying.

1.1.2 THE STAKES

At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, progress towards internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including SDG 6, is alarmingly off track. For most indicators, the current rate of progress is not fast enough to close the gap before 2030. In some regions and countries, for some indicators, progress is even relapsing.

With the growing complexity and intensity of water-related risks on the horizon, failing on water and sanitation undermines all three dimensions of sustainable development: society, economy and the environment. It also undermines human rights, peace and security. Lack of progress on SDG 6 and other water-related SDG targets can even threaten hard-won development gains in other areas.

Conversely, effectively managing water and sanitation is an essential solution to tackling major pressing global challenges like climate change, affordable and clean energy, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, disease pandemics and epidemics, disasters caused by natural hazards, conflict, extreme poverty and gender inequality. These are all priorities that governments and societies care about.

Water flows throughout the United Nations sustainable development agenda. SDG 6 is highly interlinked and synergistic with all other SDGs in the 2030 Agenda (see figure 1) (UN-Water, 2016). Accelerated progress on SDG 6 can act as a catalyst for progress on other SDGs, and vice versa. Progress on water and sanitation has a vital role in supporting the "entry points for transformation" identified by the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019* (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General, 2019) to achieve SDGs: human well-being and capabilities, sustainable and just economies, energy decarbonization with universal access, urban and peri-urban development, and global environmental commons.

There has been a vast disconnect between how important water is, and the action taken by governments and society to manage it sustainably. The UN 2023 Water Conference has offered a unique and timely opportunity to galvanize political and societal attention. Most importantly, it has provided tangible commitments for action to achieve the ultimate goal: to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

"Water is humanity's lifeblood. From the food we eat. To the ecosystems and biodiversity that enrich our world. To the prosperity that sustains nations. To the economic engines of agriculture, manufacturing and energy generation. To our health, hygiene and survival itself. Water is a human right — and a common development denominator to shape a better future."

António Guterres, Secretary-General, 22 March 2023 (United Nations, Secretary-General, 2023a)

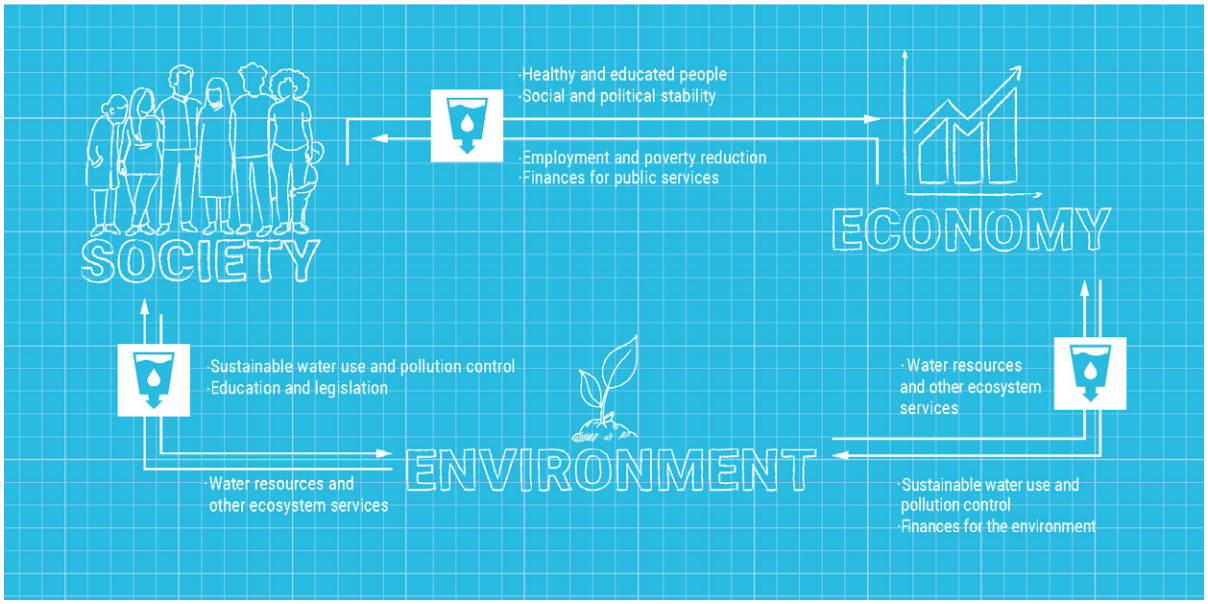


Figure 1. SDG 6 interlinks the three dimensions of sustainable development. Source: Adapted from UN-Water (2016)

1.2 Purpose and structure of this report

This SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023 provides a "blueprint" to accelerate progress on water and sanitation, including implementation of the Water Action Agenda commitments. As a blueprint, this report is a concise guide to delivering results. It offers actionable policy recommendations directed towards senior decision makers in Member States, other stakeholders and the United Nations system, to get the world on track to achieve SDG 6 by 2030.

Prepared by the UN-Water family of Members and Partners, the report provides a forward-looking collective vision for sustainable and resilient water and sanitation management in the second half of the 2030 Agenda period.

Why a blueprint?

A blueprint is a plan used by engineers to build a machine that works. Right now, the world community needs a blueprint to put the management of water on a sustainable course.

The report is structured as follows:

> **Chapter 1 – The opportunity: Water and sanitation at a critical junction**

- This first chapter summarizes the background and context for the report, why it matters now and the report structure.

> **Chapter 2 – The data: Where does the world stand at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda?**

- The second chapter overviews where water and sanitation currently stand in the global political agenda, including in the 2030 Agenda, the Water Action Decade, the UN 2023 Water Conference, the Decade of Action and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework (GAF).
- The chapter also summarizes progress towards SDG 6 targets at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda.

> **Chapter 3 – The blueprint: How to put SDG 6 progress on track**

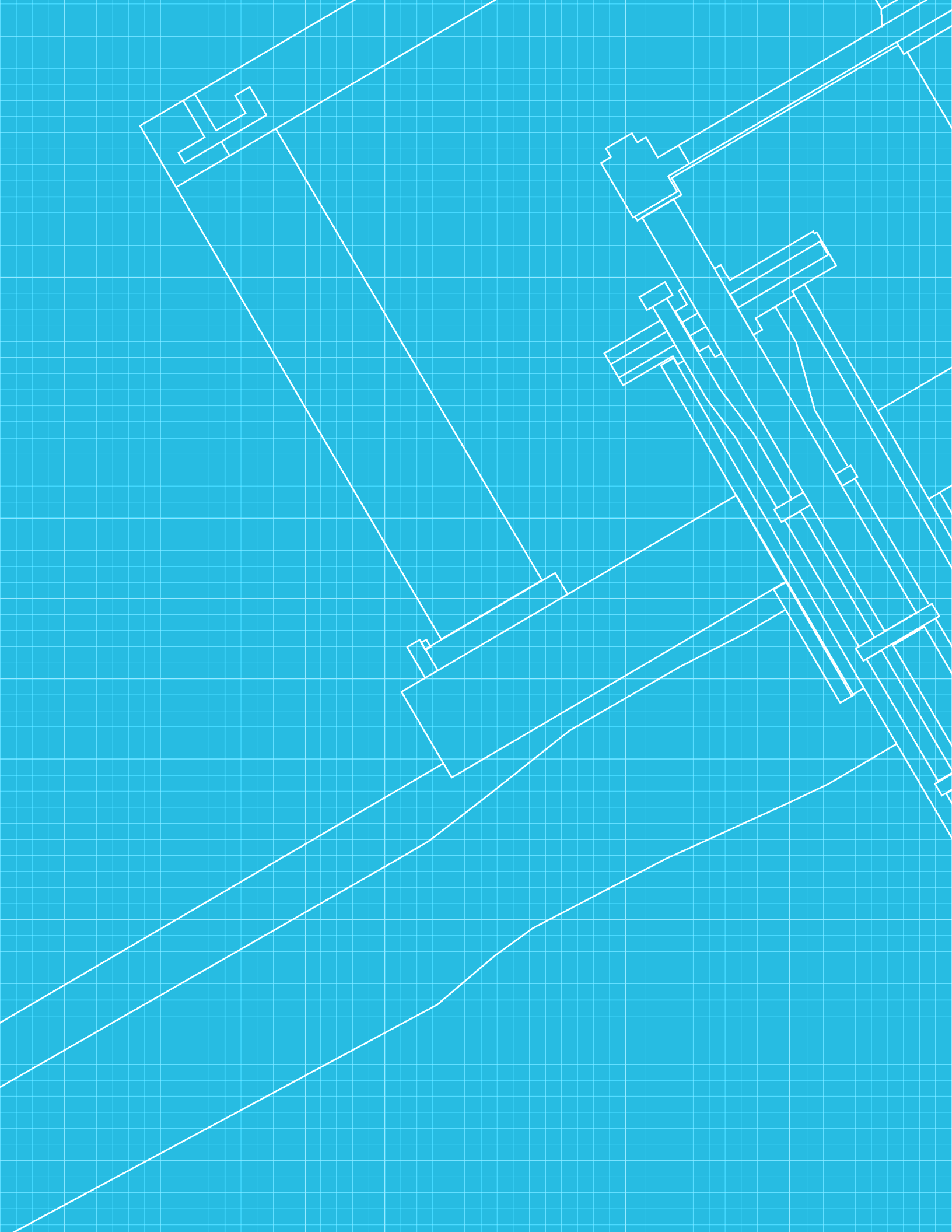
- The third chapter synthesizes UN-Water's collective vision for how to gain momentum for accelerating progress on SDG 6 and implementation of the Water Action Agenda.
- The chapter is organized with sections covering each of the five SDG 6 GAF "accelerators": financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation and governance.

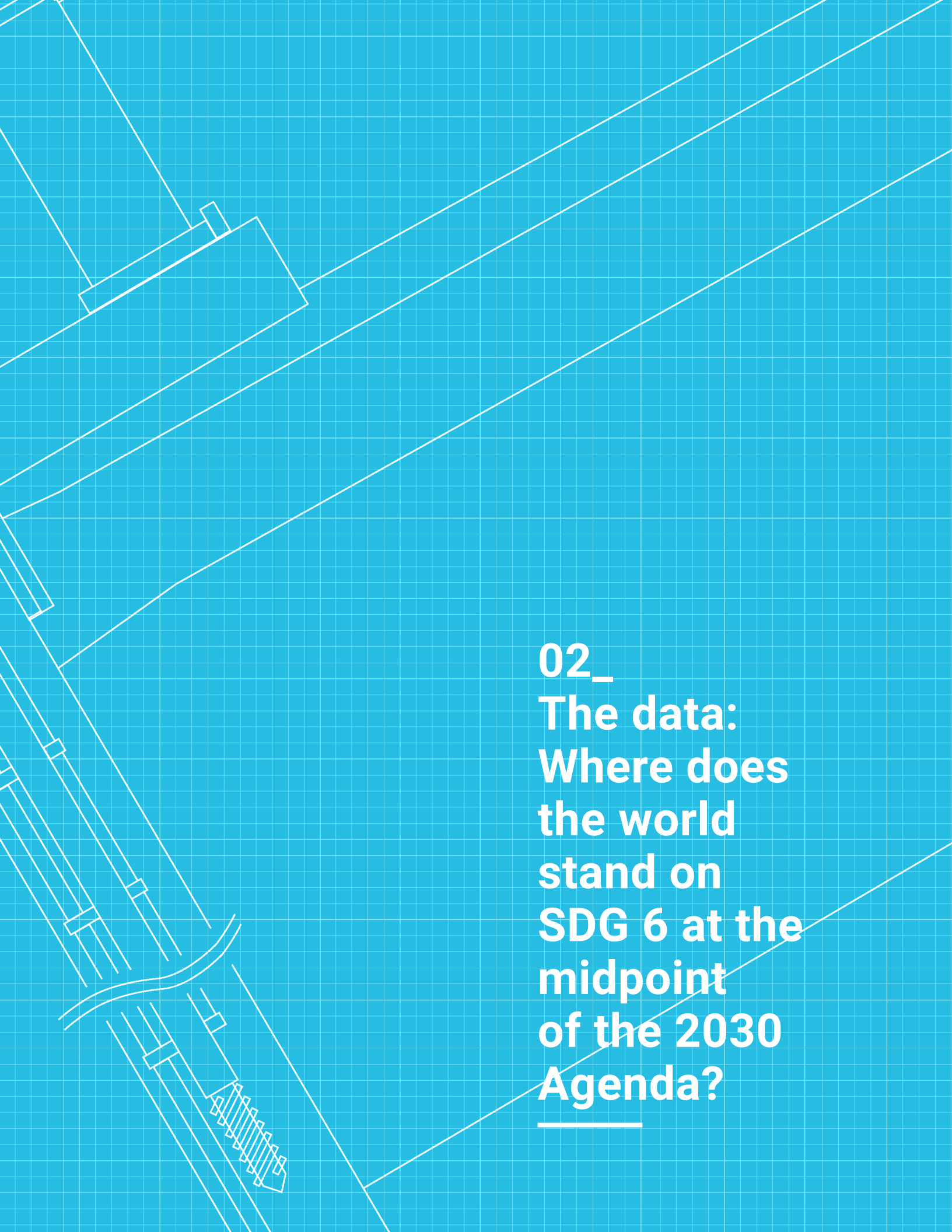
> **Chapter 4 – The system: How the United Nations can support SDG 6 acceleration**

- The fourth chapter focuses on the strategic response to the conference, including the Water Action Agenda, by the United Nations system.
- The chapter also looks forward, and discusses how different organs of the United Nations system and its partners can support SDG 6 acceleration at country, regional and global levels.

> **Chapter 5 – The message: Key findings and recommendations**

- This chapter summarizes the key messages and actionable policy recommendations directed towards senior decision makers in Member States, other stakeholders and the United Nations system on solutions to accelerate progress and actions required to put SDG 6 on track.





02_ The data: Where does the world stand on SDG 6 at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda?

> "Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all."
>
> **Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015)**

2.1 SDG 6 in context

2.1.1 SDG 6 AT A GLANCE

The United Nations General Assembly adopted SDG 6 as a dedicated water and sanitation goal at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. This elevated the importance of water as part of the United Nations sustainable development agenda (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015). This was the consequence of a concerted advocacy effort by Member States and engaged stakeholders for a broader spectrum of water and sanitation issues to be addressed in the 2030 Agenda.

By addressing the entire water cycle and striving for universal coverage of drinking water and sanitation, SDG 6 is far more comprehensive in scope and scale than previous water-related targets adopted by the United Nations. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), over the period 2000 to 2015, monitored only the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation through MDG target 7c (United Nations, n.d.b). The 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (United Nations, 2002) included a target to develop integrated water resources management (IWRM) plans, but they were never made part of MDGs.

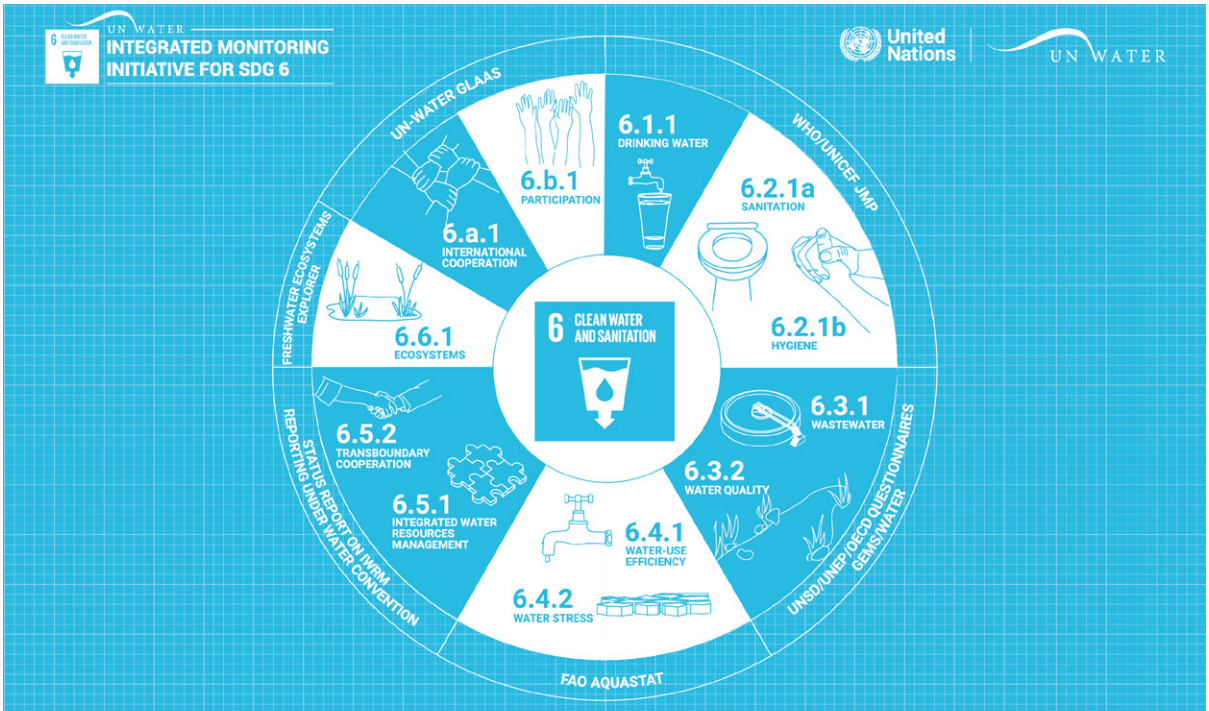
The eight global targets of SDG 6 include: drinking water (target 6.1), sanitation and hygiene (6.2), wastewater treatment and ambient water quality (6.3), water-use efficiency (WUE) and level of water stress (6.4), IWRM and transboundary water cooperation (6.5), water-related ecosystems (6.6), international water cooperation (6.a) and community participation (6.b). Twelve indicators measure the eight targets, as presented in figure 2.

2.1.2 WATER ACTION DECADE (2018–2028)

For successful implementation of SDG 6, Member States and the United Nations system must coordinate and respond effectively. To aid this, the General Assembly declared the period from 2018 to 2028 as the International Decade for Action, "Water for Sustainable Development" (Water Action Decade) in resolution 71/222. The goal of this Decade is to strengthen cooperation, partnership and capacity development towards achieving the ambitious 2030 Agenda moving away from silos and encouraging integration and alignment of global efforts. Beginning on World Water Day, 22 March 2018, and concluding on World Water Day 2028, the Decade will build upon the accomplishments of the previous Water for Life Decade from 2005 to 2015 (United Nations, General Assembly, 2017).

The *United Nations Secretary-General's Plan: Water Action Decade 2018-2028* laid out the following objectives of the Water Action Decade (United Nations, 2021a):

- Advance sustainable development.
- Energize implementation of existing programmes and projects.
- Mobilize action to achieve the 2030 Agenda.



TARGETS	INDICATORS	CUSTODIANS
6.1. Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.	**6.1.1** Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services.	WHO, UNICEF
6.2. 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.	**6.2.1** Proportion of population using (a) safely managed sanitation services and (b) a hand-washing facility with soap and water.	WHO, UNICEF
6.3. 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.	**6.3.1** Proportion of domestic and industrial wastewater flows safely treated.	WHO, UN-Habitat, UNSD
	6.3.2 Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality.	UNEP
6.4. 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.	**6.4.1** Change in water-use efficiency over time.	FAO
	6.4.2 Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources.	FAO
6.5. Implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate.	**6.5.1** Degree of integrated water resources management.	UNEP
	6.5.2 Proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation.	UNECE, UNESCO
6.6. Protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.	**6.6.1** Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time.	UNEP, Ramsar
6.a. 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.	**6.a.1** Amount of water- and sanitation-related official development assistance that is part of a government-coordinated spending plan.	WHO, OECD
6.b. Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.	**6.b.1** Proportion of local administrative units with established and operational policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management.	WHO, OECD

Figure 2. SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation

Note: AQUASTAT = FAO Global Information System on Water and Agriculture; FAO = Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; GEMS/Water = Global Environment Monitoring System for Water; GLAAS = Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water; IWRM = integrated water resources management; JMP = Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene; OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; Ramsar = Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat; UNECE = United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; UNEP = United Nations Environment Programme; UNESCO = United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; UN-Habitat = United Nations Human Settlements Programme; UNICEF = United Nations Children's Fund; UNSD = United Nations Statistics Division; WHO = World Health Organization.

The aim of the Decade is to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda by promoting a move away from silos and encouraging integration and alignment of global efforts.

At the halfway point of the Decade, a midterm review was carried out that was highlighted in a report by the Secretary-General (United Nations, General Assembly, 2022). The report recognized the achievements made during the first five years of the Decade, identified key actions and events, and revealed some valuable lessons learned. Box 1 features the global thematic campaigns that support the Decade's efforts.

However, the report also noted that progress towards achieving SDG 6 has been insufficient, and that increased cooperation and partnerships are needed. For the second half of the Decade, transformational actions are required to accelerate progress towards achieving internationally agreed water-related goals and targets. The review highlighted that the UN 2023 Water Conference will be an essential milestone to create momentum and accelerate progress (United Nations, General Assembly, 2022).

Box 1. Inspiring action for water and sanitation

Global thematic campaigns that are tailored for a fast-paced, high-volume communications context can quickly build public literacy and consensus around the importance of water and sanitation, while catalysing personal and political action.

UN-Water coordinates the global thematic campaigns for the annual United Nations international observances on fresh water and sanitation: World Water Day (22 March) and World Toilet Day (19 November). Every year, the campaigns focus on different aspects of the water cycle and the ways in which water and sanitation connect with other sectors. UN-Water Members and Partners propose the themes, in line with current challenges on the global agenda. The United Nations World Water Development Report (WWDR) is produced on the same topic and recommends policy direction to decision makers.

In addition to tens of thousands of activities organized by a wide variety of stakeholders, the campaigns also have an extensive reach on global digital platforms. Since 2016, the page views on the World Water Day website have more than doubled and the potential impressions on social media have grown from 1.1 billion in 2016 to 10.1 billion in 2023. The numbers for World Toilet Day are not as high, largely due to the topic not being discussed as much in the media and being shrouded in taboo in many countries.

THE UN 2023 WATER CONFERENCE

> **"The UN 2023 Water Conference in March must result in a bold Water Action Agenda that gives our world's lifeblood the commitment it deserves."**
>
> **António Guterres, Secretary-General (United Nations, n.d.c)**

The General Assembly passed resolution 73/226 in 2018 to implement the Water Action Decade objectives, which include SDG 6 and other water-related targets. This resolution called for the UN 2023 Water Conference (United Nations, General Assembly, 2019).

The co-hosts of the conference, the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Tajikistan, aimed to make it a turning point for the world. The vision for the conference was to foster comprehensive understanding

and appreciation of the value of water, and to encourage collective action towards achievement of the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, as outlined in the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2021b).

Among the many highlights of the conference, three are relevant to feature in the context of this report.

First is the Secretary-General's announcement on the consideration of the appointment of a Special Envoy for Water, which would help to elevate water in the United Nations system.

Second, the conference concluded with the creation of the Water Action Agenda. This is a collection of voluntary commitments designed to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 6 during the second halves of the Water Action Decade (2018–2028) and the 2030 Agenda (2015–2030). At the beginning of July 2023, the Water Action Agenda comprised over 800 commitments (United Nations, n.d.d), which also contribute to the United Nations SDG Actions Platform (UN DESA, n.d.). Box 2 presents a preliminary analysis of the Water Action Agenda voluntary commitments.

Third, the President of the General Assembly developed a summary of the proceedings that took place over the three days of the conference, which will feed into the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2023 (President of the General Assembly, 2023).

Box 2. Preliminary analysis of the Water Action Agenda voluntary commitments

Following the UN 2023 Water Conference, Charles Iceland and Caroline Black from the World Resources Institute examined over 800 voluntary commitments to tackle water crises globally. Their analysis explored the transformative potential of commitments and offered avenues for improvement for those lagging in promise. The points below reflect some of the findings from the analysis.

Finance: Twenty-six per cent of commitments identified a clear source of funding. Water investments are not as expensive as one might think and can yield significant economic benefits. A World Resources Institute study estimated that ensuring water security for all by 2030 could cost just over 1 per cent of global gross domestic product (Strong and others, 2020).

Quantifiable targets: Only 20 per cent of commitments detailed quantitative objectives, thus complicating success evaluation. These could include additional quantities of water made available, improved water quality or increased amount of protected/restored landscapes.

Climate change emphasis: Despite water being a critical facet of climate change impacts, only 24 per cent of commitments tackled this issue. Governments and others need to stop treating water and climate change as siloed issues.

Cooperation across borders and sectors: Only 13 per cent of commitments featured cooperation across borders or sectors, even though water issues inherently traverse these boundaries. It is time for leaders in government and business to treat water as a key geopolitical and economic issue.

Targeting agricultural and industrial water users: Approximately 12 per cent of plans target agriculture and 6 per cent target industry, despite them being the largest water consumers. The world cannot transform its water systems without focusing on its biggest water users.

2.1.3 THE DECADE OF ACTION: SDG 6 GLOBAL ACCELERATION FRAMEWORK (2020–2030)

Launched in 2020, as part of the Secretary-General's Decade of Action to deliver SDGs by 2030, SDG 6 GAF (UN-Water, 2020) mobilizes United Nations agencies, governments, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders. SDG 6 GAF is a unifying initiative that aims to deliver fast results, at an increased scale, towards the goal of ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030.

Through its four action pillars (engage, align, accelerate and account) and around five cross-cutting and interdependent accelerators (see Chapter 3), the international community can use SDG 6 GAF to catalyse broad stakeholder action by significantly improving support to countries to achieve SDG 6 on water and sanitation.

Examples of how SDG 6 GAF is being used in practice include the following:

- **Inter-agency initiatives.** To unify the international community's support to countries and accelerate progress on SDG 6, inter-agency initiatives of UN-Water Members and Partners include the Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-SDG6) (UN-Water, n.d.a), the SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative (UN-Water, n.d.b), the road map for the human rights to water and sanitation (United Nations, OHCHR, n.d.a), the Hand Hygiene for All Global initiative (WHO, n.d.a), the Water and Climate Coalition (Water and Climate Coalition, n.d.), the World Water Quality Alliance (UNEP, n.d.) and the national water roadmaps (FAO, 2022a).

- **Country engagement.** Country engagement (UN-Water, n.d.c) is at the core of SDG 6 GAF. Driven by demand from Member States, UN-Water supports United Nations resident coordinators (RCs) and United Nations country teams (UNCTs) through coordinated, integrated policy support to implement and accelerate SDG 6 by leveraging expertise and capacity from UN-Water Members and Partners available globally. This initiative demonstrates an operational model of United Nations development system reform in practice. Box 3 presents a summary of the country-level engagement pilot.

- **Commitments to action.** The United Nations records voluntary commitments and partnerships from a wide range of stakeholders in support of implementation of the 17 SDGs. These wide-ranging commitments can be seen on the SDG Actions Platform, hosted by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, n.d.). Since 2020, outreach related to SDG 6 GAF has promoted the registration of voluntary commitments through the platform. Subsequently, the Water Action Agenda commitments have been added to this platform, and there are now over 1,700 voluntary commitments registered for SDG 6.

- **Follow-up mechanism.** To take stock of progress on SDG 6 GAF, an annual high-level and multi-stakeholder SDG 6 Special Event is organized at HLPF. Following the launch of SDG 6 GAF, annual SDG 6 Special Events were organized during HLPF in 2021 (UN-Water, 2021a) (virtual) and 2022 (UN-Water, 2022). In 2023, after the UN 2023 Water Conference, the event is now to be called the SDG 6 Water Action Agenda Special Event.

SDG 6 GAF has provided an organizing framework for the international community to work together "as one" on the implementation of SDG 6. The SDG 6 GAF structure was used to organize preparatory meetings for the UN 2023 Water Conference, and for the concept notes for the interactive dialogues.

Some UN-Water Members and Partners have also adopted SDG 6 GAF in their strategic plans, sector strategies and programming documents.

The operationalization of SDG 6 GAF has marked an important shift towards a more coordinated, integrated approach by UN-Water Members and Partners to deliver results together. There will be greater engagement not only within United Nations entities and partner organizations, but also across all the levels of the United Nations development system.

Box 3. UN-Water country-level coordination

UN-Water initiated a country-level engagement pilot in 2019 in support of the reinvigorated resident coordinator (RC) system and the new generation of United Nations country teams (UNCTs). The objective was to provide integrated policy support to RCs and UNCTs by connecting and deploying the global expertise of UN-Water Members and Partners to countries on demand.

The UN-Water Task Force on Country Level Engagement conducted the pilot during 2020 and 2021. It was co-coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), together with the United Nations Development Coordination Office (DCO). The support offered by UN-Water consisted of access to data and expertise, connection to technical support, and global water-related campaigns and processes. Initial countries included Bahrain, Costa Rica, Guinea, India, Madagascar, Mexico, Nepal, Sao Tome and Principe, and United Arab Emirates, as well as other engagements in Central Asia, Latin America and South Caucasus.

The pilot findings included lessons learned about country needs, levels of country coordination, entry points for strengthened country coordination, and more effective communication among global, regional and country levels. For example, while coordination around water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) often exists within UNCTs, there are opportunities to strengthen coordination across SDG 6 targets, as well other water-related SDG targets, to enable the United Nations to provide integrated and effective support to countries. The United Nations Reform enables UN-Water to engage and add value at the country level, with the RC system as the natural counterpart to support governments to implement plans and commitments on water and sanitation. One of the next activities of the Task Force includes collaboration around the National Water Roadmap and the Global Dialogue on Water Tenure.

2.1.4 SDG 6 MONITORING – FROM BASELINES TO TREND LINES

Member States committed to collecting data on SDG global indicators when they adopted the SDG global targets. Custodian agencies were designated to maintain global databases to track progress and ensure accountability.

UN-Water established IMI-SDG6 (UN-Water, n.d.a) at the beginning of the 2030 Agenda period, building on existing efforts such as the World Health Organization (WHO)/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Global Environment Monitoring System for Water, the FAO Global Information System on Water and Agriculture, and the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) implemented by WHO.

By bringing together the United Nations organizations that are custodians of the SDG 6 global indicators, IMI-SDG6 enables synergies across United Nations organizations, as well as coordination of methodologies and requests for data. This leads to more efficient outreach, reduced reporting burden and consolidated global progress reporting on SDG 6. At the national level,

IMI-SDG6 also promotes intersectoral collaboration and consolidation of existing capacities and data across organizations, to strengthen countries' national and subnational monitoring systems.

Since adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, there have been at least two rounds of global data compilation for all of the 12 SDG 6 indicators. The first SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation (UN-Water, 2018a) was published to inform discussions among Member States during HLPF in July 2018. The main focus was the baseline status and trends of the global indicators, and recommendations for enabling and accelerating progress.

Following the second round of global data compilation, the *Summary Progress Update 2021: SDG 6 — Water and Sanitation for All* (UN-Water, 2021b) provided an update on the status and trend lines, as well as in-depth progress reports on each SDG 6 indicator. Sufficient country data were available to produce trend lines for targets 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.a and 6.b, and baselines for target 6.6. The 2023 data drive for SDG 6 (UN-Water, 2023a) is under way, with the aim of issuing the next progress update in August 2024. The latest data for each SDG 6 indicator are available on the SDG 6 data portal (UN-Water, n.d.d). Box 4 presents lessons learned on monitoring SDG 6.

Box 4. Lessons learned on monitoring SDG 6 at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda

Member States' capacities to report on the SDG 6 global indicators have notably improved over the last eight years. The average United Nations Member State now has data for around two thirds of the 12 SDG 6 global indicators.* This growth has been achieved through increased awareness, uptake and institutionalization of the global indicators at the national level, supported by standardized methodologies and capacity-development tools and activities led by the United Nations custodian agencies.

However, Member States remain at different stages of maturity in their ability to collect, analyse and use SDG 6 data. Especially in low- and middle-income countries, the reporting is often based on few data points, in terms of geographical reach and frequency of measurement. Low technical capacity and fewer human and financial resources remain key challenges, including lack of monitoring infrastructure and data management systems. This particularly affects the indicators reliant on in situ measurements.

To increase the relevance of the global indicators for national and subnational use, future work will develop and promote means for data disaggregation and contextualization. It will continue to communicate the need for complementary national and subnational indicators to inform domestic policy and decision-making processes. Strengthening country monitoring systems will also contribute to closing national, regional and global data gaps and enable trend analysis.

* The average number of indicators reported on by United Nations Member States has risen from 0 in 2015 to 4.7 by the end of 2018 and 8.5 by the end of 2022.

2.2 SDG 6 progress and trends at the halfway milestone

The following section focuses on SDG 6 and its eight targets that are measured by 12 indicators. There are additional water-related targets across other SDGs, highlighting the interconnected nature of water across the sustainable development agenda (UN-Water, 2016). Figure 3 shows the progress on SDG 6 indicators as of July 2023, based on the latest available data.

2.2.1 PROGRESS ON SDG 6 TARGETS

DRINKING WATER

Target 6.1: By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all

Nearly 700 million people have gained access to safely managed drinking water services since 2015. Globally, 73 per cent (or nearly three out of four people) used safely managed drinking water services in 2022. Therefore, 2.2 billion people still lacked drinking water services that were accessible on premises, available when needed and free from contamination. In 2022, 32 countries had achieved universal access to safely managed drinking water services, and a further 20 countries were on track to achieve universal access by 2030 (UNICEF and WHO, forthcoming).

In rural areas, the number of people lacking safely managed drinking water decreased from 1.5 billion in 2015 to 1.3 billion in 2022. However, in urban areas, over the same period, it increased from 784 million to 857 million, thus highlighting the challenge of keeping up with urban growth (UNICEF and WHO, forthcoming).

Coverage has increased in most SDG regions. But, it has stagnated in Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean. No region is on track to achieve universal coverage by 2030. At current rates of progress, the world will reach only 77 per cent coverage by 2030, leaving 2 billion people without safely managed services. Achieving universal access to safely managed drinking water by 2030 will require on average a **sixfold increase in current rates of progress** (by 14 times in least developed countries and 19 times in fragile contexts). This also includes a substantial increase in current levels of investment (UNICEF and WHO, forthcoming).

In 2022, 120 Member States, representing 51 per cent of the world's population, had national estimates for indicator 6.1.1 on the proportion of the population using safely managed drinking water services.[1]

SANITATION AND HYGIENE

Target 6.2: 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

As of 2022, 57 per cent of the world's population used a safely managed sanitation service. Since 2015, 902 million people have gained access to safely managed sanitation. Approximately 1.5 billion people still lacked even basic sanitation services in 2022 – of which two out of three people lived in rural areas, and 419 million people still practised open defecation. In 2022, 9 countries had achieved universal access to safely managed services, and a further 21 countries were on track to achieve universal access by 2030 (UNICEF and WHO, forthcoming).

At the current rates of progress, the world will reach only 65 per cent coverage by 2030, leaving 3 billion people without safely managed

1 There are neither agreed definitions of "affordability" nor sufficient data for some of the proposed metrics of affordability, to produce global or even national comparable statistics on affordability (UNICEF and WHO, 2021).

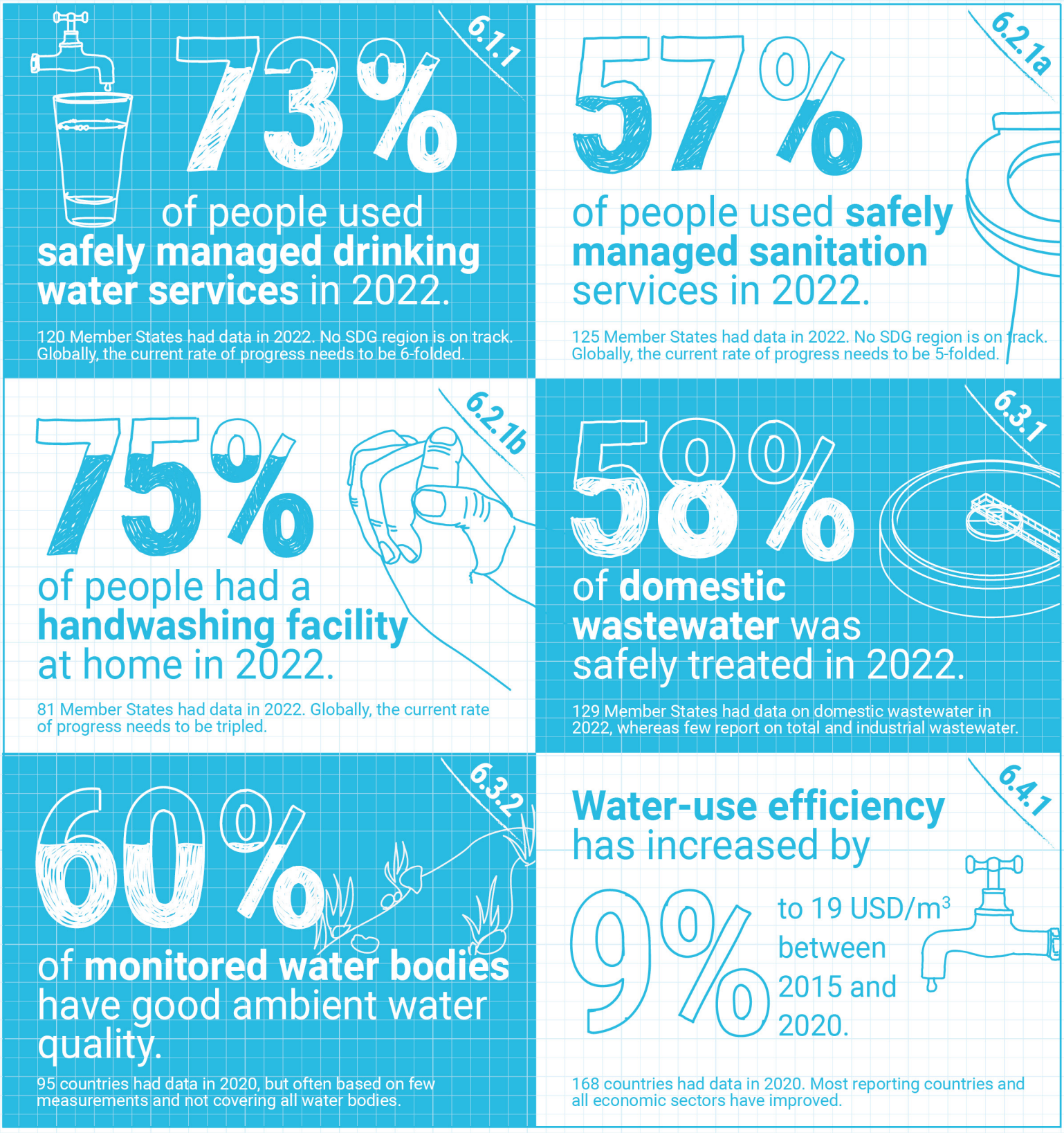
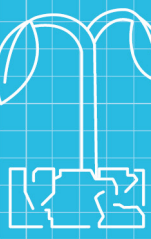


Figure 3. Progress against SDG 6 indicators

6.4.2

18%



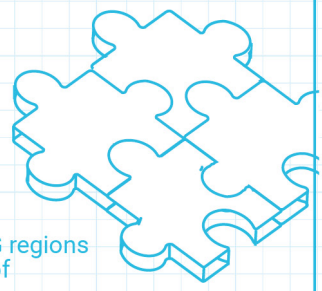
of **available water resources** are being withdrawn, with extreme disparities.

178 countries had data in 2020. Extremely high water stress within North America and Western Asia regions.

6.5.1

The global average level of **integrated water resources management** implementation is

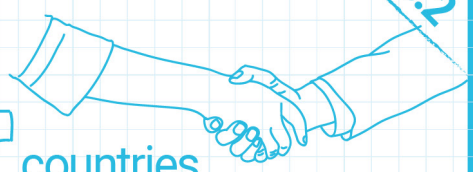
54%



: 186 countries had data in 2020. 5 SDG regions are off track. Globally, the current rate of progress needs to be doubled.

6.5.2

24



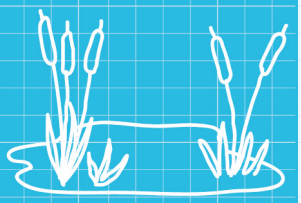
countries have all their **transboundary basin area** covered by operational arrangements.

102 countries had data in 2020, of 153 that share transboundary waters. Only North America and Europe is on track.

6.6.1

There are high surface water extent changes in

21%



of water basins.

185 countries had data in 2020. All SDG regions are affected.

6.a.1

Water- and sanitation-related official development assistance has decreased by

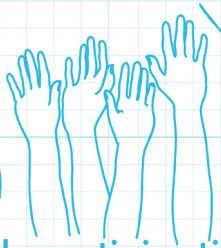
15%

to US$7.8 billion between 2015 and 2021.

Data from 144 countries that are eligible for official development aid. Increases for WASH and decreases for other water sectors.

6.b.1

25%



of countries report high participation by communities in **planning and management for rural drinking-water and water resources management**.

117 countries had data in 2021. Six of 10 countries have less than 50% of financial resources needed.

sanitation services. Achieving universal access to safely managed sanitation by 2030 will require on average a **fivefold increase in current rates of progress** (by 16 times in least developed countries and 15 times in fragile contexts). The trend line of progress is positive across all regions with estimates, with acceleration most prominent in Central and Southern Asia, and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia.

On a positive note, the world is on track to eliminate open defecation in 2029. In 2022, 125 Member States, representing 86 per cent of the world's population, reported on indicator 6.2.1a on the proportion of the population using safely managed sanitation services (UNICEF and WHO, forthcoming).

As of 2022, 75 per cent of the world's population – three out of four people – had a handwashing facility with soap and water available at home. In the same year, nearly 2 billion people – a quarter of the world's population – still lacked a basic handwashing facility with soap and water at home. Among the countries with trend data available, six had already achieved universal (> 99 per cent) access to basic services, and another five were on track to reach universal access by 2030 (UNICEF and WHO, forthcoming).

At the current rates of progress, the world will reach only 84 per cent coverage by 2030. This will leave 1.4 billion people without basic hygiene services. Achieving universal access to basic hygiene services by 2030 will require on average a **tripling of current rates of progress** (by 27 times in least developed countries and 18 times in fragile contexts).

In 2022, 81 Member States, representing 64 per cent of the world's population, reported on indicator 6.2.1b on the proportion of the population using a hand-washing facility with soap and water. Regional estimates were available for only four SDG regions in 2022, due to limited data (UNICEF and WHO, forthcoming).

WASTEWATER AND AMBIENT WATER QUALITY

Target 6.3: 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

Untreated wastewater is a major source of pollution to drinking water and ecosystems. There are insufficient data reported by governments to international databases to assess the global status of total wastewater flows comprising domestic and industrial wastewater safely treated in compliance with national or local standards.

Globally, in 2022, only 58 per cent of all wastewater flows generated by households were safely treated before being released into the environment (UN-Water, n.d.e). This represents a slight increase from the previous global update (UN-Habitat and WHO, 2021), which found 56 per cent of domestic wastewater to be safely treated in 2020. Wide disparities were found among the regional proportions of household wastewater safely treated in 2022 (ranging from 24 per cent in Central and Southern Asia to 86 per cent in Europe and North America), indicating that progress remains uneven across the world. For the domestic wastewater component, estimates were available for 2022 from 129 Member States, representing 89 per cent of the world's population, on the proportion of safely treated domestic wastewater flow component of indicator 6.3.1 (UN-Water, n.d.e).

Approximately 60 per cent (UN-Water, n.d.f) of the world's monitored water bodies has good ambient water quality, as per national and/or subnational water quality standards. These standards are based

on measurements of five water quality parameters: dissolved oxygen, electrical conductivity, nitrogen, phosphorus and pH. Nineteen of the 49 countries reporting in 2017 and 2020 were on track to improve water quality. Nutrients from untreated wastewater effluent and agricultural run-off remain the greatest threat to freshwater ecosystems.

Of the 89 countries with data in 2020, only 52 had information about groundwater quality. This is problematic because groundwater often represents the largest share of fresh water in a country (UN-Water, 2021b). In 2020, 96 countries, representing only 35 per cent of the world's population, have reported on indicator 6.3.2 on the proportion of water bodies with good ambient water quality (UN-Water, n.d.f).

A clear message evident from the 2017 and 2020 data drives is that the capacity to monitor ambient water quality is limited in low-income countries. Water quality data are not routinely collected in many of these countries, meaning that over **3 billion people** could be at risk because the health status of their freshwater ecosystems is unknown (UNEP, 2021a).

WATER-USE EFFICIENCY AND LEVEL OF WATER STRESS

Target 6.4: 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

Increased WUE results in more sustainable food systems, including in food production, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal; industrial systems and energy saving. Increasing water efficiency over time means decoupling a country's economic growth from its water use.

The change in WUE over time, indicator 6.4.1, rose from $\$17.4/m^3$ in 2015 to $\$18.9/m^3$ in 2020. This represents a 9 per cent efficiency increase. Around 57 per cent of countries presented a WUE equivalent to $\$20/m^3$ or less in 2020, compared to 58 per cent in 2015. However, global values hide regional differences. Central and Southern Asia, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and Oceania show the highest growth rates in WUE from 2015 to 2020, while Latin America and the Caribbean shows a decrease in WUE. In 2020, estimates for WUE ranged from below $\$3/m^3$ in economies that depend largely on agriculture to over $\$50/m^3$ in highly industrialized, service-based economies (FAO, 2022b).

All economic sectors have seen an increase in their WUE since 2015. In 2020, the mining, industry, manufacturing, electricity and constructions sector had a WUE equivalent to $\$32.08/m^3$, the services sector had $\$104.65/m^3$ and the agriculture sector had $\$0.59/m^3$. WUE in agriculture has had the greatest increase (20 per cent) from 2015, compared to the mining, industry, manufacturing, electricity and constructions sector (13 per cent) and services sector (0.3 per cent) (UN-Water, 2019a). Accelerated efforts are especially needed in irrigated agriculture, the most water-demanding economic sector (UN-Water, 2021c).

An estimated 18 per cent of the world's total renewable freshwater resources was withdrawn in 2020, after taking into account environmental flow requirements (FAO, 2022b). When a territory withdraws 25 per cent or more of its renewable freshwater resources, it is said to be "water stressed".[2] Therefore, the world as a whole is not considered to be water stressed. However, this global figure hides regional, national and subnational variations. Additional data disaggregation by major basins shows that countries that may appear less water stressed

2 Five classes have been identified to signal different levels of stress severity: < 25 per cent indicates no stress, 25–50 per cent indicates low stress, 50–75 per cent indicates medium stress, 75–100 per cent indicates high stress and >100 per cent indicates critical stress (UN DESA, 2023a). The level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources is the ratio between total fresh water withdrawn by all major sectors and total renewable freshwater resources, after taking into account environmental flow requirements (UN DESA, 2023a).

can include much more stressed basins. Since many of these basins are shared between two or more countries, this also shows the need for transboundary cooperation on water resources management, as assessed by SDG indicator 6.5.2 (FAO and UN-Water, 2021).

The proportion of global freshwater withdrawals to renewable freshwater resources available, indicator 6.4.2, increased by about 1 per cent from 2015 to 2020. This indicates a rise in the level of global water stress. In 2020, at a subregional level, Southern Asia and Central Asia had high levels of water stress and Northern Africa had critical water stress. At the regional level, the situation in Northern Africa and Western Asia is particularly concerning since it registered an 18 per cent increase in water stress levels from 2015 to 2020 (FAO, 2022b).

It is estimated that **2.4 billion people lived in water-stressed countries** (level of water stress equal to or greater than 50 per cent) in 2020, of which almost 800 million lived in high and critically high water-stressed countries (level of water stress equal to or greater than 75 per cent) (FAO, 2022b).

At the global level, agriculture is the dominant sector in terms of freshwater withdrawals, representing 72 per cent of the total freshwater water withdrawals, followed by the mining and quarrying; manufacturing; electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply; and constructions sector with 15 per cent and the services sector, including municipalities for households, with 13 per cent of total freshwater withdrawals (FAO, 2023).

INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND TRANSBOUNDARY WATER COOPERATION

Target 6.5: By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate

Addressing the complexity of competing and increasing demands on water resources requires coordinated action across all sectors and at all levels. Implementation of IWRM is a way to balance these competing demands without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems, and without increasing risks to the environment and people. This calls for implementation of coordinated policy and regulatory frameworks, sharing of data and information within and among countries, inclusive stakeholder participation in water resources management, and sustainable financing for these processes in all countries. Between 2017 and 2020, 186 countries, representing 99 per cent of the world's population, reported on indicator 6.5.1 on IWRM implementation (UN-Water, n.d.g).

The world is not on track to achieve SDG indicator 6.5.1 by 2030 (91–100 per cent or a very high degree of IWRM implementation). The global average degree of IWRM implementation in 2020 was 54 per cent (UNEP, 2021b), which was a moderate increase from 49 per cent in 2017 (UNEP, 2018). IWRM implementation **urgently needs to double current rates of progress** to achieve the global target by 2030.

At the regional level, significant efforts to accelerate IWRM implementation are needed in Central and Southern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa. These regions have made limited progress

and are lagging behind other regions. Only 44 countries have achieved a high or very high degree of IWRM implementation. At the current rates of implementation progress, at least 107 countries will not achieve the target by 2030.

Transboundary waters account for 60 per cent of the world's freshwater flows, and 153 countries have territory within at least 1 of the 310 transboundary river and lake basins (Oregon State University, 2018) and the inventoried 468 transboundary aquifer systems (International Groundwater Resources Assessment Centre, 2021; UNECE and UNESCO, 2021).

On the positive side, 129 countries (out of 153) have reported on SDG indicator 6.5.2 in 2017 and/or 2020 (UN-Water, n.d.h). However, the results show a need to accelerate transboundary cooperation: out of 153 countries that share transboundary waters, only 24 countries reported that all the rivers, lakes and aquifers they share are covered by operational arrangements for cooperation. Such arrangements are important instruments to prevent or manage conflicts and to promote regional integration and sustainable development. An additional 22 countries have high levels of cooperation. Europe and North America, and sub-Saharan Africa are the most advanced SDG regions in terms of transboundary water cooperation (UN-Water, 2021b). Progress in Latin America and the Caribbean, all Asian subregions and, more generally, for transboundary aquifers is significantly lagging behind.

WATER-RELATED ECOSYSTEMS

Target 6.6: By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes

The extent of surface water available in **one fifth of the world's rivers basins** changed significantly between 2015 and 2020, compared to a 20-year reference period (UN-Water, 2021b). Some river basins are experiencing rapid increases in their surface-water area due to flooding and a growth in reservoirs and newly inundated land. Others are experiencing rapid declines due to the drying up of lakes, reservoirs, wetlands, floodplains and seasonal water bodies.

Decreasing permanent water trends are most observable in Australia and sub-Saharan Africa, with increasing trends primarily found in Central, Eastern and Southern Asia and Northern Africa. Europe and North America (excluding Greenland and the United States of America) has the fewest basins with significant changes (UNEP, 2021c).

Additionally, coastal and inland wetlands are experiencing ongoing loss, with more than 80 per cent of wetlands estimated to have been lost since the pre-industrial era. Only 10–12 million km2 is estimated to remain. The area covered by coastal mangroves has also declined globally, by 4 per cent since 1996 (UN-Water, 2021b).

While target 6.6, with an end date of 2020, has not been met, monitoring and reporting of indicator 6.6.1 on the change in the extent of water-related ecosystems will continue towards its eventual achievement.

2.2.2 PROGRESS ON MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION TARGETS FOR SDG 6

Means of implementation targets have been included within each SDG to monitor an "interdependent mix of financial resources, technology development and transfer, capacity-building, inclusive and equitable globalization and trade, regional integration, as well as the creation of a national enabling environment required to implement the new sustainable development agenda" (UN DESA, 2014).

SDG 6 includes two means of implementation targets: 6a on international cooperation and 6b on community participation.

INTERNATIONAL WATER COOPERATION

Target 6.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

Indicator 6.a.1 tracks the amount of water- and sanitation-related official development assistance (ODA) included in a government-coordinated spending plan. Overall ODA increased from $191 billion in 2015 to $235 billion in 2021. However, ODA for water showed a decreasing trend over the same period, with commitments falling by 12 per cent to $9.8 billion, and with ODA disbursement for water decreasing by 15 per cent to $8.1 billion (OECD, n.d.).

Furthermore, most SDG regions, except Central and Southern Asia and Oceania, have had a decline in the amount of ODA for water since 2015. The largest decline in ODA for water has been for Northern Africa and Western Asia, where ODA for water fell from $2.2 billion in 2015 to $1.4 billion in 2021. Also, sub-Saharan Africa, which receives nearly one third of ODA for water, experienced a 7 per cent decline in ODA for water from 2015 to 2021. However, positively, ODA to the water sector for least developed countries has increased by 27 per cent since 2015, to $2.8 billion in 2021 (OECD, n.d.).

Water- and sanitation-related ODA includes water policy and governance, water supply, sanitation, water resources conservation, river basins development, waste management/ disposal, education and training, agricultural water resources and hydroelectric power. Water supply and sanitation comprises most ODA for the water sector at 81 per cent, compared with 6 per cent for hydroelectric power plants and 12 per cent for agricultural water resources (OECD, n.d.). Overall, nearly one third of countries have reported that donor funds are poorly aligned with national water sector plans. This poor alignment was reported in almost half of low-income countries (OECD, n.d.).

Aid commitments for water supply and sanitation fell by more than 13 per cent from 2017 to 2021, while total aid commitments increased by 13 per cent over the same period. In 2017, water supply and sanitation were ranked eighth among 42 sectors in terms of aid commitments. In 2021, the ranking dropped to eleventh among all sectors (OECD, n.d.). This decline may reflect a gradual de-prioritization of water and sanitation aid compared with other sectors among donors.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Target 6.b: Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management

In the GLAAS 2021/2022 cycle, over 85 per cent of countries (105 of 123 responding) had participation procedures defined in laws or policies in rural drinking water and water resources management. However, less than a quarter of countries (29 of 117 responding) reported high or very high participation of communities in planning and management processes for rural drinking water and water resources management (WHO, n.d.b).

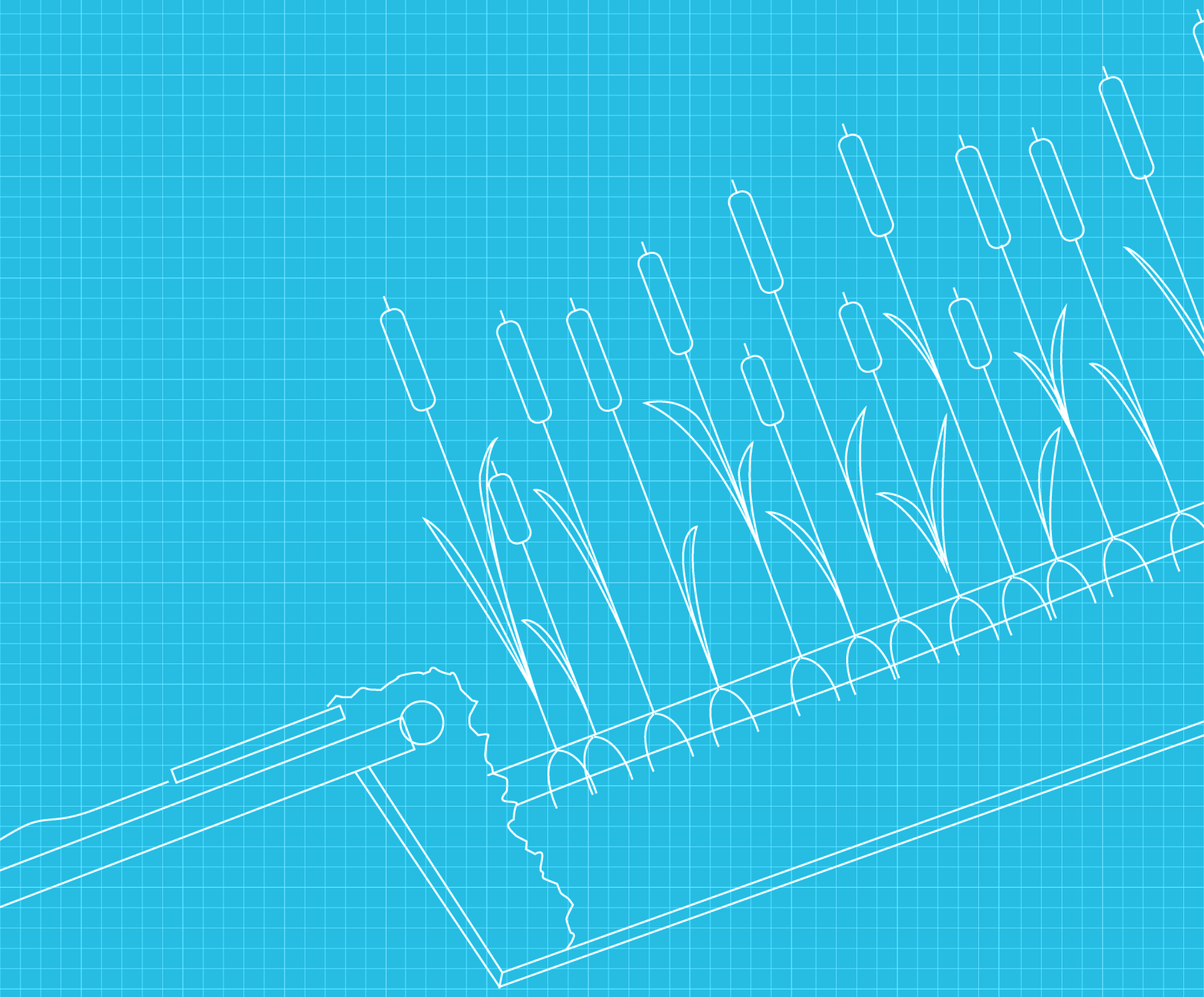
The implementation of participation procedures under SDG 6 is limited by a lack of financial and human resources. Only 18 of 113 of GLAAS responding countries indicated they

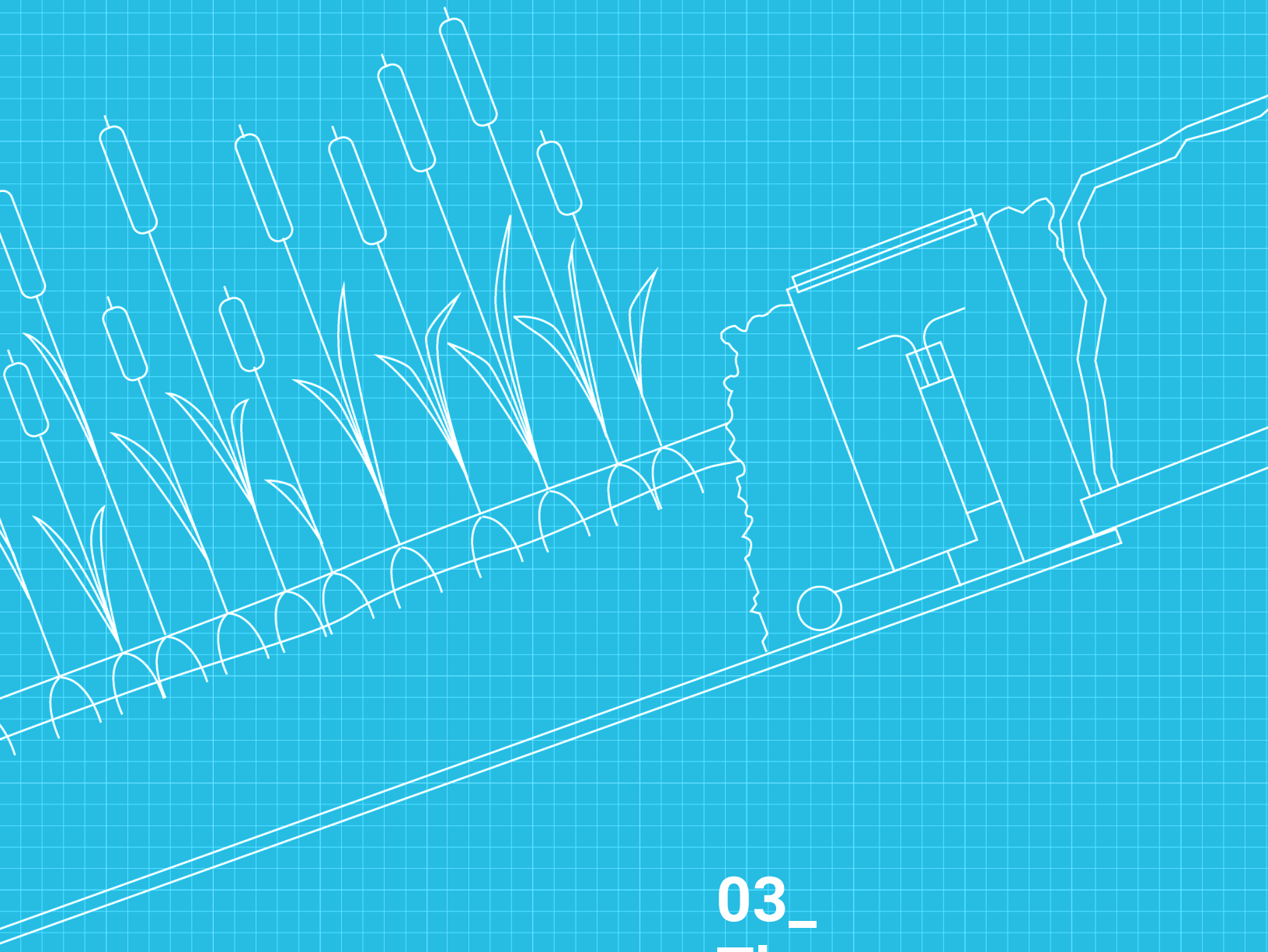
had over 75 per cent of the financial resources needed to support participation of users and communities for rural drinking water and sanitation (WHO, n.d.b). Results for water resources management are similar to those for drinking water and sanitation. The lower the income level of the country, the less likely that sufficient financial resources are in place. This can increase vulnerability and decrease the coping capacity to address water-related risks.

Rural populations in high-income countries are more likely to have regular opportunities for public engagement, access to public information, and mechanisms to receive and resolve conflicts than those in lower-income countries. Fewer than 15 per cent of low-income countries reported that a majority of their rural populations have opportunities for participation (WHO, n.d.b).

Inclusive participation, with special attention to involve people at risk, is vital to ensure sustainable solutions for all aspects of SDG 6; provide formal feedback systems and mechanisms to reduce conflicts and disputes among users; contribute to wider reductions in inequality within and among countries, including gender inequality; and capitalize on knowledge from Indigenous communities. Since 2013, 146 countries have reported on community participation to inform indicator 6.b.1 on the proportion of local administration units with established and operational policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management (WHO, n.d.b).

In conclusion, since the first SDG 6 synthesis report was published in 2018, it has been well documented that progress towards SDG 6 targets is significantly off track. Now, at the midpoint to 2030, progress towards SDG 6 continues to be well below the pace needed to meet the targets by 2030. With only seven years remaining, the pace of progress will need to dramatically increase to close the global gaps on all SDG 6 targets.





03_ The blueprint: How to put SDG 6 progress on track

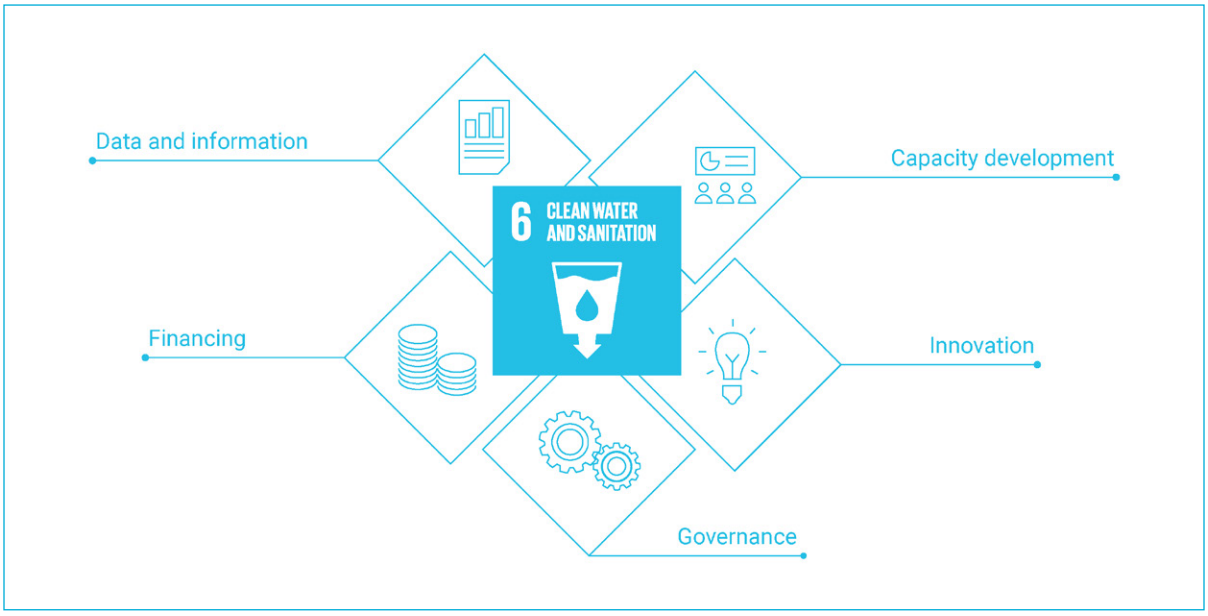


Figure 4. SDG 6 GAF accelerators. Source: UN-Water (2020)

This chapter offers blueprints to accelerate progress on SDG 6. They follow the SDG 6 GAF (UN-Water, 2020), which was launched in 2020 as part of the Secretary-General's Decade of Action to deliver SDGs by 2030.

The blueprints below are laid out according to the five SDG 6 GAF accelerators (figure 4), with each segment presenting: (a) challenges to accelerating progress in these areas and (b) possible pathways to accelerating progress on SDG 6 through these themes.

3.1 Blueprint for financing

3.1.1 MAJOR CHALLENGES TO ACCELERATING PROGRESS ON FINANCING

The water sector requires a considerable amount of financing, with estimates ranging from $182 billion to $664 billion annually (Rozenbery and Fay, 2019). This gap includes various areas such as water supply and sanitation ($116 billion to $229 billion per year), flood protection ($23 billion to $335 billion per year) and irrigation ($43 billion to $100 billion per year), as well as funding for the implementation of water resources management. Estimates indicate that to achieve SDG 6, over $1 trillion will be needed per year (Strong and others, 2020).

The water sector provides public and private benefits. However, many of these benefits cannot be easily monetized, thus limiting revenue streams from investments. Water resources and their benefits are often undervalued, leading to a lack of well-prepared bankable projects and sustainable financing models. The development of sustainable financing models is hindered by a weak enabling environment for investment. Additionally, there is a mismatch between the needs of the supply and demand sides of finance in the water sector, with water infrastructure requiring a high initial investment and a long payback period that does not align with the short-term horizons preferred by commercial investors. The small-scale and fragmented nature of water-related investments leads to high transaction costs. The presence of

structural and operational inefficiencies creates obstacles in tapping into available funding and optimally utilizing existing resources. Furthermore, limited data and analytical tools to assess complex water-related investments, combined with a lack of sector knowledge among financiers and investors, pose challenges for the water sector (OECD, 2022).

While ODA still plays a crucial role in development, its traditional structure may limit its potential impact by not allowing funds to be invested in long-term, strategic and systemic improvements. For instance, in improving governance, strengthening institutions, enhancing regulatory capacity or fostering a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. These are all long-term, strategic initiatives that can significantly affect a country's development trajectory, but they may not have immediate, tangible outputs that fit into the typical ODA project framework.

The water community faces a crucial challenge in ensuring development, climate and biodiversity finances cater to water requirements. While water affordability is crucial, it is unsustainable to continue with high wastage patterns. There is a need to provide incentives to bring about a change in how water is valued (United Nations, 2023d).

These challenges exacerbate already complex situations in transboundary basins. Financing transboundary water cooperation poses several challenges due to a perception that such projects are high risk, or because the associated benefits are not well understood (UNECE, 2021). This lack of funding is recognized at the transboundary level, where most countries report having insufficient resources to advance water cooperation (UNEP, 2021b).

3.1.2 PATHWAYS TO ACCELERATION

It is time to change the approach to financing water and sanitation. Financing is not solely about increasing funding – it also requires utilizing existing funds in a more efficient and effective manner. Instead of focusing solely on bankable projects, priority is needed for creating the necessary enabling conditions to attract investments, and for using grants to establish water and sanitation solutions that can generate at least some of their own financing needs. Successful approaches should be replicated and scaled up, and financial resources redirected to where they are most effective.

To address the challenges facing governments, the global development finance architecture needs to be reformed to provide more funding to governments. This can be done through enhancing multilateral development banks' efficiency of capital use or extending fiscal space for low-income countries (Roundtable on Financing Water, 2023). This should be contrasted with the need for more direct funding for small- and medium-sized enterprises and for redirecting investments or pooling resources to achieve multiple benefits.

In addition, bold policies are required to provide clarity and confidence to encourage private sector investments in water solutions. At the same time, putting justice and equity at the centre of decision-making around financing water and sanitation will help ensure no one is left behind. Mobilizing financial resources from domestic sources, including the private sector, also requires building institutional and human capacities.

Improving the demand side of the equation is also imperative. To access new sources of investment and increase creditworthiness, water service providers, including utilities and irrigation agencies, and local and national governments must enhance their technical and financial efficiency. Governance arrangements must become more transparent, to improve the performance and creditworthiness of service providers. Additionally,

economic regulation can play a crucial role in enhancing water service performance and planning for long-term resilience (United Nations, 2023d).

To steer funding and financing decisions towards water, governments need to devise well-defined policy goals and formulate financial strategies that account for costs involved. Public expenditure on water must be augmented, given its significance as a public good, and to help realize the human rights to water and sanitation. Development partners must also ramp up their investments in the water domain by focusing on strengthening institutions, building systems and developing capacity in cooperation with governments (United Nations, 2023e).

Good governance is crucial to ensure effective financing. Hence, the development of capacities to absorb funds and implement funded projects, along with the establishment of sound policies, regulations and strong institutions, is necessary to mobilize actors and resources. It is also necessary to ensure sufficient coordination and consistency across interlinked decision-making processes.

Establishing mechanisms for transparency and accountability, and putting in place measures for anti-corruption, can help funds reach end users. Measuring project outcomes can increase the efficiency of funds. Significantly low water prices, financed by inefficient subsidies, which are expensive, poorly targeted, non-transparent and distortionary (Andres and others, 2019), should be adjusted to reflect the costs of the resources. A better calibration of subsidies to help those most in need and not lower the costs for those most capable of affording WASH services would help more people access drinking water and sanitation services.

To ensure equity in addressing water-related issues, grants should benefit vulnerable and marginalized communities. Civil society must be prioritized for resourcing to improve community oversight and accountability mechanisms (United Nations, 2023f).

For the sustainable management of water resources, in addition to constructing new infrastructure, investments are necessary to maintain, operate and enhance the resilience of current facilities (especially ageing infrastructure). Policy and regulatory frameworks are required to ensure investments in water infrastructure incorporate resilience-building measures.

To tackle the interrelated problems of climate change, resilience and the environment, addressing the financing challenges entails obtaining more funding for water infrastructure investments. It also requires evaluating the numerous benefits and utilizing the available and incoming financial streams and opportunities. In addition, effective incentives and regulation can support investments to be redirected towards climate-smart, resilient and nature-positive investments. Such opportunities include climate change adaptation and mitigation funding, as well as nature-based and hybrid solutions (United Nations, 2023g). Box 5 presents examples from two countries of successful acceleration through financing.

Box 5. Examples of successful acceleration through financing

In China, environmental degradation was identified as a priority within national development planning. This facilitated dedicated budget allocations to freshwater ecosystem protection and restoration activities that led to 25,200 ha of wetlands being protected and restored through the restoration of degraded wetland areas (7,200 ha), the reconversion of agricultural land (12,800 ha) and the creation of new wetland areas (5,000 ha), which represents a 250 per cent increase in wetland areas from 2016 to 2020 (UN-Water, 2023b).

In Ghana, different actors, including the private sector, non-governmental organizations, charities and development partners, financed the increase of coverage of safely managed drinking water services by 28 percentage points from 2000 to 2020, totalling 41 per cent of the population in 2020. Over the same period, coverage of at least basic drinking water services increased by 22 percentage points, from 64 per cent to 86 per cent (UN-Water, 2023c).

3.2 Blueprint for data and information

3.2.1 MAJOR CHALLENGES TO ACCELERATING PROGRESS ON DATA AND INFORMATION

On average, United Nations Member States have data available for about two thirds of the 12 global indicators for SDG 6. While these global indicators are useful for measuring overall progress, more detailed and wider sets of data are necessary for policymaking and planning at the national and subnational levels to address water and sanitation. Country focal points have identified technical capacity and resource limitations as key reasons for data gaps, such as lack of monitoring infrastructure, data management systems and human resources. Efforts to enhance national-level capacity for monitoring SDG 6, including developing technical and institutional infrastructure and increasing staffing and expertise, are crucial (UN-Water, 2021b).

The water domain has fragmented data and information. It contains significant data gaps, and the quality of the data is not always assured. Access to information is limited, particularly for those who are more vulnerable to water-related risks (United Nations, 2023h). Despite advances in technology and data management, countries are still encountering obstacles in areas such as collecting and comparing data and making it compatible, legal challenges around sharing data, and acquiring the financial and technical resources required for data management. Moreover, spatial coverage, storage and sharing of data still face sustainability challenges. Application and interpretation of data also remain challenging, as do the frequency and timeliness of data exchanges (United Nations, 2023g). Disaggregated data on sex, gender, age and others are still largely lacking, resulting in ineffective policies and measures to concretely address the issue.

3.2.2 PATHWAYS TO ACCELERATION

As water resources become increasingly unpredictable, it is necessary to re-examine the knowledge, science and data that have been utilized in the past to enhance the ability to address future water-related challenges. Moreover, integrating traditional knowledge can offer valuable advantages. This can help to ensure society's knowledge–policy–action pathway is better equipped to handle the water-related challenges that lie ahead.

Access to quality and timely data is crucial for decision makers to make well-informed policy decisions concerning water planning and implementation. However, merely enabling access to such data is only one aspect of the

challenge. It is equally important to ensure the data are translated and utilized effectively for evidence-based policy, planning and investment purposes. The updating of old data can also help improve accuracy, relevance and forecasting.

Governments should utilize official public data sources and new types of data from private and citizen sources, to have a better understanding of their populations. Official public data sources like national accounts, censuses, surveys and regulatory data provide reliable data for the entire population, and can be disaggregated. Additionally, governments should also take advantage of data from private sources like mobile phones, electronic transactions and satellites if they offer greater frequency, timeliness or detail.

Earth observation technologies, including satellites and drones, present a transformative opportunity, especially for developing countries, to enhance water resources management. Integrating such data with traditional measurements can enable sustainable water management practices, thus providing a significant benefit.

It is critical to use a consistent methodology with standardized terms and questions for data collection and monitoring. This will improve decision-making and accountability. Trust can be built through proper data generation, validation, standardization and information exchange. However, insufficient data cannot be an excuse for inaction, as there will always be a certain level of uncertainty to contend with.

To achieve the goal of "leaving no one behind", it is important to break down data into specific categories such as household, gender and age. By disaggregating data, policymakers, donors and community leaders can gain a better understanding of water-related challenges, risks and opportunities, allowing for the creation of targeted policies that promote a fair and equal distribution of resources. Data must be disaggregated in a consistent and dependable way to ensure policies are effective and equitable. Box 6 presents examples from two countries of successful acceleration through data and information.

Box 6. Examples of successful acceleration through data and information

In Brazil, the availability of data with high spatial and temporal resolution to understand the status and links between actions and water quality outcomes helped the area of water bodies assessed with good ambient water quality increase by 8 percentage points from 2017 to 2020. The data provided evidence that investment decisions to improve water quality (e.g. the construction of 900 new wastewater treatment plants since 2013) are effective (UN-Water, 2023d).

In Pakistan, the regular joint sector reviews resulting in costed provincial WASH sector master plans coverage of basic sanitation services increased by 39 percentage points from 2000 to 2020, totalling 68 per cent of the population in 2020. The number of people who practiced open defecation fell by 32 percentage points over the same period, to 7 per cent of the population in 2020. These efforts are putting Pakistan on track to eliminate open defecation by 2030 (UN-Water, 2023e).

There are significant gaps in data and information at the local level, such as in cities and municipalities. These gaps hinder decision-making and investment planning in the water and sanitation sector. It is crucial that governments prioritize national efforts to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to collect, process and manage comprehensive and up-to-date data that are tailored to meet local demands effectively. This will facilitate evidence-based planning and investments in the sector.

However, this requires substantial investments of time, resources, technologies and coordination. These can be challenging due to low capacities, bureaucratic and resource constraints, and policy limitations at the national level. Enhancing coordination among stakeholders, improving data accessibility, and standardizing monitoring indicators across different levels of governance in water and sanitation will create a stronger foundation for data usability within the water domain, and also with other water-connected policy areas. Box 7 provides highlights from WWDR 2023 (UNESCO, 2023) on how partnerships can enhance data-gathering and information generation.

Box 7. Highlights from the United Nations WWDR 2023

WWDR 2023 demonstrates how building partnerships and enhancing cooperation across all dimensions of sustainable development are essential to accelerating progress towards SDG 6 and realizing the human rights to water and sanitation (UNESCO, 2023).

Nearly every water-related intervention involves some kind of cooperation. Taking account of different interests and motivations (but with a consensus on actions required) helps to identify and maximize potential cross-benefits and mitigate negative impacts. Environmental co-benefits are among those most often highlighted in the report, along with data/information-sharing and co-financing.

Partnerships can facilitate and enhance data-gathering and information generation (e.g. joint monitoring) for the benefit of all parties. The report describes how an open and transparent exchange of data and information is integral to effective collaboration and builds trust among partners, including in transboundary settings where cooperation over shared basins and aquifers has been shown to deliver multiple benefits.

While inclusive stakeholder participation promotes buy-in and ownership, potential impediments to cooperation need to be identified, acknowledged and avoided. Unclear and/or overlapping mandates among partners can lead to confusion and duplication of efforts. They can also seed internal competition. Avoiding such detrimental conditions requires strong leadership that allows for dissenting views to be heard, thereby fostering trust in and legitimacy of the process and the partnership itself.

Accurate and comprehensive information on water quality, quantity, access, distribution, risks and usage is crucial for making informed decisions. However, there are substantial gaps in water-related data and decision-making systems. The impacts of climate change on water also need to be considered. To ensure policies are effective and inclusive, policymakers must have access to high-quality, timely and reliable data that are tailored to their specific needs and supported by robust monitoring mechanisms.

It is essential to establish effective and publicly accessible data-collection and -monitoring systems, which should incorporate participation of civil society and citizen science, and traditional and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, in designing and implementing information systems. At the global level, it is necessary for increased data sharing and improved interoperability of all SDG global databases.

Also at the global level, establishing an independent expert panel that is separate from governments could be beneficial in raising awareness of the challenges faced by the water sector and other related sectors. This proposal was recommended by the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB) in 2015 (UNSGAB, 2015). It would help to ensure that the

scientific work carried out is consistent, and that water-related knowledge is shared among Member States, with continuity maintained among them.

The quality of scientific information available for various water-related challenges differs considerably. Nonetheless, it is essential to utilize the latest knowledge from science and practice to address the increasingly urgent global challenges related to SDGs, which affect all major water challenges.

3.3 Blueprint for capacity development

3.3.1 MAJOR CHALLENGES TO ACCELERATING PROGRESS ON CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

One of the major areas preventing the achievement of SDG 6 is the lack of capacity to reach the targets. Whether in collecting and analysing data, being trained in the latest technologies or just having enough or the right professionals to carry out the work required to implement projects and programmes, capacity is a limiting factor to reach SDG 6 by 2030 (Water Policy Group, 2021).

Capacity development for water and sanitation faces a complex array of challenges. These include financial constraints, limited access to education and training, weak governance and institutional frameworks supporting capacity development, lack of technical expertise and technology, and an inability to attract a skilled workforce, particularly women.

While the issue of capacity development is often associated with low-income countries, the problem is not limited to them. In higher-income countries, an ageing workforce is expected to retire over the next decade without a sufficient influx of young professionals to take its place.

In all regions of the world, there is a shortage of water and sanitation workers willing to work in rural areas. This is because people, especially youth, migrate to cities in search of opportunities. In addition, salaries and benefits are often insufficient to attract professionals to work in water and sanitation.

Many countries are unaware of their future water and sanitation workforce requirements, few have national plans or strategies to address the professional workforce gap in water and sanitation, and fewer have the necessary resources to implement their plans. Two thirds of countries reported not having 75 per cent of the professionals needed to carry out key functions for the delivery of WASH services (WHO, 2019).

The water and sanitation sector is changing rapidly, with the introduction of new technologies and adaptation to a changing climate. Yet, education is often lagging behind in identifying and training people in the skills required to implement solutions and tackle these challenges. This includes technical skills and soft skills such as conflict resolution, negotiation and communication. Professionals with expertise in finance, economics, programme management and computer programming are also needed. Conversely, institutions are sometimes not equipped to best utilize the skills that young professionals bring due to a lack of adaptation capacity to meet new demands. Given the rapid change, it is important that employees and employers recognize the importance of lifelong and adaptive learning.

Another reason the world is lagging in capacity is the lack of women working in water and sanitation. According to one study, only 18 per cent of the global workforce is female (World Bank, 2019). This is a significant source of untapped talent. The barriers to women working in water and sanitation are many, including discrimination and harassment in the workplace, which can make it difficult for

them to succeed in and advance their careers. Cultural and social norms can limit women's access to opportunities for education, training, advancement and assumption of leadership roles, as well as their ability to work outside the home or interact with male colleagues. In some regions, women may face safety concerns when working in the water sector, particularly if their work requires fieldwork or travel to remote areas. Women are sometimes inaccurately perceived as being less capable or less interested in water-related fields, or in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, which can limit their opportunities and access to resources. However, it has been shown that water sector performance has improved with increased involvement of women (Jenniskens, 2022).

Overall, the enabling environment to attract, educate, train, protect and retain those working in water and sanitation is lacking at all levels.

3.3.2 PATHWAYS TO ACCELERATION

The water and sanitation community needs to assess the current and future demands for a water and sanitation workforce, to prepare the next generation of water and sanitation professionals. There is a need for national-level workforce assessments and studies to determine current in-demand and future skills with a view towards emerging technologies.

There is also a need to develop an enabling policy environment for collaborative frameworks among stakeholders such as those in education, employers, trade unions and employees. Such frameworks are needed to align labour and skills requirements with capacity-development initiatives and education. This alignment can take place through society-wide dialogues in an inclusive manner, to ensure women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and marginalized communities become more engaged in the future water and sanitation workforce.

Developing a robust water and sanitation workforce requires buy-in from government, employers and employees alike. The sector requires professional development whereby institutions improve their own enabling workforce environment and employ the right types and numbers of adequately qualified, trained and motivated personnel. It is also necessary to ensure adequate training is in place to address staff turnover and to foster new knowledge.

To attract future water professionals, social awareness must be raised about the importance of such professionals. Water education and literacy must begin in primary schools, and efforts should be made to identify talent through universities, to channel people towards careers in water and sanitation. Specific attention should be given to encouraging and reducing the barriers for girls and women to engage in education related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and to enabling entrepreneurialism in all young professionals. Box 8 presents examples of how young people are tackling the water crisis.

Box 8. Youth tackling the water crisis head on

Young people are likely to be hardest hit by the water crisis. Youth leaders have been vocal in expressing their disappointment in the inaction of leaders (#FillUpTheGlass, n.d.) and claiming a seat at the table to participate in decision-making processes that will affect them and future generations. The UN 2023 Water Conference and its preparatory meetings were catalytic in providing a platform for young people from different regions to exchange ideas and experiences, organize joint action and register commitments in the Water Action Agenda.

The Global Youth Movement for Water, launched during the 9th World Water Forum, has convened over 370 youth-led organizations and allies to influence decision makers to increase youth's negotiating power and encourage action through the #FillUpTheGlass campaign (UN DESA, 2023b).

Youth-led organizations like the World Youth Parliament for Water are forging links between local and global youth action through a network of over 15,000 passionate young leaders from over 80 countries and 50 national and regional Water Parliaments for Youth. Joined up action between the youth climate movement and water has also added momentum to youth engagement on SDG 6 and SDG 13.

For example, UN1FY* is a youth constituency launched by the Water and Climate Coalition, aimed at ensuring meaningful youth participation in high-level water and climate policy negotiations. One of the key UN1FY outputs was the water and climate youth development plan and agenda launched at the UN 2023 Water Conference (UN DESA, 2023c).

There are five key demands of the Global Youth Movement for Water:

1. Water for health. Access to water and proper sanitation, as basic human rights, especially for young women and girls.

2. Water for development. Dedicated funding for youth for community-based water solutions, promoting transparency and accountability.

3. Water for climate. Adequate education and training for youth, especially young women, to acquire knowledge and skills necessary to better tackle water and climate issues.

4. Water for cooperation. Inclusion of youth in water-related mechanisms, negotiations and decisions, with water as an instrument of peace and cooperation.

5. Water Action Decade. Creation of an inclusive and permanent body within the United Nations to address water challenges and nomination of a United Nations Youth Envoy on Water.

* UN1FY consists of one acronym for two initiatives. One is the UN1FY Movement — the United International Federation of Youth for water and climate. The other is the UN1FY Festival — the United International Festival of Youth for water and climate

Many of the jobs in water and sanitation are at the technical and vocational level, especially those that will comprise the future professional workforce gap. There should therefore be a focus on increasing the ability of countries at the national and subnational levels to educate and train people in this area. Recognizing the informal work that many carry out, especially women, acknowledging their previously acquired competencies and upskilling them to increase their employability through professionalization will also significantly increase their contributions to the sector.

The size of the capacity-development gap requires all methods to fill this gap to be explored, including more practical methods such as on-the-job-training and peer-to-peer learning. In addition to technical skills, programmes should also focus on leadership skills and other skills that support organizational processes like policy reform, organizational change, analytical thinking, programme management, human resources, data collection, mediation and facilitation. These can support new forms of collaboration that provide a space for complex and synergistic problem solving.

It is necessary to create more progressive financing models for capacity-development programmes at the national level, so countries can address their capacity needs. These need to go beyond individual small-scale projects, and enable more strategic and long-term planning and implementation of capacity-development programmes nationwide. Box 9 provides examples from two countries of successful acceleration through capacity development.

The cross-sectoral nature of water and the reality that water-using sectors may not be capacitated in optimal ways to manage water mean it is necessary to train water resources managers. This includes in industry, energy, agriculture, municipal and environment authorities, and in technology in a way that is tailored to their needs, in their context and in their languages.

Box 9. Examples of successful acceleration through capacity development

Argentina cited "technical and institutional capacity-building on data use and action planning" as one of the key success factors in making progress on SDG target 6.6. A consultative planning process helped secure political interest that led to developing capacity to understand and act on freshwater changes. This led to evidence-based action plans to improve the protection and restoration of the freshwater ecosystems in the Esquel–Percy System and the Marapa–San Francisco River Basin (UN-Water, 2023f).

In **Mozambique** and **Zimbabwe**, capacity development was identified as a key success factor in progress on SDG indicator 6.5.2 on transboundary water cooperation with the two countries through the development of the Pungwe, Buzi and Save Tri-Basin Institution. This is a joint body for implementing existing cooperation agreements in all three river basins (UN-Water, 2023g).

3.4 Blueprint for innovation

3.4.1 MAJOR CHALLENGES TO ACCELERATING PROGRESS ON INNOVATION

Current methods in the other four GAF accelerators are not adequate to achieve SDG 6. The business-as-usual approach is not helping the world to accelerate fast enough to bridge the gaps to achieving SDG 6. In addition, global changes are now happening so quickly that innovation itself needs to advance more quickly to adapt to these changes for the world to keep pace.

While sustainable and innovative finance schemes exist, they have not yet reached a scale that would lead the way for transformative change. This is hindered by governance models that also require innovation to adapt with change. Budget, procurement and regulatory tools must also be used strategically, and policies and programmes designed, coordinated and implemented in a forward-looking manner. Institutional and professional capacities to deal with this growing complexity are lagging behind. Equally, while there are many innovations that exist, there are challenges with deploying, implementing and upscaling them (Bonn Dialogue for Results, 2021).

Regulatory barriers can limit innovation and prevent the adoption of new technologies or approaches (OECD, 2011). The lack of an enabling environment for investment in innovation is also a barrier in many countries (OECD, 2022). This inhibits the advancement of innovation.

The water sector has been traditionally conservative, cautious about taking risks, and reluctant to embrace and share new technologies. The challenge for water innovation therefore lies in the limited time frame available for incorporating new technologies, given the long lifespan of water infrastructure and the infrequent opportunities to upgrade water systems (UNICEF and WHO, 2020).

3.4.2 PATHWAYS TO ACCELERATION

Although there has been some progress on SDG 6, it has not been sufficient to meet the water-related objectives and targets. Achieving SDG 6 requires a significantly increased level of intensity. The scaling up and sustaining of solutions can be achieved only by adopting new approaches to tackle the issues.

To work in more innovative ways, funding for research on innovative approaches to water management and governance needs to expand, including for challenge funds. Innovation in financing methods themselves could be carried out through the strategic use of budget and regulatory tools for sustainable water management (United Nations, 2023f). By extension, ways have to be found to make the existing outcomes of research more accessible and understandable for a larger audience.

New multilevel, polycentric governance mechanisms can be established through cooperation among academia, governments and technology providers, as well as cooperation across sectors and administrative boundaries. Cooperation at regional levels can be strengthened as a catalyst for knowledge exchange, technology transfer and innovation advancement. Innovations for transparency, accountability and participation can be key to developing innovative governance models and cross-sectoral collective action (United Nations, 2023f).

Encouraging innovation through an enabling environment creates a market for integrated solutions that mitigate risks and provide economic, social and environmental benefits. This requires a policy and regulatory environment that supports technology transfer and rewards innovation. At the same time, an example could be to provide low-interest or interest-free loans as an incentive for implementation of improved water management and sanitation practices. Public support and consultation are essential to ensure legal and policy frameworks effectively promote alternative and innovative solutions, such as nature-based or hybrid solutions and the circular economy (United Nations, 2023h).

Governments alone cannot provide innovation. Innovation can emerge out of complex interactions between the public and private sector, shaped by institutional frameworks to support human capacity development, research and development, and support to entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs (United Nations, 2023d). Enabling environments for continued innovation, adjustment and recalibration are key catalysts for transformative change. Governments can ensure new technologies support local water management priorities and contribute to global solutions.

Innovative educational methods are necessary to close the gap in understanding among the research community, policymakers and civil society, as well as help to bridge the professional workforce gap in water and sanitation.

To enhance the efficiency of water use and ensure sustainable water management, particularly in areas facing water stress and in transboundary basins, decision makers must incorporate modern technology. This may include artificial intelligence, digital solutions and Earth observations, as well as innovative techniques, while also integrating traditional knowledge. This can be achieved by engaging multiple stakeholders and their inputs (Bonn Dialogue for Results, 2021).

Governments must also use innovative methods, such as offering tax reductions for nature-based solutions and conservation spaces or payments for ecosystem services to preserve water-critical green infrastructure. Methods should also be developed to increase efficiency of water use in a multifaceted way and ease policy blockages to innovation and research on water-efficient approaches. These methods should be included along the social, economic, institutional and environmental spectra of the water and sanitation service provision value chain (United Nations, 2023f).

Innovations should be customized to local contexts. Deploying innovative practices and technologies requires a nuanced understanding of local conditions. This involves sharing knowledge and creating awareness about locally relevant water management solutions. Such solutions should consider historical, cultural and traditional knowledge, as well as the experiences of Indigenous Peoples. The deployment of adaptation technologies should be assessed in the context of their specific location, to avoid maladaptation and negative

impacts on other groups or activities (United Nations, 2023h). They should also have a view towards low-cost, appropriate solutions to leave no one behind (Bonn Dialogue for Results, 2021). Box 10 presents examples from two countries of successful acceleration through innovation.

Box 10. Examples of successful acceleration through innovation

Bahrain used innovative methods to increase sustainable water use by increasing utilization of non-conventional water resources such as desalinated seawater and treated wastewater. Combining the new sources of water with the adoption of efficient irrigation techniques and shifting to economic sectors that were less water intensive, the country reduced its water stress levels by 20 one fifth from 2000 to 2021 (UN-Water, 2023h).

In Ghana, the government used a variety of innovative techniques to increase access to safely managed sanitation services, even during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Through subsidies to install toilets, a flexible water connection payment system and innovative financing schemes in the form of funds with low interest rates (UN-Water, forthcoming), the country was able to increase those with safely managed sanitation services by 54 per cent between 2010 and 2020 (UNICEF and WHO, 2022).

3.5 Blueprint for governance

3.5.1 MAJOR CHALLENGES TO ACCELERATING PROGRESS ON GOVERNANCE

As the world's population grows, economies develop, water quality degrades and climate change worsens. Competition for water resources is therefore becoming increasingly intense. This rising pressure highlights the inefficiencies of current water governance regimes.

Ineffective water governance can be attributed to several challenges. These include institutional and territorial fragmentation, poorly managed multilevel governance and inadequate capacity at the local level. Additionally, unclear allocation of roles and responsibilities, questionable resource allocation and inconsistent financial management have contributed to the issue. The lack of long-term strategic planning, weak economic regulation, poorly drafted legislation and low enforcement capacity are also factors that hamper effective water governance. The lack of sufficient means for measuring performance has resulted in weak accountability and transparency. Ultimately, these challenges stem from misaligned objectives and poor management of stakeholder interactions (OECD, 2011). Good water governance suffers further in situations of fragility, conflict and violence (United Nations, 2023g).

The lack of comprehensive policies and policy coherence in many countries is a major concern. Even in countries where policies exist, they are often inadequately resourced in terms of finance and personnel (United Nations, 2023e). Although most Member States are making efforts to comply with the SDG "leave no one behind" mandate and have policies to extend water access to the poor, only slightly over half have devised strategies to fund these initiatives (WHO, 2022).

Regulations may exist in many countries, but often they are not enforced for various reasons. Institutional arrangements and mandates of different institutions can be a common issue. Enforcement can be weak in cases where multiple institutions are mandated to regulate the same services with no clear line of authority (WHO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2022).

Governance challenges are magnified in transboundary settings (153 countries worldwide share rivers, lakes and aquifers). Unequal power dynamics, national interests and lack of trust influence efforts to share data and establish institutional and legal frameworks to promote cooperation and avoid conflict.

3.5.2 PATHWAYS TO ACCELERATION

Cooperation and coordination across sectors are essential. The water community cannot achieve its goals alone. Effective collaboration among institutions, stakeholder groups and funding institutions is crucial for successful water-related actions, from the local level to the global level. A cooperative, cross-sectoral approach, such as with IWRM, is necessary to establish vertical, horizontal and polycentric governance. This will help manage conflicting and cross-sectoral interests. It will also ensure accountability, strengthen policy coherence and bridge silos among water and environment, health, energy, agriculture, industry, spatial planning and land-use policies (United Nations, 2023f). This can be done by establishing dedicated mechanisms or platforms that facilitate systematic cross-sectoral dialogue and collaborations. Rather than relying on ad hoc efforts, a structured and sustainable way should be created to foster ongoing conversations and partnerships across different sectors.

To ensure inclusivity and prevent marginalization, it is important to involve women and girls, people with disabilities, youth, rural communities, Indigenous Peoples and vulnerable populations in water-related planning and decision-making processes. Legal and administrative frameworks should include provisions for citizen participation. Tools should be put in place to ensure inclusive and informed participation of all stakeholders. And measures should be taken to ensure equitable representation of all groups in water management. This can include co-management arrangements, where communities are given the authority to manage resources as part of a broader governance structure that spans the local municipal level to the national level. Citizen participation should be empowered and enabled through communication, participation, convening, consumer choice and accountability monitoring (United Nations, 2023f). Box 11 provides highlights on how a feminist approach to water governance can accelerate progress on SDG 6 and SDG 5 on gender equality.

Box 11. Gender spotlight paper on SDG 6

A forthcoming United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and UN-Water spotlight paper on SDG 6 emphasizes the need for a feminist approach to address the global water crisis. It should be one that recognizes the important role women play in their communities as the main collectors, protectors and managers of water (UN Women and UN-Water, forthcoming).

The latest data and projections on the gender and water nexus presented in the paper reveal that the human rights to water and sanitation are far from realized for many women and girls globally. Striking inequalities across and within regions and countries prevail, with women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa three times less likely to be covered by safe drinking water services than those residing in Europe and North America (32 per cent versus 96 per cent*).

Despite this grim outlook, the paper notes that women, including those furthest behind, are turning their vulnerability into strength by rising up, organizing and demanding change, from the grass-roots level to the global level. The paper stresses that it is the duty of governments, in partnership with other stakeholders, to implement a feminist approach to the water crisis.

The paper calls for women's equal representation in leadership and decision-making. It also draws a

clear connection among social justice, ecological rights and women's rights. To accelerate SDG 6, countries must also commit to accelerate SDG 5 on gender equality, fund initiatives that promote gender equality and bring the diverse perspectives of women, including Indigenous women and their communities, into water governance.

*** Numbers derived from data in UNICEF and WHO (2022) and UN DESA (2022a).**

Effective governance requires political will and leaders who prioritize and promote action on water and sanitation. This leadership can come from various levels, including Heads of State, ministers or other senior political figures willing to take on the challenge of driving progress. Local leadership is also crucial, with subnational governments needing to have a clear vision, a road map and targets supported by a prominent champion. Such a champion can play a crucial role in encouraging public participation and collaboration to achieve a shared vision of the sustainable management of water and sanitation (WHO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2022; United Nations, 2023f).

To strengthen governance, integrity must be upheld and corruption fought through transparency. In decentralizing, resources and responsibilities must be strategically aligned across lower governmental tiers. In addition to delegating duties, this also empowers local and regional governments to perform efficiently, thus improving service delivery to citizens.

Governments should progressively strengthen existing institutions, fill institutional gaps and facilitate coordination (United Nations, 2023e). They should establish a stable regulatory environment supported by legislation, institutions and clear policies, including standards for service quality, and ensure enforcement. Governments need to create regulations that are clear and easy to understand, and that safeguard the interests of all consumers. These regulations should foster an environment that encourages continuous improvement, innovation and cost recovery while also making it easier to provide services to the poor and vulnerable. This should be in line with the commitment to achieving universal access to water and sanitation while leaving no one behind (WHO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2022).

Accelerating governance in transboundary basins is pivotal for managing water, protecting ecosystems and promoting peace. At the heart of this lies building political will for countries in shared basins to work together towards cooperation. Upscaling capacity development forms another critical component, ensuring that nations and their institutions have the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to effectively manage and protect shared water bodies. To make informed decisions, leveraging and mobilizing expertise is essential, integrating scientific, technical and local knowledge into planning and management processes. This expertise aids in addressing data gaps in transboundary basins. Strengthening legal frameworks at national and international levels is paramount, creating clear agreements to manage these basins, resolve disputes and promote cooperation.

The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes and the Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses offer opportunities to reinforce transboundary cooperative arrangements and strengthen water governance at national and transboundary levels.

Recognizing the numerous values of water within water governance empowers stakeholder processes to acknowledge and balance a comprehensive range of values. This includes benefit-sharing in water governance and integrating ecological and environmental values into climate-resilient water management. Utilizing this

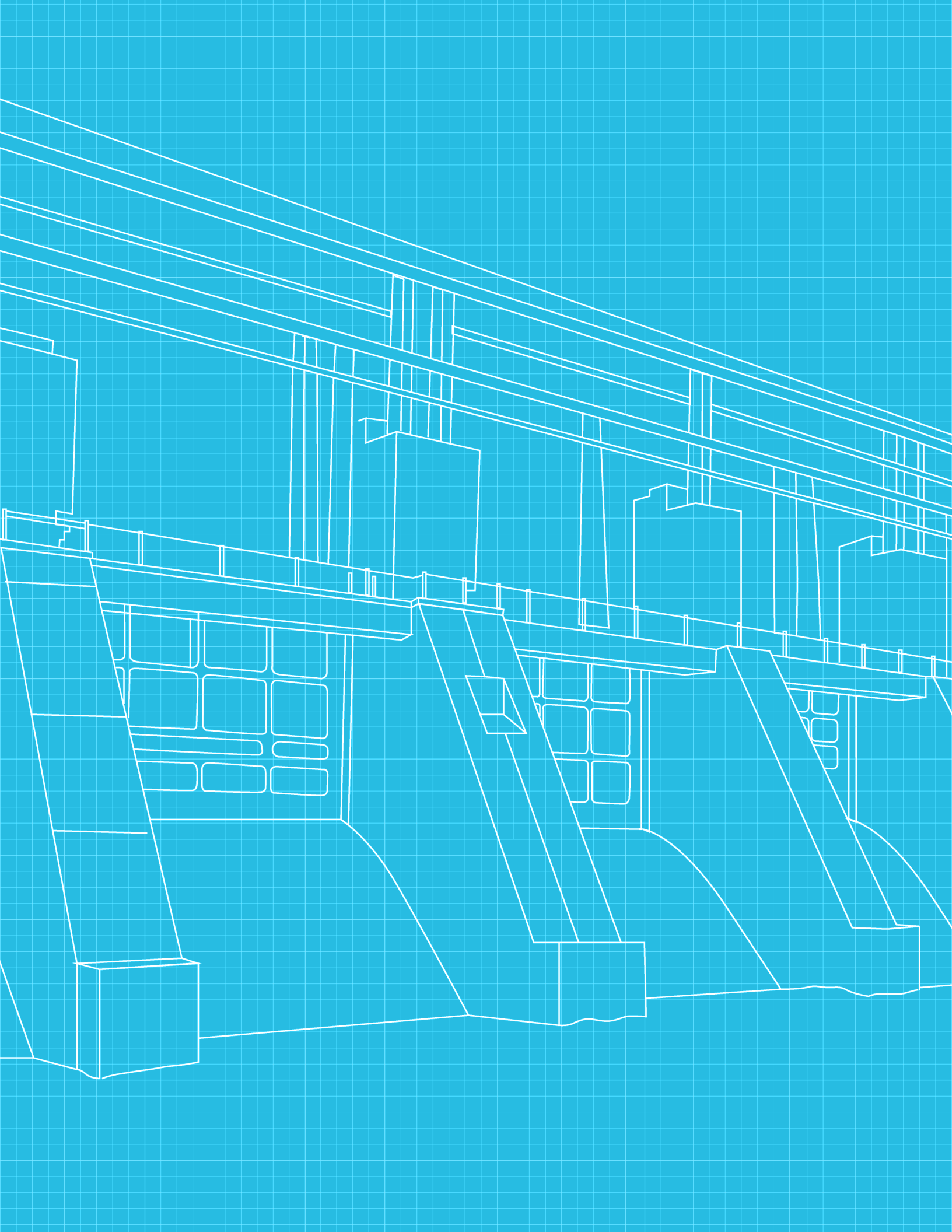
all-encompassing comprehension of the value of water, IWRM is pivotal for successful governance of water services valuation and the water–energy–food–ecosystems nexus (United Nations, 2023d). Box 12 presents examples from two countries of successful acceleration through governance.

Box 12. Examples of successful acceleration through governance

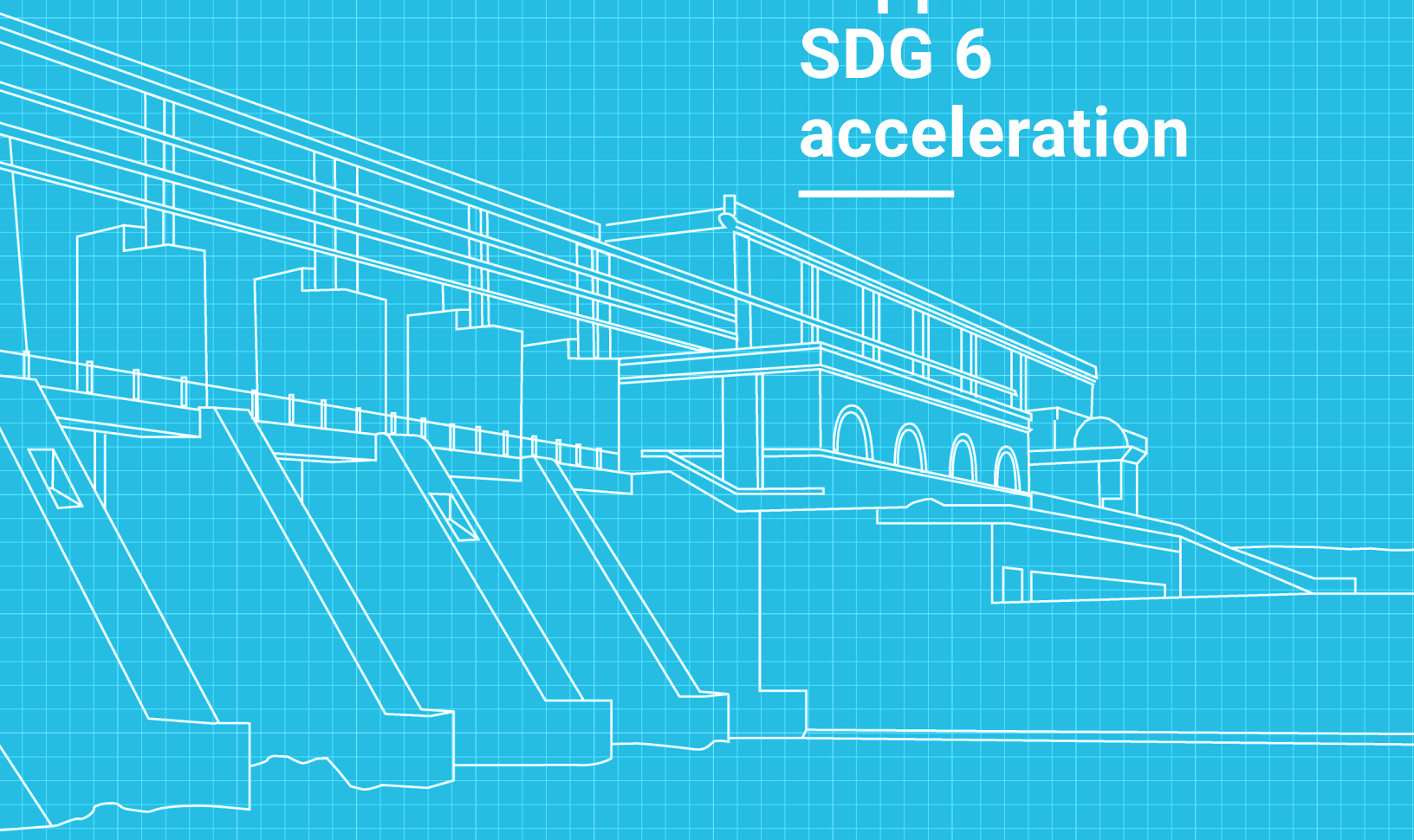
Indonesia set up cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms to actively engage the public and private sectors and created an enabling environment with enforced laws and decrees. This was accelerated by the central role of hygiene in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic. This helped to increase basic hygiene services by 10 percentage points from 2015 to 2020, totalling 94 per cent of the population in 2020. The new efforts have led to an annual improvement rate of 2 percentage points, which means the country is on track to achieve universal access by 2030 (UN-Water, 2023i).

In Kenya, the government led a process that aligned national development plans and budgeting. This included the broad involvement of stakeholders such as the private sector. As a result, the country's IWRM implementation rate increased by 6 percentage points from 2017 to 2020, and six actions were identified and budgeted for, including ecosystem restoration in the Athi watershed (UN-Water, 2023j).

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



04_ The system: How the United Nations can support SDG 6 acceleration



> "As humanity's most precious global common good, water unites us all. That's why water needs to be at the centre of the global political agenda."
>
> **António Guterres, Secretary-General, 24 March 2023 (United Nations, Secretary-General, 2023b)**

The UN 2023 Water Conference elevated water as a central United Nations priority. Several major factors have contributed to proposals put forth to raise the level ambition of the United Nations system's (United Nations, n.d.e) work on water and sanitation, including:

- Over 800 voluntary commitments registered in the Water Action Agenda (United Nations, n.d.d).
- Nine actions and initiatives highlighted as "game changers" by the President of the General Assembly in a summary of the proceedings (see Annex 1).
- A call for increased global dialogue and policy coherence on water, including a mandated intergovernmental process on water at the United Nations in New York by some Member States (UN DESA, 2023d).
- The appointment of a Special Envoy for Water under consideration by the Secretary-General (United Nations, Secretary-General, 2023b).
- Broad support for mainstreaming water across intergovernmental processes, led by the United Nations (United Nations, 2023i).
- A call to strengthen UN-Water (United Nations, 2023f).

Rising to this new level of ambition will require dramatically stepping up efforts – across sectors, inclusively through multi-stakeholder coalitions and partnerships, and at all levels, from local to global.

The United Nations system has a unique role to play in facilitating and supporting this transformational change through its main bodies, United Nations entities[3] and UN-Water.

However, an improved institutional architecture is needed to support such a transformation – one that is fit for purpose for the ambition laid out by the Secretary-General, Member States and other stakeholders. To achieve this, the necessary platforms and functions must be put in place, as well as the additional capacities and funding to support them. Decisions and action will be required by Member States and the United Nations leadership to establish this institutional architecture. Some can be done within existing mandates, and some will require new mandates.

This chapter proposes how the entities of the United Nations system (United Nations, n.d.e) can contribute to this amplified action on water. Three sections describe potential functions for elevating and mainstreaming water across intergovernmental processes through the main bodies[4] of the United Nations (section 4.2), United Nations system-wide support through United Nations entities and internal coordination bodies (section 4.3) and the UN-Water coordination and delivery mechanism through Members and Partners (section 4.5). Based on these essential functions, a final section (4.5) provides an overview of what can be done within the existing mandates and with current capacities, and where additional capacities and mandates will be required.

3 United Nations entities include specialized agencies, funds and programmes, secretariat offices and departments, and regional economic commissions.

4 The main bodies of the United Nations are the General Assembly, the Security Council, ECOSOC, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice and the United Nations Secretariat.

4.1 Elevating and mainstreaming water across United Nations intergovernmental processes

Mainstreaming water into existing intergovernmental processes is essential to increase and sustain political commitment and to ensure policy coherence on an issue that underpins the success of the 2030 Agenda. Members States should prioritize water in intergovernmental processes and United Nations entities.

This will guarantee that water is addressed, in terms of impacts of water management on the other areas of sustainable development and their impacts on water resources, to ensure water is being dealt with in a consistent manner across the different processes and to harness the transformational function of water (e.g. for climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation, food security, health and disaster resilience). Mainstreaming water across the intergovernmental processes will also enable the United Nations system to support and implement country-level policy integration more efficiently and effectively, where these changes are most needed and have the greatest impact.

To facilitate discussions on water-related matters of global concern, Member States need a regular platform for engagement. Currently, no such platform exists that can respond to the calls for action from the UN 2023 Water Conference. This jeopardizes the progress catalysed by the conference and the accountability for ongoing water-related actions. Therefore, it is essential to convene regular intergovernmental conferences on water within the General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), with substantive outcomes to sustain momentum and monitor progress. These conferences can be the venue for deliberation on water policy and strategy. They can also be a place for more in-depth review of SDG 6 than takes place in general every five years at HLPF, and an opportunity to assess progress on the Water Action Agenda.

Regular conferences on water would lift the topic politically within the United Nations system. In addition to intergovernmental meetings, a mandated, continuous working structure, embedded in the General Assembly in New York would provide a home and a centre of gravity for water. It would also allow for more straightforward interfaces with other elements of the United Nations system, the private sector, major groups and other stakeholders. This is a key element to deliver more effectively across the United Nations system, and which does not currently exist.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES: QUADRENNIAL COMPREHENSIVE POLICY REVIEW

Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR)[5] is a process by which the United Nations evaluates and updates its operational policies and activities every four years. It is a way to improve the coherence and effectiveness of United Nations policies and programmes. The review covers a range of issues, including mandates, governance structures, programme delivery and funding mechanisms for the United Nations development system.

The review is conducted through consultations with Member States, United Nations entities, civil society organizations and other stakeholders. The results are used to identify areas for operational and system-wide improvement on delivery. They are also used to develop recommendations

5 QCPR is the mechanism through which the General Assembly assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and impact of United Nations operational activities for development and establishes system-wide policy orientations for the United Nations development system. QCPR is the primary policy instrument of the General Assembly to define the way the United Nations development system operates to support programme countries in their development efforts.

for action, which are then negotiated and subsequently adopted by the General Assembly. The next QCPR will take place in late 2024.

QCPR potentially presents an opportunity for the United Nations to develop and showcase how it can increase operational efficiencies and system-wide delivery on water and sanitation through a business plan for operational implementation, with a focus on country-level implementation. This would elevate water in the United Nations development system and open the door for development of a United Nations system-wide action plan on water and sanitation.

4.2 United Nations system-wide support

Water flows throughout the United Nation system. There is no single United Nations agency, fund, programme or office dedicated exclusively to water issues. In fact, over 30 United Nations organizations carry out water and sanitation programmes. While United Nations entities have been working together on water issues for decades, responding to the stepped-up ambition will require increased collaboration. This section looks at how United Nations system entities and internal coordination bodies can support an enhanced United Nations system-wide approach to deliver water and sanitation results.

4.2.1 CHAMPIONSHIP AND ADVOCACY FOR WATER ISSUES AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS

Global United Nations executive engagement is paramount to elevate and sustain water as a central priority across the work of the United Nations. The **Secretary-General's** continued leadership on water issues through water-specific initiatives, such as the Water Action Decade, as well as other initiatives such as Early Warnings for All, bring water issues to the fore of the global political dialogue.

An important area of discussion during the UN 2023 Water Conference was the presentation of the global water cycle as a global common good (President of the General Assembly, 2023). The Secretary-General's report, *Our Common Agenda*, provides a vision for protecting the global commons and delivering global public goods (United Nations, 2021c). The **Summit of the Future in 2024** can be an upcoming opportunity to bring the global water cycle into the discussions on the global commons and lay the foundations for more effective global cooperation (United Nations, 2023j).

The **UN-Water Chair** represents the United Nations on water-related issues (UN-Water, 2019b). The role of the Chair has been critical to the effectiveness of UN-Water, raising the visibility of UN-Water, increasing awareness on water within United Nations entities and enhancing the convening power of UN-Water (UN-Water, 2018b). The portfolio of the UN-Water Chair should amplify in importance to match the increased ambition of the United Nations system's action on water as a follow-up to the UN 2023 Water Conference. To address this increasing workload and mandate, the role of the UN-Water Chair will need to be redefined in synergy with the terms of reference of the United Nations Special Envoy for Water that is under consideration by the Secretary-General.

The **Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation** is an independent expert on the issue of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation. The United Nations Human Rights Council established the mandate in March 2008 (United Nations, OHCHR, n.d.b). There is an important continuing role for the Special Rapporteur to link the human rights to water and sanitation with the realization of other rights, and to bring a human rights perspective into the water dialogue, alongside working with development practitioners on implementation. As water and sanitation challenges have major impacts on a wide range

of human rights, it will be important to reinforce engagement with the Special Rapporteurs on the right to food, rights of the environment, women's rights, Indigenous rights and others.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES: UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR WATER

A **United Nations Special Envoy for Water**, as mentioned by the Secretary-General during the closing plenary of the UN 2023 Water Conference, will raise the visibility of water-related sustainable development issues and will catalyse engagement of the United Nations system, financial institutions, Member States and stakeholders. The *Summary of Proceedings by the President of the General Assembly* indicates that "A UN Special Envoy for Water can ensure that water remains high on the political agenda, within and outside the UN. The Special Envoy can work with a revised and empowered UN-Water platform to strengthen upstream coordination within the UN system and swiftly deliver UN programmes at the country level" (President of the General Assembly, 2023). In addition, there is need for an established institutional anchor and a requisite support structure to provide policy expertise and timely advice on water.

4.2.2 PRIORITIZATION AND STRENGTHENING OF WATER-RELATED PROGRAMMES

United Nations entities deliver technical expertise and support for water and sanitation globally, regionally and at country level according to their respective mandates. The UN-Water Inventory provides an overview of the collective work of the United Nations entities and partners on water- and sanitation-related goals and targets (UN-Water, 2019c). The areas of work, type of engagement and geographic scope, including numbers of countries with active programming, vary widely from one United Nations entity to another. Some United Nations entities manage multi-country support programmes for specific areas within SDG 6 and also act as custodian agencies for SDG 6 global monitoring and reporting. Additionally, there are many positive examples of United Nations entities working together on global and regional initiatives, as well as implementing joint country programming. This collaboration among United Nations entities leverages cross-sectoral technical expertise, country presence and organization-wide capacities on water and sanitation across the United Nations system to respond to and solve complex challenges at scale.

A key element of increasing United Nations system-wide capacity on water and sanitation requires that individual United Nations entities with mandates for water and sanitation upscale their current programmes and strengthen their human resources capacity to coordinate and collaborate, including support at the country level. This can be done through strengthening water- and sanitation-related programmes in strategic plans, results frameworks, resource allocations, staffing structures and partnerships.

Executive heads of United Nations entities can promote water-related issues as top organizational priorities. They provide global leadership for their respective mandated areas on linkages between water with major global topics ranging from climate change and biodiversity to urban planning and food systems to health, gender equality, resilience and humanitarian response. **Executive secretaries of regional economic commissions** can support contextualization and localization of the global water dialogue to address regional and local water-related issues and use their coordination and convening role to promote water cooperation as an opportunity for regional integration.

To achieve SDG 6 and advance the Water Action Agenda, United Nations executive heads will need to strengthen water programmes. They

will also need to better coordinate and align their efforts with other United Nations entities and their respective partners for a more holistic approach within the United Nations system, and to address gaps and bottlenecks that are holding back SDG 6 delivery. Strengthening of United Nations entity mandates and results frameworks, as well as ensuring adequate resources, will need to be supported through the respective governance bodies (UN-Water, 2019c).

FUTURE OPPORTUNITY: REGULAR UNITED NATIONS EXECUTIVE HEADS MEETINGS ON WATER

Strengthening the United Nations system's work on water through the United Nations entities can be reinforced through regular dedicated meetings on water convened by the UN-Water Chair with the executive heads of United Nations entities. These meetings could discuss actions that agencies are taking to strengthen their water and sanitation programmes. They could also look at how to better coordinate and leverage resources to improve the efficiency and impact of the United Nations system's work on water and its integration in major closely related United Nations topic areas, as well as identifying and addressing gaps and emerging issues.

4.2.3 MANAGEMENT OF THE WATER ACTION AGENDA COMMITMENTS PLATFORM AND PROCESSES

UN DESA hosts and manages the Water Action Agenda registry of voluntary commitments, which is part of the wider SDG Actions Platform (UN DESA, n.d.). At the HLPF annual SDG 6 and Water Action Agenda Special Events, UN DESA and UN-Water will need to prepare background materials. These should include monitoring and analysis of progress, facilitating self-reporting on commitments, documenting success stories and lessons learned, and registering new commitments (UN DESA, 2022b). This will require a strengthening of UN DESA and UN-Water capacities.

In addition, UN DESA, in collaboration with UN-Water, will mobilize new commitments, forge partnerships and leverage expertise within the United Nations system towards implementation of these commitments in the field. UN DESA will conduct regular analysis of these commitments. The Water Action Agenda will remain open, and UN DESA, in collaboration with UN-Water, will continue to mobilize voluntary commitments. The annual HLPF Special Event will be a pivotal moment to follow up and review the Water Action Agenda and SDG 6 progress.

4.2.4 UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM-WIDE STRATEGIC GUIDANCE, SHARED VISION AND ENHANCED COOPERATION

The **United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination** (CEB) is chaired by the United Nations Secretary-General. CEB serves as an internal coordination mechanism that: provides high-level system-wide strategic guidance; promotes coherent leadership, shared vision and enhanced cooperation; and considers forward-looking solutions in response to mandates stemming from the governing bodies of its member organizations (CEB, n.d.a). CEB established UN-Water in 2003 as the United Nations inter-agency coordination mechanism for freshwater-related issues, including sanitation (CEB, n.d.b). UN-Water reports annually to CEB through the **High-Level Committee on Programmes**, which is the principal mechanism for system-wide coordination and policy coherence in the programme area (CEB, n.d.c). Changes to the Terms of Reference for UN-Water are endorsed by CEB, through the High-Level Committee on Programmes.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES: UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM-WIDE STRATEGY FOR WATER AND SANITATION

A future opportunity can be the development of a coordinated United Nations system-wide approach for water to underpin the United Nations strategic response to the UN 2023 Water Conference. This approach could include the Water Action Agenda, SDG 6 progress acceleration and the Secretary-General's call for water to be addressed as a central United Nations priority. Building on SDG 6 GAF, a **United Nations system-wide strategy or action plan on water and sanitation** can support greater coherence, implementation, resources and accountability for delivering results and increasing overall impact across the United Nations system at all levels.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES: STRENGTHENING COORDINATION CAPACITY AT COUNTRY AND REGIONAL LEVELS

Various water and sanitation coordination structures are present in many countries (see box 13). These structures are frequently led by the government and are linked to line ministries with a focus on specific aspects of SDG 6. The structures are often multi-stakeholder in nature, and in many cases, are supported by United Nations entities.

Building on existing efforts, additional capacity for coordination can strengthen interlinkages and cross-sectoral approaches to water and sanitation, thus reducing fragmentation and optimizing resources. Options to enhance these endeavours include increasing human and financial resources for UNCT members that currently provide support for water and sanitation coordination on an ad hoc or project basis, to be able to do so more predictably. Designating dedicated national- and regional-level water coordination focal points could also be explored as an option to further supplement coordination capacity.

Additionally, in countries with humanitarian crises, greater efforts can be made to link the strategic direction of national priorities across United Nations development and humanitarian country-level planning and programming processes and instruments. Examples include UNSDCF and humanitarian response plans and related assessments such as the common country analysis and the humanitarian needs overview. This can also be an opportunity to mobilize humanitarian and development funding and financing streams for resilient SDG 6 outcomes.

Box 13. Country-level support and coordination through the United Nations development system

Actions needed to accelerate progress on water and sanitation issues are largely local and basin specific, with government at the centre. Thus, support from the United Nations system at country level will be fundamental.

The RC system ensures coordination of all organizations of the United Nations dealing with operational activities for development at the country level, regardless of the nature of their presence in the country. It encompasses the United Nations RC, UNCTs and the RC office, and is served by DCO (UNSDG, 2023).

UNCTs include all the United Nations entities working on sustainable development, emergency, recovery and transition in programme countries (UNSDG, 2023). At country level, the United Nations entities that work on water and sanitation issues are part of UNCTs that are central in providing coordinated support to countries. In many cases, they are also UN-Water Members.

RCs lead UNCTs. They also ensure system-wide accountability on the ground for the United Nations

Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and coordinate United Nations support to countries in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UNSDG, 2023).

DCO manages and oversees the RC system and serves as Secretariat of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG). Its objective is to support the capacity, effectiveness and efficiency of RCs and the United Nations development system as a whole, in support of national efforts for sustainable development (DCO, n.d.).

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES: UPSCALED COUNTRY-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT FOR SDG 6 ACCELERATION AND WATER ACTION AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

By building on existing coordination structures and United Nations country programmes, the United Nations system can strengthen its support for SDG 6 progress acceleration and implementation of Water Action Agenda commitments at country level. This could be done through the United Nations RC system, UNCTs and United Nations country programming instruments including the common country analysis and UNSDCF (UN DESA, 2022b).

With additional support, RCs and UNCTs can work with government counterparts to strengthen coordination of programmes and projects on the ground, together with relevant partners. This will ensure activities are anchored in the existing relevant national development plans and UNSDCFs and can deliver on the commitments, including links to the regional level as relevant, in line with United Nations entities' roles in the commitment and their mandates (UN DESA, 2022b). RCs and UNCTs can also advocate with governments for greater prioritization of water-related issues in their national development plans and budgets. In addition, they can encourage new commitments to be registered in the Water Action Agenda and promote follow-up accountability for implementation of existing commitments.

UN-Water and DCO are developing new operational models. These demonstrate how the United Nations development system can work together, through the RC system and UNCTs. The objective in doing so is to deliver better coordinated, more coherent support to countries on water-related issues by leveraging existing in-country, regional and global United Nations system-wide capacities and resources, and partnerships.

Establishing a United Nations system-wide strategy for water and sanitation and implementing it in close coordination with the RC system is a crucial "pathway to scale" for delivering integrated support on the ground. This would also support governments and stakeholders to accelerate progress at national and subnational levels.

Upscaling United Nations system-wide work on SDG 6 through implementation of the Water Action Agenda commitments from the UN 2023 Water Conference is a prime opportunity with great potential to demonstrate **the United Nations Reform** and **the United Nations development system's repositioning** in practice (United Nations, n.d.f).

4.3 The UN-Water coordination and delivery mechanism through Members and Partners

4.3.1 HOW UN-WATER CAN DELIVER FOR THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

UN-Water is an inter-agency coordination mechanism that brings together all United Nations entities working on water- and sanitation-related issues and external partners to ensure coherence and coordination of United Nations activities on water. It also supports Member States in

achieving the water-related targets of the 2030 Agenda. The coordination mechanism, which does not have an implementation mandate, also has a range of other functions. These include: providing coordination and multi-stakeholder engagement at global, regional and country levels; providing information and data to support monitoring, reporting and review of SDG 6; coordinating global campaigns and engagement initiatives on water-related issues; and offering policy guidance on topics related to water.

UN-Water comprises United Nations entities (Members) and other international organizations (Partners) working on water and sanitation issues. It is supported by the Management Team that includes the UN-Water Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary and the Technical Advisory Unit. The UN-Water role is to ensure Members and Partners "deliver as one" in response to water- and sanitation-related challenges.

The ambition created by the UN 2023 Water Conference, including the Water Action Agenda and initiatives highlighted as game changers by the President of the General Assembly, and the associated requests by Member States, requires that UN-Water enhances its capacity to deliver for the United Nations system in an efficient and effective manner. Strengthening of UN-Water was also a frequent appeal during the conference. The paragraphs below lay out ways in which UN-Water could build on and reinforce what it already does and then augment its capabilities to deliver on the follow-up of the conference and support SDG 6 acceleration, thus contributing to achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Coordination and multi-stakeholder engagement, especially at the country level. Through its Members and Partners, UN-Water plays a critical role in ensuring coordination and multi-stakeholder engagement in global, regional and country-level water issues. Given the cross-sectoral nature of water, this coordination across thematic areas and stakeholders can help countries deliver on SDG 6, on other SDGs and their targets, and on the commitments made in the Water Action Agenda. UN-Water will need to reinforce its approach and support systems for country-level engagement to enable and facilitate cooperation and collaboration among UN-Water Members and Partners with governments and other stakeholders. They will have to work in close collaboration with RCs and through UNCTs, where UN-Water Members are often represented, to deliver on water-related outcomes that would strengthen the United Nations capacity.

Mainstreaming of water. Guided by Member States, UN-Water can also increase support for the integration of water-related issues into relevant intergovernmental processes linked to themes such as climate change, disaster risk reduction, humanitarian crises, food and agriculture, health, biodiversity, oceans, environment, urban development, women's empowerment, finance and international cooperation. Through such an approach, UN-Water can help to ensure water issues are considered in these broader policy discussions, vis-à-vis strengthening support to the UN-Water Members affiliated with these processes. This can help to improve the overall effectiveness of water initiatives. Along the same lines, UN-Water-supported activities through Members and Partners at the country and regional levels should try to mainstream water across the national and regional work of United Nations entities, and support governments in doing so across line ministries.

United Nations system-wide approach. UN-Water can help the United Nations system to adopt a system-wide approach to water. This means UN-Water is recognized as the mechanism that crosses boundaries within the United Nations to ensure water-related initiatives are comprehensive and integrated across the different elements of the United Nations system,

taking into account the broader context in which they operate. If SDG 6 GAF were transformed into a United Nations system-wide strategy or action plan on water and sanitation, then UN-Water would play a key role in its delivery through coordination and implementation by Members and Partners.

Information-sharing and data provision. UN-Water serves as a platform for information-sharing and data provision related to SDG 6 monitoring, reporting and review through its IMI-SDG6 platform. Such information and data enable decision makers to act on the existing gaps in implementation of SDG 6. However, the lack of monitoring infrastructure and capacity to uptake data and information by decision makers in many countries means that UN-Water needs to expand support programmes. It also needs to facilitate capacity development and strengthening of national monitoring systems so countries are better equipped to take action. Through its Members and Partners, UN-Water can also help countries to advance on SDG 6 implementation by addressing deficiencies and bottlenecks identified through their SDG 6 monitoring and reporting.

Policy guidance. UN-Water provides policy guidance through its membership and associated expert groups on global topics related to water. Through these expert groups, UN-Water ensures stakeholders are up to date with the latest scientific, technical and policy developments in water. The expert groups, which comprise experts from UN-Water Members and Partners and bridge across sectors, have the potential to strengthen support to the global community and Member States in particular. With more country-level engagement, UN-Water can better understand the needs and challenges that remain, identify gaps in SDG 6 delivery by the United Nations system and provide policy guidance at the national level. This could be combined with the development of a knowledge management system and learning strategy across Members and Partners that can help to be more effective in policy support.

On-demand technical expertise. The amount of expertise related to water and sanitation is significant across UN-Water Members and Partners, as demonstrated in the UN-Water Inventory (UN-Water, 2019c). However, it is an underutilized element of what the mechanism can offer to Member States. The on-demand technical expertise, which Member States can draw upon as needed, allows UN-Water to broker timely and targeted support through the relevant Members and Partners and other support mechanisms in place across the United Nations system, in coordination with the RC system and UNCTs. Developing better ways to access this expertise and deploy it can benefit Member States.

Advocacy and raising awareness. UN-Water also plays a role in advocacy and raising awareness about water-related issues. This is done most notably through its campaigns on World Water Day and World Toilet Day, and also through a strong social media presence. As UN-Water starts to make more efforts to bridge into non-water sectors where it wants to elevate its footprint, communications and associated campaigns will have to broaden. It will need to better integrate into areas where water is not the focus of discussions yet also be agile enough to respond quickly to rapidly appearing opportunities. The development of a United Nations system-wide communications strategy and campaign relating water to respective mandates of the United Nations agencies could help strengthen the understanding of interlinkages with water and sanitation across major global topics. It could also take advantage of strategic opportunities at key moments.

Support to the SDG 6 GAF accelerators. Marked acceleration is required to achieve SDG 6. UN-Water has to play a role in facilitating action in this

regard. It has already launched the SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative, which aims to enable "the United Nations system and its multi-stakeholder partners to 'deliver as one' in supporting countries to develop capacities to accelerate progress towards SDG 6" (UN-Water, n.d.b). The initiative is only in its infant stage, and much work remains to be done to bring the initiative to scale. Giving impetus to the other four accelerators (financing, data and information, innovation and governance) will also require similar endeavours.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES: SUPPORT TO A SPECIAL ENVOY FOR WATER AND REGULAR INTERGOVERNMENTAL MEETINGS ON WATER

With a loud call for a Special Envoy and more intergovernmental meetings on water emerging from the UN 2023 Water Conference, UN-Water is uniquely placed to support these additional means to address water in the United Nations system. The UN-Water family, with 35 Members and 45 Partners, makes up a mechanism that can assist the Special Envoy for Water with technical and policy support across a wide range of water-related topics. It can also provide support to foster and then implement collaboration, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and provide advocacy and communications assistance to reinforce messaging and outreach.

4.3.2 WHAT UN-WATER WOULD NEED TO DELIVER FOR THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

To deliver on the follow-up of the UN 2023 Water Conference and to accelerate the implementation of SDG 6 and the Water Action Agenda, UN-Water will need to play a central role. However, it is not currently equipped to take on the additional responsibilities necessary to carry out what is required.

To be effective, UN-Water will have to provide catalytic support for:

- A Special Envoy for Water.
- Meetings on water with United Nations executive heads.
- More frequent United Nations conferences on water.
- Increasing coordination across the United Nations system.
- Politically elevating water across its Members.
- Bridging out to other intergovernmental processes.
- Increasing capacity development for monitoring and uptake of SDG 6 data.
- Implementing SDG 6 GAF.
- Increasing engagement with Member States and regional entities such as regional economic commissions.
- Increasing communications capacity to support all of the previous points.

This increased scope and activity necessitates a capacity, financial resources and, in some cases, the mandate that UN-Water does not currently have.

The following are ways in which the UN-Water capacity and functions can be enhanced to deliver for the United Nations system.

UN-WATER MEMBERS AND PARTNERS

UN-Water is its Members and Partners. The Members of UN-Water cut across most water-related themes and are the institutions that carry out programmatic work on water and

sanitation within the United Nations system. Enhancing their capacity to engage with UN-Water to a greater degree and take part in coordinated activities across the United Nations system will help the United Nations deliver in a more effective manner. Two options, which are mutually reinforcing, for strengthening Member capacity are presented below.

First, **strengthen the water and sanitation programmes in each individual United Nations entity to scale up delivery and to enable better coordination across the United Nations system**. This would enable UN-Water to deliver many of the tasks laid out in the previous section such as country support, mainstreaming water, and provide technical expertise and support to SDG 6 GAF. This includes the allocation of financial resources, staff or staff time dedicated to water and sanitation, including coordination through UN-Water. This increases the overall capacity of UN-Water, and also gives those United Nations entities increased capacity to engage on water-related issues throughout the United Nations system.

Second, **facilitate the secondment of staff and/or allocate staff time to the UN-Water Management Team for long-term and/or specific assignments.** The United Nations system is full of water experts. Creating a mechanism whereby United Nations entities can second their staff to the UN-Water Management Team for different levels of time-bound support could leverage existing capacity across UN-Water Members and Partners and increase professional opportunities for staff.

The number of UN-Water Partners has steadily increased since 2003. The Partners have brought their expertise, knowledge and networks to UN-Water in support of the coordination mechanism and the internationally agreed agenda on freshwater-related issues, including sanitation (UN-Water, 2021d). UN-Water Partners could potentially more fully align their activities with those of the United Nations system in the country context, thus providing additional resources that RCs and UNCTs can tap into for support.

Following up on the UN 2023 Water Conference, including implementation of the Water Action Agenda commitments and the game-changer initiatives outlined by the President of the General Assembly, will need active engagement of UN-Water Partners in task forces, expert groups and other initiatives.

THE UN-WATER MANAGEMENT TEAM

The UN-Water Management Team draws the connections on water and sanitation across the United Nations system. With UN-Water offices in New York and Geneva, the UN-Water Management Team sits at the heart of decision-making support in the United Nations system. If the United Nations wants to deliver in a more system-wide, coordinated manner at a higher level on water and sanitation for the activities mentioned above, then increasing the functional capacity in the Management Team will be required to coordinate those tasks.

For the above-mentioned support and coordination activities, the functions that the UN-Water Management Team would need to enhance to meet the needs include liaising with Member States on intergovernmental processes, coordination, advocacy, knowledge management, data and monitoring, and system-wide resource mobilization.

THE CALL FOR STRENGTHENING UN-WATER IS NOT NEW, BUT IT IS TIME NOW FOR AN EVOLUTION

The suggestion to strengthen UN-Water goes back to the recommendations of the UNSGAB report in 2015 (UNSGAB, 2015). The topic was also elaborated on by others, including the Global High-Level Panel on Water and

Peace (Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace, 2017), the Secretary-General's Second Report on Repositioning the United Nations Development System (ECOSOC, 2017) and the United Nations and World Bank Group High-Level Panel on Water (United Nations and World Bank Group High-Level Panel on Water, 2018).

To respond to the new level of ambition of the United Nations system and undertake the efforts outlined in this section, UN-Water must maintain its inter-agency structure. It must do so while making a step change in the level of support it can provide to the United Nations system on water and sanitation issues – from global intergovernmental conferences to country-level support. Beyond the above proposals for increasing capacity of the various parts of the UN-Water family, the addition of a United Nations coordination office[6], which could enhance the UN-Water visibility and efforts on water across the United Nations system, should be considered. Such a coordination office would serve, and not replace or supersede the UN-Water inter-agency mechanism. For example, such a coordination office would work in complete synergy with the possible United Nations Special Envoy for Water. It could also lead the development and coordination of a United Nations system-wide action plan or strategy on water and sanitation.

4.4 The way(s) forward – options for consideration

This final section of this chapter provides an overview of what can be done within the existing mandates and with current capacities, and where additional capacities and mandates will be required if the transformation outlined by the Secretary-General and Member States is to occur. Three avenues offer a menu of options for consideration; these are not mutually exclusive. Figure 5 presents these options for how the United Nations system can support SDG 6 progress acceleration.

4.4.1 CONTINUE BUSINESS AS USUAL – LEARN AND ADAPT

This option would be the status quo within the United Nations. UN-Water would continue to: review, monitor and report on SDG 6; share information and provide data; provide policy guidance and technical expertise; carry out advocacy and communications on behalf of the UN-Water family; and slowly expand its work at the country level. As it has done for its 20-year existence, UN-Water would learn and adapt from the work it carries out. By continuing only business as usual, UN-Water could not respond to the increased ambitions and expectations outlined by the Secretary-General and Member States.

4.4.2 STRENGTHEN EFFECTIVENESS – DO BETTER AND MORE

Within the existing mandates of the United Nations, there is much that could be done to elevate water across the system. This would involve integration of water issues into intergovernmental processes and enhancement of the United Nations executive leadership role in promoting these issues globally. Working with United Nations executives and their water and sanitation programme teams, the UN-Water Management Team could support giving priority to water and sanitation programmes within all United Nations entities.

This option also calls for an expansion of country-level engagement and coordination, and a realignment of UN-Water expert groups and task forces to support Member States

6 A coordination office in the United Nations is a specialized unit or department within the United Nations system that aims to enhance coordination and cooperation among various entities and agencies of the United Nations. The primary role of a coordination office is to promote synergy and coherence in the implementation of United Nations programmes, policies and initiatives. Common tasks include facilitating inter-agency collaboration, strategic planning and policy development, information management and knowledge-sharing, advocacy and representation, and resource mobilization. Coordination offices within the United Nations serve as focal points for collaboration, integration and coherence among different entities, enabling them to work collectively towards common objectives and improve the impact of the United Nations system as a whole.

and various initiatives more effectively. These include the SDG 6 GAF accelerators, the game-changer initiatives highlighted by the President of the General Assembly and the Water Action Agenda. These proposals will require additional financial and human resources to implement in some combination of the UN-Water Management Team and UN-Water Members.

4.4.3 DEVELOP NEW ELEMENTS – TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION AND DIALOGUE

The most ambitious of the options, and the one that would position water in the United Nations system most effectively, would be to develop new mandates and strengthen existing mandates. Water and sanitation do not have a "home" or a strong "voice" at the highest level, despite these issues being fundamental to sustainable development. The required transformation on how the United Nations system needs to address water to meet the demands of the Secretary-General and Member States will require a commensurate transformation in the system and additional resources for UN-Water and its Members.

In terms of new mandates, following the UN 2023 Water Conference, the need for regular intergovernmental meetings and conferences on water issues will keep progress moving forward and water at the top of the global political agenda.

SDG 6 GAF could be elevated into a United Nations system-wide strategy, developed and coordinated by an enhanced UN-Water. The addition of a coordination office to UN-Water resources would strengthen its inter-agency coordination mandate and augment the capacity of United Nations entities to deliver better integrated results on water and sanitation at all levels.

Within existing mandates, the organization of meetings, involving United Nations executive heads, specifically focused on water issues would transform action and dialogue on water. The appointment of a Special Envoy for Water by the Secretary-General would raise the profile of water on the global agenda across sectors and intergovernmental processes. Their role would be supported as part of the strengthening of UN-Water and its Members' water and sanitation programmes. Following the UN 2023 Water Conference and operationalization of the Water Action Agenda, this requires managing its platform effectively, supporting implementation and providing a process for follow-up and review.

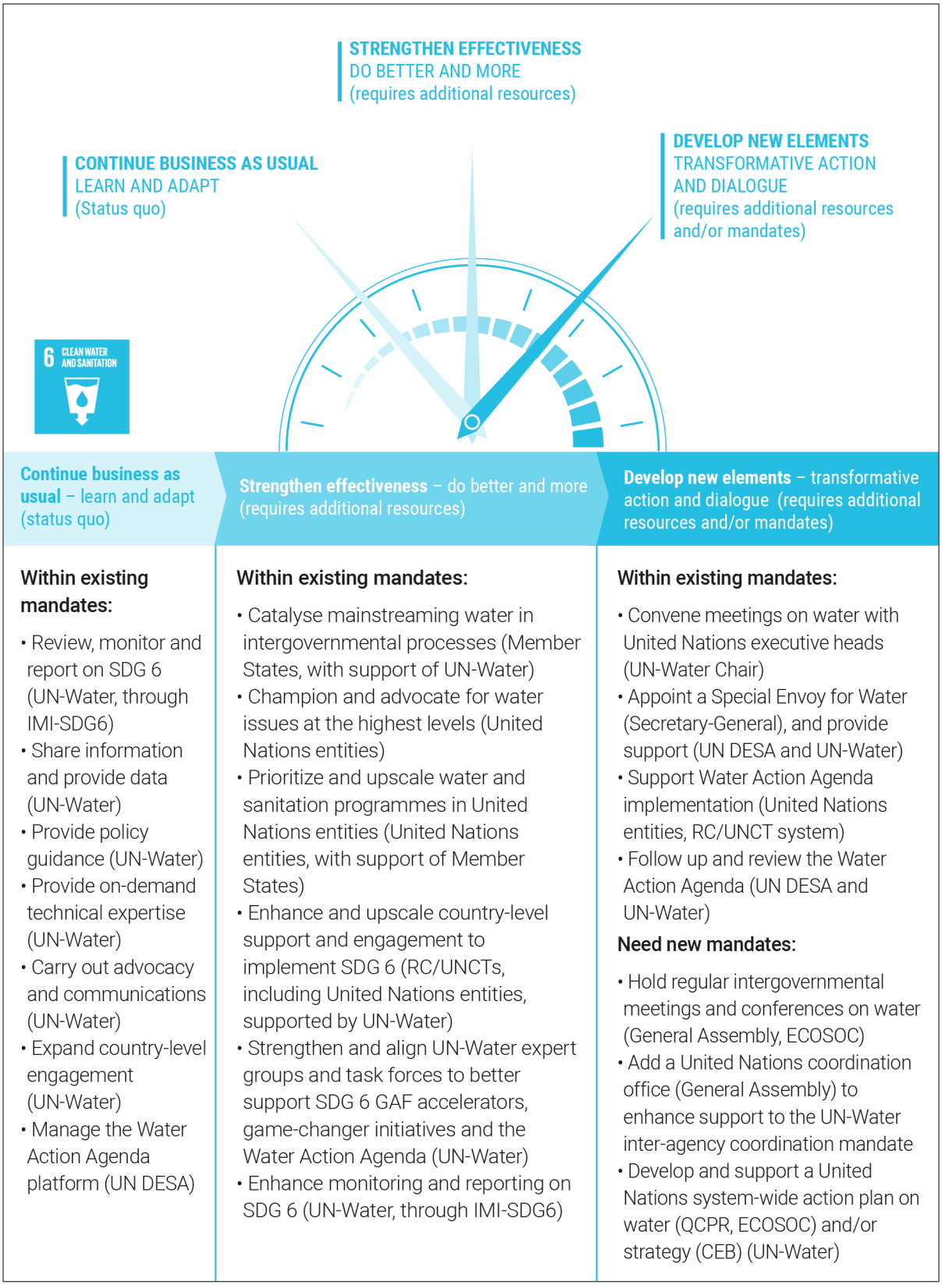
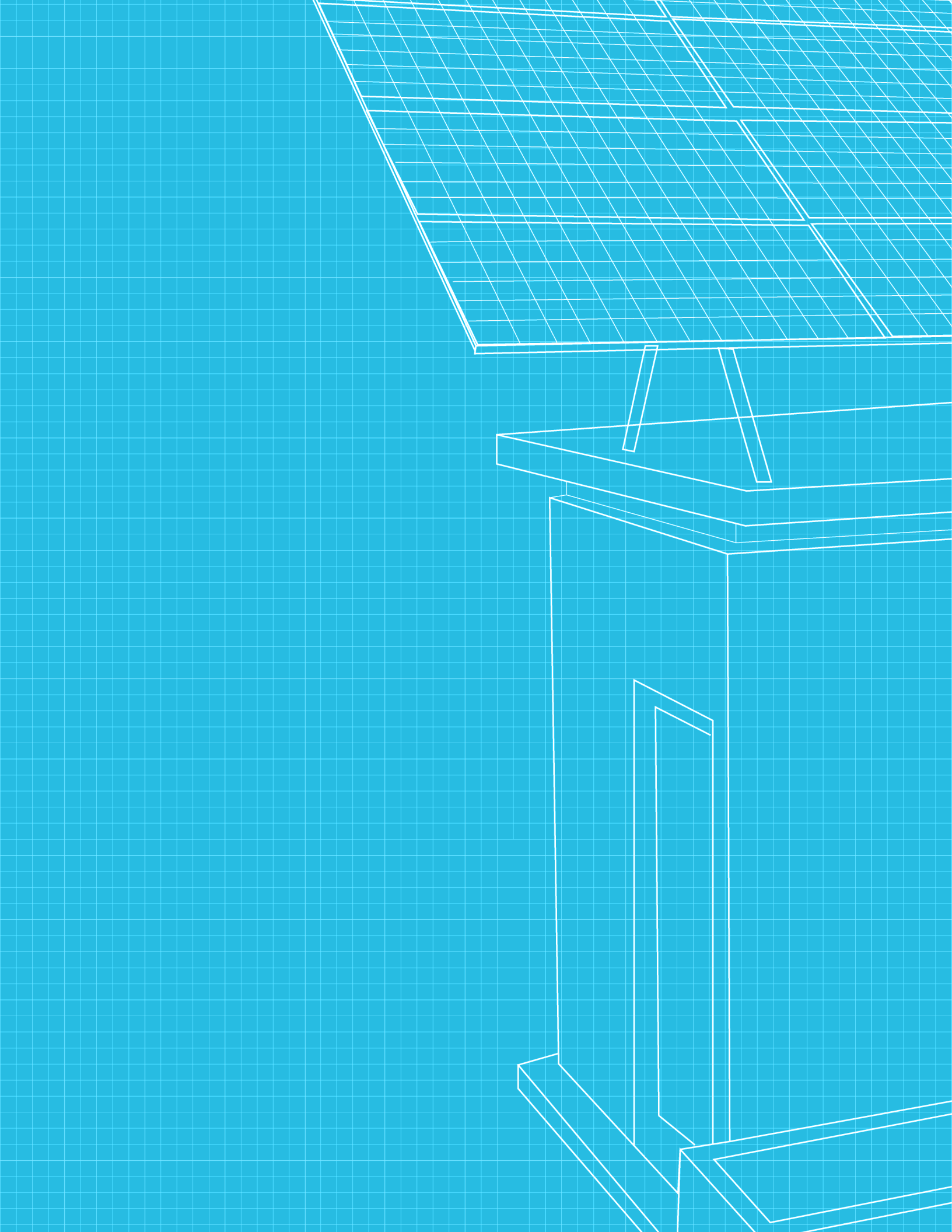
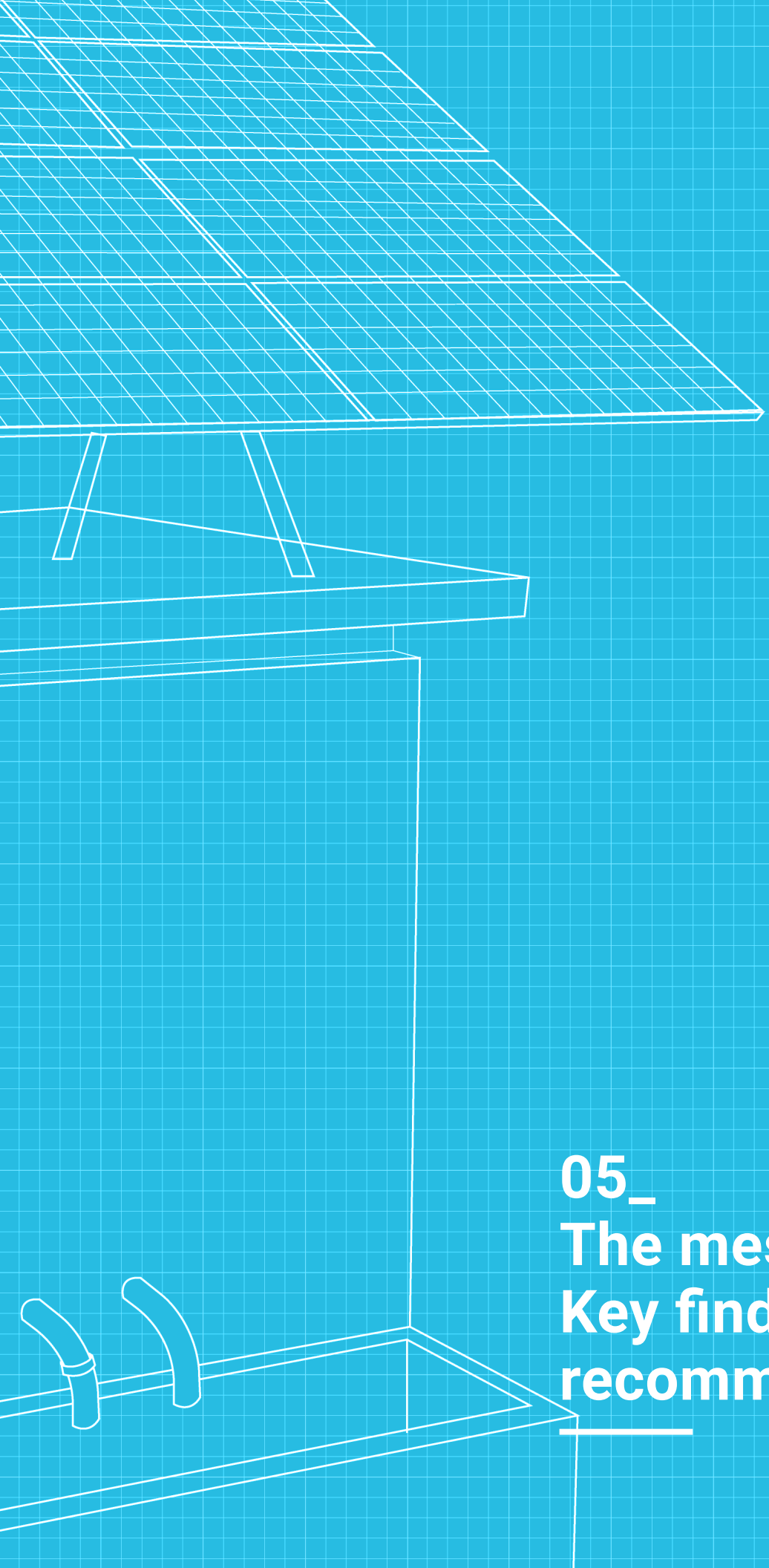


Figure 5. Options for how the United Nations system can support SDG 6 progress acceleration





05_
The message: Key findings and recommendations

In 2018, the SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation showed the world is not on track to reach SDG 6 (UN-Water, 2018). In 2021, the UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative's Summary Progress Update demonstrated that the world needs to accelerate, on average, four times faster if SDG 6 is to be reached by 2030 (UN-Water, 2021b).

Two years later, the UN 2023 Water Conference generated renewed commitment across sectors to address the global water crisis as a top priority. In response, this SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023 presents a blueprint for SDG 6 acceleration.

At the midpoint of the journey to 2030, the world has come a long way, but…

- **We need to move much faster.** We need to work six times faster on drinking water, five times faster on sanitation and three times faster on hygiene. At the current speed, in 2030, 2 billion people will still be living without safely managed drinking water, 3 billion without safely managed sanitation, and 1.4 billion without basic hygiene services.
- **Water quality is suffering.** Forty-two per cent of household wastewater is not treated properly, damaging ecosystems and human health. Significant data gaps on ambient water quality leave many at risk of exposure to pollution.
- **Climate change is hitting hard.** Rising water stress is affecting food security and biodiversity. There are rapid changes in surface water in one fifth of river basins. Floods and drought are becoming more frequent and extreme, increasing the number of water-related disasters.
- **Silo thinking is holding us back.** Implementation of IWRM needs to double. Only one SDG region is on track to have all its transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers covered by cooperation arrangements by 2030.
- **We are heading in the wrong direction.** Financing needs have gone up and ODA disbursement is going down.
- **We are not walking the talk on inclusivity.** Inclusive governance is recognized but not implemented. National policies and laws increasingly recognize participatory procedures, but implementation has been insufficient.

Obstacles blocking progress	The blueprint for acceleration
> **Not enough money flowing to water.** Enabling environments for efficient investment and spending are absent. Lack of well-prepared bankable projects and sustainable financing models make the water sector unattractive for investment.	> **Pour in more funds.** New investments must be attracted by better enabling environments, and existing finances must be used more efficiently and effectively. The global development finance architecture needs to be reformed to provide more funding to governments.
> **Not enough data.** In too many countries, policymakers lack credible and timely data for decision-making due to inadequate monitoring and reporting systems, and insufficient resources.	> **Fill the data gaps.** National monitoring, reporting and data dissemination systems must be strengthened to cover all SDG 6 global indicators, combining data sets from all stakeholders. Earth observation technologies and improved data practices, such as standardization and disaggregation, can enhance decision-making and reduce inequalities.
> **Not enough capacity.** Gaps in the water and sanitation workforce are growing due to limited access to education, weak supportive frameworks, and poor rates of recruitment and retention of skilled staff, particularly women.	> **Invest in the workforce.** Education and employers need to collaborate to promote water and sanitation "literacy" in curricula and to attract, train and retain workers, especially women and youth. There is a need for national-level workforce assessments and studies to determine current in-demand and future skills with a view towards emerging technologies.
> **Not enough innovation.** From planning to implementation, innovation is too limited and slow to meet the need for rapid, transformative change.	> **Boost innovation.** Innovative approaches must be sped and scaled up through supportive policies, utilizing technology, such as artificial intelligence, and customizing innovations to local contexts.
> **Not enough coherence.** Water governance is ineffective due to institutional weakness and fragmentation, and poor regulation, accountability and transparency.	> **Maximize cooperation.** Collaboration across different sectors and national borders magnifies the effectiveness of water and sanitation management and supports social cohesion and international peace.

The United Nations system we need

To meet the ambition of the UN 2023 Water Conference and deliver the Water Action Agenda, we need:

- **Water mainstreamed in all relevant intergovernmental processes.** United Nations leadership, United Nations entities and Member States can play a fundamental role in integrating water into the agendas of global and regional efforts on climate change, health, biodiversity, food, energy and disaster risk reduction, among others.
- **Regular intergovernmental meetings and conferences.** These can ensure progress is measured and momentum maintained at the top of the global political agenda.
- **United Nations leadership convened at the highest level.** United Nations executive heads can help accelerate progress on SDG 6 and drive the Water Action Agenda through regular dialogue and decision-making.
- **A more effective country-level coordination interface.** The interaction between United Nations entities working on water and the United Nations development system, through the resident coordinator system, can be enhanced to bolster and upscale country-level SDG 6 acceleration.
- **A dedicated system-wide water and sanitation strategy.** SDG 6 GAF can be elevated and transformed into a United Nations system-wide strategy to operationalize inter-agency coordination for SDG 6 acceleration.
- **Strengthened United Nations agency water and sanitation programmes.** The upscaling of current programmes and developing new ones to address gaps and respond to emerging needs can augment United Nations system capacity to deliver on SDG 6 implementation.
- **A United Nations coordination office to enhance the UN-Water inter-agency mandate.** The addition of a coordination office to UN-Water resources can strengthen the United Nations system's capacity to deliver results. Such a coordination office would serve the UN-Water inter-agency mechanism.

Annex 1. Summary of Proceedings by the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations 2023 Water Conference

As part of the summary of the proceedings of the UN 2023 Water Conference, the President of the General Assembly proposed nine actions and initiatives highlighted as "game changers" that could be pursued following the conference (President of the General Assembly, 2023):

- Integrated water and climate policy at national and global levels by 2030.
- Operational Global Water Information System to support water, climate and land management for socioeconomic resilience, ecological sustainability and social inclusion by 2030.
- Early Warnings for All to help safeguard lives and property by 2027.
- Overcoming the dependence on ever-rising water consumption for providing nutrition and power – as fast as possible.
- Re-defined financial principles to make our economies water-, climate-, land-, and ecosystems-smart and people centric.
- Global Water Education Network to build the capacity of institutions and people, especially to support developing countries.
- Inclusive, comprehensive transboundary agreements to support countries, on the basis of the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) and the 1997 Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses (Watercourses Convention).
- Institutional architecture to support transformation: a board of UN agencies under the leadership of the UN Secretary-General, managed by a UN Special Envoy for Water, supported by a reformed UN-Water coordinating body and an independent scientific and advisory panel, in addition to the arrangement for discussing water policy at the United Nations in New York to be developed by the General Assembly.
- Intergovernmental processes on water to be convened on a regular basis.

Annex 2. Abbreviations and acronyms

2030 Agenda > Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

AQUASTAT > Global Information System on Water Resources and Agricultural Water Management

CEB > United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination

COVID-19 > coronavirus disease

DCO > United Nations Development Coordination Office

ECOSOC > United Nations Economic and Social Council

FAO > Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations

GAF > Global Acceleration Framework

GEMS/Water > Global Environment Monitoring System for Water

GLAAS > Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water

HLPF > High-Level Political Forum (on Sustainable Development)

IMI-SDG6 > Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Sustainable Development Goal 6

IWRM > integrated water resources management

JMP > Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene

MDG > Millennium Development Goal

ODA > official development assistance

OECD > Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OHCHR > United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights

QCPR > Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review

Ramsar > Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat

RC > resident coordinator

SDG > Sustainable Development Goal

UN1FY > United International Federation of Youth for water and climate / United International Festival of Youth for water and climate

UN 2023 Water Conference > 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

UNCT > United Nations country team

UN DESA > United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

UNECE > United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

UNEP > United Nations Environment Programme

UNESCO > United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UN-Habitat > United Nations Human Settlements Programme

UNICEF > United Nations Children's Fund

UNSD > United Nations Statistics Division

UNSDCF > United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

UNSDG > United Nations Sustainable Development Group

UNSGAB > United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation

UN Women > United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

WASH > water, sanitation and hygiene

Water Action Decade > International Decade for Action, "Water for Sustainable Development", 2018–2028

WHO > World Health Organization

WUE > water-use efficiency

WWDR > World Water Development Report

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Notes

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