

Addressing Global Water Challenges and Accelerating Progress on SDG 6 at the Country Level

Technical Advice Concept Note

1. Background

Solving the water and sanitation crisis is today an urgent global priority with consequences far beyond water and sanitation, impacting *inter alia* economic development, food security, health, peace and security, and gender equality. With demand for freshwater expected to grow by more than 40% until 2050 and climate change having an increasing impact on water availability, the World Economic Forum has indeed identified the water crisis as one of the most impactful global risks during the last seven consecutive years. At the same time, the UN-Water SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2018 on Water and Sanitation clearly highlights that the world is currently off-track to solve the global water crisis. Today, 2.1 billion people lack safely managed drinking-water, 4.5 billion lack access to safely managed sanitation, water governance structures remain weak and water-related ecosystems continue to decline.

Against this backdrop, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development and the New Urban Agenda provide a roadmap to address the water and sanitation-related challenges in a comprehensive manner, balancing the economic, environmental and social dimensions, and at the same time ensuring that no one is left behind.

In this context, Member States have expressed concern about their capacity to comprehensively review and accelerate progress towards meeting the global water and sanitation related goals. To enable this, the United Nations' and World Bank Group's High-level Panel on Water as well as the Global High-level Panel on Water and Peace have recommended the establishment of UN meetings on water at the highest possible level. In response to the recommendations, in June 2018 UN-Water, as the coordinating mechanism for the UN's work on water and sanitation, appointed a Task Force¹ to explore the feasibility, format, structure, periodicity, budgetary and operational aspects of possible UN high-level meetings on water and sanitation. It is recognised that these possible meetings should have multi-stakeholder participation, be integrated across different sectors, meetings and processes, and have impact on the ground level as their ultimate objective. As such, strong links to the reformed UN development system are necessary, which will be realigned to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a new framework for country- and regional-level planning, coordination and implementation.

While recognising that the recommended high-level meetings would ideally be periodic to allow for stocktaking and substantial follow-up and review, this technical advice concept note focuses on the

¹ Task Force co-coordinators: UN-DESA and WMO. Task Force members: AquaFed, FAO, GWP, ILO, OHCHR, SWA, UN Environment, UN Global Compact, UN-Habitat, UNECA, UNECE, UNESCO, UNESCWA, UNICEF, UNU, WfWP, WHO, World Bank Group, WSSCC and WWC.

organisation of the first UN high-level conference on water and sanitation, which conceivably may even remain a one-off event.

In the same way as back in 2014, when UN-Water proactively developed technical advice to support Member States in the formulation of SDG 6, this paper intends to analyse in a factual and evidence-based way the rationale for the conference, how it could be organised and what would make sense considering the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) and other relevant processes.

2. Rationale for organising the conference

There is currently no UN high-level meeting/conference that gathers all Member States and allows them to comprehensively review progress, share lessons and mobilise action on the whole of SDG 6 and other relevant global targets. While there are many UN intergovernmental platforms that can deliberate on water-related issues, they can do so only according to their core mandate which is typically limited to some aspects of SDG 6 and of the water cycle². This means that the periodic in-depth reviews of SDG 6 at the HLPF currently are the only UN fora to review progress on all water and sanitation issues. Many Member States and other stakeholders have expressed criticism on the effectiveness of the Forum with respect to its capacity to review specific SDGs in-depth. For example, during the SDG 6 in-depth review at the HLPF 2018 many Member States raised the concern that a 3-hour session every four years is not enough to provide necessary attention to water and sanitation to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 6. This was highlighted by the fact that many Member States that asked for the floor during the review were ultimately unable to speak due to lack of time.

At the same time, the water and sanitation sector has a number of periodic, non-UN meetings, including the triennial World Water Fora, the biennial Water Action Decade conferences in Dushanbe, the triennial Budapest Water Summits, the annual Stockholm World Water Week and the Sanitation and Water for All high-level meetings, among others³. However, in their current form, none of these international meetings have the UN mandate or political participation needed to ensure the comprehensive review of SDG 6 currently requested, nor do they provide the neutral space required to negotiate agreements to be made by heads of government and ministers.

This fragmented setup was highlighted in the 2017 UN General Assembly Working-Level Dialogues on Water, which looked at the ability of the UN system to effectively support Member States in implementing SDG 6 and other relevant global targets. As per the High-level Panel on Water's recommendation, a UN high-level conference on water and sanitation would be able to address this gap and complement the HLPF process by providing a space for all Member States to comprehensively review implementation, share lessons and experiences, make agreements and commitments, build partnerships, strengthen accountability and accelerate progress on SDG 6 and other relevant global targets at the country level.

The conference – which would be the first official UN meeting on water since the Mar del Plata conference in 1977 – would also allow Member States to start addressing critical gaps currently

² Please see Annex 8.2 for a list of all relevant intergovernmental bodies

³ Please see Annex 8.1 for a non-exhaustive list of the most relevant meetings from the HLPF 2018 to the end of 2021

existing between different water-related intergovernmental processes. In their current setup, discussions relevant to the water sector are separated among a number of different fora with few interconnections: climate change adaptation is discussed at UNFCCC COPs, water-related disasters as part of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, sustainable development financing as part of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and issues related to Small Island Developing States as part of the SAMOA Pathway, to name some examples. This means that a combined stocktaking of water-related matters is currently not possible and that synergies between relevant processes are not harnessed.

In response, a UN high-level conference and its preparatory and follow-up processes would allow Member States to look at water issues thoroughly by combining the review of SDG 6 with water-related elements of other relevant fora. This would also help responding to the need for increased integration emphasised in the 2017 Working-Level Dialogues, which stressed that the challenges of water cannot be addressed through the water sector alone and need to be integrated into many of the other SDGs. It is recognised that a systematic approach needs to be developed for how such a comprehensive review can bridge the gap between existing processes.

Lastly, the reform of the UN development system, which will be reconfigured to more effectively deliver on the SDGs at the country level, presents an opportune moment for a possible conference. A UN high-level conference would be able to directly support and become an “early adopter” of the reformed UN development system by integrating SDG 6 across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, support national and regional level planning on water and sanitation related goals, strengthen multi-sectoral stakeholder partnerships and commitments for the implementation of SDG 6, and strengthen links between the national, regional and global levels.

The setup of the possible conference could be modelled after the successful high-level United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (also known as the Ocean Conference) organised in New York in June 2017, which resulted in financial commitments of 25.5 billion USD towards the implementation of SDG 14⁴. Following a similar process, the UN high-level conference on water and sanitation could ultimately contribute to the mobilisation of necessary action at the country level to set the world on track towards achieving safe water and sanitation for all.

In order for the conference to take place, extra-budgetary funding would need to be mobilised and a mandate to convene given through the UN system at the highest level.

3. Conference objectives

The main objective of the conference would be to **accelerate progress on SDG 6 and other relevant global targets at the country level** by supporting Member States and other relevant stakeholders to⁵:

- a. Comprehensively review SDG 6 and other relevant global targets
- b. Review and advance actionable solutions to address the global water challenges

⁴ In-depth analysis of Ocean Conference Voluntary Commitments to support and monitor their implementation. UN-DESA. 2017.

⁵ Not listed in order of priority

- c. Provide a platform for engagement and collaboration between the water sector and other relevant sectors, based on the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs
- d. Share lessons and experiences, building on input from existing global, regional and national meetings and processes, and build partnerships at all levels
- e. Make commitments to mobilise actions and resources and monitor implementation of such commitments
- f. Increase accountability and engagement of all stakeholders towards achieving SDG 6 and other relevant global targets through a human-rights based and gender-responsive approach
- g. Disseminate and advance the implementation of recommendations of the UN-Water SDG 6 Synthesis Report, the High-level Panel on Water and the Global High-level Panel on Water and Peace, as well as other relevant processes
- h. Support the reformed UN development system, including through strengthened and integrated national- and regional-level planning
- i. Link and enhance water-related work between global agendas such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development and the New Urban Agenda
- j. Mobilise high-level political support and action on water and sanitation issues, including through a conference outcome document
- k. Propose the way forward for periodic follow-up and review of SDG 6 and other relevant global targets among all stakeholders

4. Integration of the conference in current processes

It will be essential for the conference not to duplicate existing meetings and processes but instead to enhance their outcomes and to be integrated across different sectors and geographical levels. To this effect, the UN high-level conference would need to seek synergies with all relevant meetings and various international partnerships in the water sector and beyond through an inclusive preparatory process. The UN high-level conference will be effective if it is a catalyst to shape the agendas of other relevant meetings, so that they further become coherent and harmonised to drive best practices to help achieve SDG 6 and other relevant global targets. The outputs and outcomes from relevant meetings would also become more easily and readily accessible by Member States through the conference preparatory process.

A non-exhaustive list of the most relevant meetings from the HLPF 2018 to the end of 2021 is included as an annex.

5. Conference format

5.1 Participation

Participation in the high-level segment of the conference should be at the highest possible levels, meaning ministerial level or higher. The participation during the entire conference should be multi-stakeholder in nature, bringing together Governments, local governments, the UN system, other intergovernmental organizations, international financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, foundations, academic institutions, the scientific

community, the private sector, philanthropic organizations, media and other actors engaged in the implementation of SDG 6 and other water related goals. Stakeholder participation may be based on the list of those with ECOSOC credentials, but can also use other criteria if needed.

Noting that the success of the Ocean Conference to a large extent depended on its strong multi-stakeholder participation, the conference would need to ensure meaningful inclusion of all relevant stakeholders throughout the conference and its preparatory and follow-up processes. Civil society, private sector and other constituencies would be enabled to actively influence the conference through the preparatory process and through the preparation of relevant background documentation, as well as involvement in the conference partnership dialogues and plenary sessions.

To provide the space for different sectors to engage with the water and sanitation sector and vice versa, participation will need to include partners from all relevant sectors including agriculture, industry, energy, health, education, climate and urban/rural development in the conference as well as in its preparatory and follow-up processes.

While Governments will be responsible for the comprehensive review of the implementation of SDG 6 and other relevant global targets and the conference outcome document, multi-stakeholder participation will be required for making commitments, sharing of lessons and experiences and formation of partnerships at all levels.

5.2 Timing of the conference

The timing of the conference will depend on the length of the preparatory process, the HLPF cycles and the timing of other relevant meetings and processes. Based on today's knowledge on the HLPF cycles and on other relevant meetings, the time window available to organise the conference would range from 2020, two years after the in-depth review of SDG 6 at the HLPF 2018, until the end of 2021.

If Member States would decide to organise high-level meetings periodically in order to enable comprehensive follow-up and increased accountability, due consideration should be given to the HLPF cycles and themes.

5.3 Location

The conference location could be decided by requesting expressions of interest from Member States to organise the conference based on selection criteria, possibly including ease of access, capacity, security situation etc., or be organised at UN Headquarters. In the case of periodic UN high-level conferences, the conference location could rotate based on set criteria.

5.4 Conference elements

It is recognised that, to allow form to follow function, the conference programme should be designed once the conference objectives have been decided. As a key point, there should be a focus on integration between different sectors and between different existing processes in the programme design, as the multi-sectoral nature is among the main added values and key justifications for the conference.

The conference programme will ensure that gender equality considerations are mainstreamed in the themes and content of the conference, and that gender balance is reflected in the composition of participants and speakers.

An overview of possible conference elements that could be included in the programme is included below:

- **Plenary sessions:** Open to all stakeholders devoted to statements to set the scene, share status of progress and highlight challenges.
- **Partnership dialogues:** Open to all stakeholders and devoted to knowledge exchange, partnership building and voluntary commitments towards implementation of SDG 6 and other relevant global targets. The dialogues could be themed after cross-cutting issues or a nexus approach and ensure inclusion of all relevant stakeholders.
- **Voluntary commitments:** Registering voluntary commitments would enable accelerated progress towards implementation of SDG 6 and other relevant global targets, especially on the country level. These commitments could be themed in line with the partnership dialogues, in which registered commitments also could be announced.
- **High-level segment:** High-level concluding statements and adoption of the conference outcome document by Member States.

Parallel sessions would ideally be avoided, to ensure maximum participation and engagement.

5.5 Background documentation

Issue briefs and all necessary documentation would be made available or prepared to support the preparatory process and the conference itself. This could include the (possibly updated) SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2018 on Water and Sanitation, SDG 6 Indicator Reports, 2-page reports on country status based on SDG 6 data, outcome documents from relevant global and regional meetings and processes, relevant HLPF declarations, and background briefs for the partnership dialogues. Depending on the topics, UN-Water Expert Groups and Task Forces can be mobilised to prepare the briefs. This process would ensure multi-stakeholder participation from different sectors in the development of the background documentation.

5.6 Conference outcome documents

The conference would adopt a concise, focused, intergovernmental agreed outcome document (e.g. a declaration/call for action) to support the implementation of global water-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development and the New Urban Agenda, as well as a summary of the conference including the partnership dialogues and list of commitments made during the conference. The conference outcome document would be an input to the HLPF and other relevant processes.

6. Conference organization

6.1 Calling the conference

A mandate to convene the conference needs to be given through the UN system at the highest level (e.g. by the UN General Assembly (UNGA)).

6.2 Preparatory process

A possible sequence for calling and planning the organisation of the conference could include:

- Resolution to convene agreed in the UNGA
- Modality resolution agreed in the UNGA, including specification of the conference programme and preparatory process (could possibly be merged with the resolution to convene)
- Selection of co-facilitators to oversee preparatory process and subsequently chair the conference

A structured, comprehensive and inclusive preparatory process would then need to follow, which to a large extent would determine the final impact the conference would have. As outlined in section 4, input from relevant global and regional meetings and process will need to be facilitated through an integrated process that could include the following steps:

- A multi-stakeholder preparatory process for the partnership dialogues, possibly including consultations at the regional level through the Regional Forums for Sustainable Development and their associated preparatory meetings and events
- Preparatory meetings and intergovernmental consultation to agree on outcome documents

Relevant UN-Water Expert Groups, Task Forces, Members and Partners could be tasked to prepare the background documentation and provide other support to the preparatory process as needed. National, regional and global monitoring and reporting initiatives would feed into the conference as necessary to allow for informed progress reviews and follow-up, including status reports of country progress building on national SDG 6 data. The preparatory process would build synergies with other existing relevant water-related meetings and processes.

A detailed work plan and operational arrangements would need to be developed.

6.3 Communication

A communication strategy would need to be developed for the conference to ensure maximum outreach and involvement leading up to the conference, to communicate the conference outcomes, and to keep the momentum and the issues high on the global agenda following the conference. The strategy could be developed and coordinated by UN-Water to ensure synergies with the World Water Day, World Toilet Day and Water Action Decade campaigns.

6.4 Follow-up process

The way forward to follow-up and review SDG 6 and other relevant global targets will be agreed by Member States during the conference. Additionally, follow-up and review of voluntary commitments made in the conference would be needed, as well as ensuring that conference outcomes translates into action at the country level. This could be done by tasking UN-Water to coordinate this process and the UN development system to support Member States in accelerating progress at the country level in partnerships with other relevant stakeholders. Given current capacities of UN-Water, the extent of such a follow-up process would have to rely to a large degree on additional resources made available.

6.5 UN-Water support

The UN-Water family commits to jointly support the organisation of the conference, including providing secretarial support for the organisation of the conference, helping define the agenda and providing consolidated technical input based on SDG 6 monitoring and reporting, showcasing and drawing on thematic work, and supporting the preparatory processes at national, region and global levels. The UN-Water Task Force, co-coordinated by UN-DESA and WMO, will lead and coordinate these efforts.

In this context, the UN Secretary-General could appoint the UN-Water Chair as the Secretary of the conference.

Once a mandate to convene would be given through the UN system, UN-Water would develop a detailed work plan, budget and operational arrangements including considering the title and theme of the conference, carefully assess the links to other processes as well as consult with a wider group of stakeholders.

6.6 National champions, donors and other partners

To mobilise the required extra-budgetary funding as well as the mandate to convene and possibly host the conference, national champions, donors and other partners will need to be identified.

7. Budget

The conference budget would need to cover conference costs (venues, translation services etc.) as well as travel for participation from developing countries. If a preparatory meeting is organised to negotiate the outcome document, funding to bring in experts from developing countries may be required as well. Extra-budgetary funding would be required for the conference organisation and a detailed budget would need to be developed.

In addition to direct conference costs, extra-budgetary resources may also be needed to support the preparatory process, communication activities, developing additional resources, supporting the follow-up process etc. Resources will also be required from the Member States and the international community at large to cover participation in the preparatory and follow up processes, as well as the conference itself.

However, by accelerating progress on SDG 6 and other relevant global targets and reducing fragmentation in the water sector, benefits far larger than the total conference cost could be achieved.

8. Annexes

8.1 Non-exhaustive list of the most relevant meetings⁶

2018

- Singapore International Water Week – *July*
- Stockholm World Water Week – *August*
- Korea International Water Week – *September*
- IWA World Water Congress in Tokyo – *September*
- UN General Assembly – *September*
- Cairo Water Week – *October*
- Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention – *October*
- Ramsar COP13 in Dubai – *October*
- Africa-Arab Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction – *October*
- European Forum for Disaster Risk Reduction – *November*
- Amsterdam International Water Week – *November*
- Africa Water Week – *November*
- CBD COP14 – *November*
- UNFCCC COP24 in Katowice – *December*

2019

- Arab Water Week – *March*
- LATINOSAN – *April*
- Gulf Water Conference – *March*
- Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) Sector Ministers' Meeting – *April*
- Regional Forums for Sustainable Development and associated preparatory meetings – *Spring*
- Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction - *May*
- United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development – *July & September*
- Stockholm World Water Week – *August*
- Korea International Water Week – *September*
- UN General Assembly – *September*
- Cairo Water Week – *October*
- UNCCD COP 14 – *October*
- Budapest Water Summit – *October*
- Amsterdam International Water Week – *November*
- UNFCCC COP25 – *November*
- UNCCD COP 14 – *November*

2020

- SWA Finance Ministers' Meetings – *Spring*
- Regional Forums for Sustainable Development and associated preparatory meetings – *Spring*

⁶ Assuming that meetings will keep their usual frequency throughout 2018-2021

- IWRA World Water Congress – *May*
- UNESCO Water Science-Policy Interface Colloquium – *June*
- Dushanbe Conference – *June*
- Singapore International Water Week – *July*
- Stockholm World Water Week – *August*
- Korea International Water Week – *September*
- UN General Assembly – *September*
- Cairo Water Week – *October*
- Amsterdam International Water Week – *November*
- CBD COP15
- Africa Water Week
- UNFCCC COP26
- EauMega 2020
- Regional Platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction
- United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (tbc)

2021

- The 9th World Water Forum in Dakar - *March*
- Regional Forums for Sustainable Development and associated preparatory meetings – *Spring*
- Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction - *Spring*
- Stockholm World Water Week – *August*
- Korea International Water Week – *September*
- UN General Assembly – *September*
- UNCCD COP 15 – *October*
- Cairo Water Week – *October*
- Amsterdam International Water Week – *November*
- Ramsar COP14
- Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention
- UNFCCC COP27
- Arab Water Week
- United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (tbc)

8.2 Overview of relevant intergovernmental bodies

SDG 6 specific intergovernmental platforms	Leading entity
Meeting of the Parties to Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention)	UNECE
Intergovernmental Council for the International Hydrological Programme (IHP) elected by UNESCO's General Conference	UNESCO
Commission for Hydrology	WMO
Conference of the Contracting Parties of the Ramsar Convention	IUCN hosts the Ramsar secretariat

Intergovernmental platforms of UN-Water Members	Leading entity
The Conference of the Parties	CBD
The FAO Conference	FAO
Committee on World Food Security	FAO, IFAD, WFP
General Conference of all Member States and the 35-member Board of Governors.	IAEA
The Governing Council and the Executive Board	IFAD
International Labour Conference	ILO
General Assembly and Human Rights Council	OHCHR
Regional Commission	UN ECA
Regional Commission	UN ECE
Regional Commission	UN ECLAC
The UN Environment Assembly	UN Environment
Regional Commission	UN ESCAP
Regional Commission	UN ESCWA
The General Assembly, ECOSOC and the Commission on the Status of Women on normative support functions; the General Assembly, ECOSOC and the Executive Board on operations.	UN Women
The Conference of the Parties	UNCCD
The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development	UNCTAD
High-Level Political Forum (for Division for Sustainable Development)	UN-DESA
The Executive Board (shared with UNFPA and UNOPS)	UNDP
The General Conference	UNESCO
Conference of the Parties	UNFCCC
Governing Council (under ECOSOC)	UN-Habitat
Executive Committee (under General Assembly and ECOSOC)	UNHCR
Executive Board (under ECOSOC)	UNICEF
General Conference	UNIDO
General Assembly of UNWTO	UNWTO
Executive Board (elected by ECOSOC and FAO Council)	WFP
World Health Assembly	WHO
Intergovernmental Board on Climate Services for the Global Framework for Climate Services (GFCS)	WMO
World Meteorological Congress	WMO
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	WMO, UNEP
Boards of Governors	World Bank Group