

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE (2023) ON THE MIDTERM COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE OBJECTIVES OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR ACTION, “WATER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT”, 2018–2028

Proposals on the themes for the interactive dialogues

Contribution from UN-Water

I. Background

In its resolution 75/212 entitled “United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028” the General Assembly (GA) decided that the United Nations (UN) 2023 Water Conference will comprise of five (5) interactive dialogues. The President of the GA is requested to hold a 1-day preparatory meeting by November 2022 at UN Headquarters in New York to “*finalize the themes of the interactive dialogues and other outstanding organizational matters*” pertaining to the Conference. The GA also requested the Secretary-General of the Conference (Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Liu Zhenmin) to prepare proposals for themes of the interactive dialogues in a background note, in consultation with Member States, with the support of UN-Water and relevant UN entities. These proposals should be ready for finalization at the preparatory meeting.

This document presents a set of options on possible themes of the interactive dialogues and lists pros and cons of the different options. This document emerged from several discussions within the UN-Water network, including at its 35th meeting in October 2021. The order of the suggested options does not imply any preference among them.

II. Proposed Options

Option 1: Water Action Decade Work Streams + 1

Dialogue themes may be organized around the four work streams of the [Plan of the Water Action Decade](#). In this case, one more theme that complements the four others will need to be added. Discussions around a theme for such additional Dialogue revealed that “Water Governance” comes up often. However, it is just one of the five accelerators of [the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework](#) (GAF), while GAF needs to be considered in its entirety in the design of the Dialogues’ themes. It is therefore suggested to include a GAF-focused theme as the fifth. This fifth Dialogue will explore how GAF can help speed up the objectives of the Decade and accelerate progress in individual work streams of the Water Action Decade Plan. The advantage of selecting this theme as the fifth one is that it could “marry” the Decade Work Plan and the GAF. With this, the possible themes for the Dialogues become:

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

- 2. Improving knowledge generation and dissemination.**
- 3. Pursuing advocacy, networking and promoting partnerships and action.**
- 4. Strengthening communication actions for implementation of the water-related SDGs.**
- 5. Accelerating Water Action Decade implementation through the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework.**

Pros:

- This option is deeply rooted in the Decade setup, reflected in the Decade documents, and naturally well-aligned with the Decade philosophy and objectives.
- In principle, intermediate review of success indicators can be made as per the Decade work plan.
- Most of the Dialogue themes are largely set by the Decade work plan and the preferred options for the fifth theme are narrowed down.

Cons:

- This approach is conservative, as it does not take into account the obvious realities that occurred since the Decade started. It is clear that the world is not on track with the 2030 Agenda, for example, and it became clear even before the pandemic hit. SDG 6 in particular is alarmingly off track. Hence the GAF theme is suggested to be built into this option.
- Some elements of the work streams are either general or overlapping. This, however, comes from the Decade work plan.
- This approach misses a range of important thematic issues – gender, climate change, risk management etc. – at least explicitly. Hence a focused subsequent effort needs to be made to make them all cross-cutting and yet visible in all themes.
- Themes' titles are too long at present to capture attention and interest.

For this Option to work, more unpacking is required for each theme at the subsequent stage of preparation of thematic papers for individual Dialogues. In the Decade work plan, for example, each of the four workstreams have two to four specific activities - 11 such activities in total. Each activity has its own success criteria and means of verification of success. All of these elements jointly contribute to three Decade Objectives: i) Advance sustainable development; ii) Energize implementation of existing programs and projects and 3) Mobilize action to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Using these details of the Decade work plan, making sure that overlaps between themes are avoided, and ensuring the explicit presence of thematic issues in the first four themes will be the key action required to make this option attractive for the Conference.

Incorporating thematic issues as cross-cutting in the above five themes may be the biggest challenge for subsequent work. There are too many issues to include from the water sector itself, while perspectives from other sectors also need to be considered. In addition, theme 4 is mainly communication-focused, which makes a substantive discussion challenging and raises questions about target groups and modes of communication.

Option 2: Accelerators of the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework

Another option for the Dialogues is the *explicit use* of the five “accelerators” of the [SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework](#) (GAF) as themes. GAF is a unifying initiative that involves all sectors of society to speed up progress on SDG 6 by improving support to countries. It is part of the [UN Secretary-General’s Decade of Action](#) to deliver the SDGs by 2030.

Various countries have proved that dramatic gains in water and sanitation can be achieved in just a few years and that some of the solutions are inexpensive, effective and can be quickly deployed. GAF therefore aims to deliver fast results at an increased scale. GAF has four pillars – Engage, Align, Accelerate, and Account – and five “accelerators”. If the accelerators are to be used as the basis, the themes and corresponding content of associated Dialogues may be:

1. **Financing.** This Dialogue will examine how to improve targeting, better utilization of existing resources and mobilization of additional domestic and international funding for delivery and implementation of all SDG 6 targets. It may also explore the barriers that preclude finance mobilisation to date.
2. **Data and information.** The Dialogue will discuss how data generation, validation, standardization and information exchange can build trust so leaders can make informed decisions and increase accountability. It will discuss how to ensure that high-quality information on SDG 6 indicators is shared and easily accessible by any decision maker.
3. **Capacity.** The Dialogue will explore how inclusive human and institutional capacities at all levels can enable improved service levels, operating and maintenance technology, increased job creation in the water sector and the retaining of a skilled work force.
4. **Innovation.** The discussions will be around how innovative practices and technologies can be leveraged and scaled up to ultimately lead to improved water resources and sanitation development and management at the country level.
5. **Governance.** The discussions will be around cross-sector and transboundary collaboration, clear roles, stakeholder involvement and effective and inclusive institutions to make SDG 6 everyone’s business.

Pros:

- Accelerators are well-formulated already and are designed to respond to the challenge of slow progress in SDG 6 to date.
- There are five accelerators. Five Dialogue Themes are required. No need for additional themes’ crafting.
- GAF places an increased focus on concrete country support. It should enable a scaled-up impact at country level. It may therefore have more buy-in from the UN Member States.
- GAF has a clear commitment from Principals of UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes which may enable UN entities to work better together to support SDG 6 progress.

- In terms of outcomes, using GAF as a structure could help to take forward recommendations as many efforts to accelerate progress on SDG 6 are already aligned with GAF.

Cons:

- GAF was launched in 2020. This is a rather recent initiative that has not been aligned with the Water Action Decade.
- GAF focuses on SDG 6 only. Water Action Decade covers areas beyond SDG 6 that are water-related – throughout the SDG universe. (It may, however, be possible to overcome this by simply “adding” to SDG 6 some key explicit “water-related” goals that sit outside of SDG 6 domain, e.g. 11.5).
- Accelerators themselves are not particularly new and have been discussed many times before at various levels and events.
- This approach, like option 1, misses a range of important thematic issues – gender, climate change, etc. However, a focused effort can be made to make them all cross-cutting and yet visible in all five themes.

The point that has come up in discussions within UN-Water to date is that GAF cannot be ignored, i.e. even if GAF is not selected as the main option, its accelerators need to be built into other options.

Option 3: Water-related SDG targets and global agreements

This option could focus on SDG 6 targets and/or SDG 6 + other “water-related” targets (at least explicit ones like 11.5) and bring up links to global agreements like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Paris Agreement. Possible options to group SDG targets under such themes are:

1. **Water and sanitation** (SDG 6.1 and 6.2)
2. **State of water resources and freshwater ecosystems** (SDGs 6.3, 6.4, 6.6 and 15.1)
3. **Transboundary water management and IWRM** (SDG 6.5)
4. **Water, climate and disaster risk reduction** (SDGs 6.5, 1.5, 11.5, 13, and other disaster-related targets; link to Sendai Framework and Paris Process)
5. **Water and peace** (SDGs 6.5, 6.a, 6.b and 16)

Each of the above Dialogues may be structured in such a way that it addresses the current state/progress of the SDGs in question, and how the five GAF accelerators can help speed up this progress.

Pros:

- The UN has been successful in rallying Member States around the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. As such, the UN system is working in close collaboration with Member States to integrate the 2030 Agenda into their national strategies/priorities. At present, many Member States refer to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs when addressing sustainable development. Furthermore, this is the agenda against which they are reporting their progress, in particular in international fora such as the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) and regional ones.

- It can be aligned well with the objectives of the Water Action Decade, which go beyond SDG 6 to include other “water-related” targets.
- It can be aligned with other global stock-taking and review exercises, including the Midterm Review of the Implementation of the Sendai Framework, to promote risk-informed sustainable development.
- This is, perhaps, the most pragmatic approach which aligns well with both the 2030 Agenda, the Decade process and the recently initiated GAF – the latter can be addressed within each of the five themes above and discussions in each Dialogue can be set to follow the GAF accelerators.

Cons:

- This option may reinforce siloes between SDG 6 targets.
- It may be difficult to structure each theme properly with too many SDGs in each. Caution should also be exercised on how many cross-cutting issues are included. Prioritization needs to be done to avoid the danger of an overall approach becoming too encompassing and losing focus.
- “Grouping” SDG targets may be done in different ways and solid rationale is needed for categorization. Capturing interlinkages may become quite complex.

Option 4: Major water challenges across sectors

Working across sectors is a critical approach to accelerate progress in terms of advancing water and sanitation and improving the state of the resource. This option will provide an opportunity to improve the coordination between the water related sectors and avoid fragmentation of the work on advancing water and sanitation. As the success of the Conference will depend on its ability to engage with and drive action across other sectors, this option can be used to attract and invite key stakeholders from the most crucial water related sectors. Themes can be related to a group of important water development issues – e.g. water for human and economic development (including water and sanitation), water for peace, water for ecosystems – and also to key associated sectors like energy, agriculture, industry. Then SDG 6 targets, links to other SDGs and global agreements can be grouped under those themes, for example:

1. **Social development (health, education, gender, economic development)** (SDG 6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 17)
2. **Agriculture and food security** (SDG 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and SDGs 2, 12)
3. **Environment and biodiversity** (SDG 6.6 and SDGs 14, 15)
4. **Climate, energy and disaster risk management** (SDGs 6.5, 7, 11.5, 13, Paris Agreement and Sendai Framework)
5. **Peace and security** (SDG 6.5, 6.b and SDG 16)

Similar to option 3, each of the above Dialogues may be structured in such a way that it addresses the current state/progress of the SDGs in question and how the five GAF accelerators can help speed up this progress. Adding the partnerships dimension (theme of UN World Water Development Report 2023) may further enhance the structure of each Dialogue.

Pros:

- The approach makes major groups of water and water-related development challenges explicit. It also emphasizes, more than other proposed options, the interactions between sectors. It therefore promotes cross-sector coordination and policy alignment.
- Similar to option 3, this approach can be aligned well with the objectives of the Water Action Decade, which go beyond SDG 6 to include other “water-related” targets.
- This option, while being explicitly thematic, has clear links with the SDGs. The SDGs are the typical framework that most governments use to talk about sustainable development and against which governments are reporting their progress, in particular in international fora such as the HLPF and regional ones.
- This option also lends easily to the proposed organization of “Special Forums” during the Conference. The Secretariat could identify “Champions” and organizations from different sectors to organize these Forums and make sure that the interlinkages between the SDGs are considered throughout the Conference.

Cons:

- “Grouping” so many SDGs (beyond just SDG6 or even beyond other explicitly water-related SDGs) under various themes/challenges may become too complex. Also, it can be done in different ways. A solid rationale is therefore needed for categorization/grouping, and hard decisions need to be made about what to drop to avoid discussions to become too general.
- An effort needs to be made to bring in GAF into this option more explicitly, and this may further complicate it.

III. Possible recommendations of the five dialogues

The interactive Dialogues will be based on concept notes prepared around the selected themes. Regardless of the option finally selected, the Dialogues should be aiming for concrete and action-oriented recommendations. The Outcome of the Conference is a report, which will include the summaries of Dialogue discussions. The five interactive Dialogues would aim to support the objectives of the Conference as defined in OP4 of resolution [A/RES/75/212](#), and suggestions for possible recommendations are grouped based on shortened versions of these eight objectives.

1. **Progress is assessed:** The mid-term review of the Water Action Decade includes assessment of what has been done, successes and failures, and how to move forward to scale-up and improve implementation by all stakeholders including governments, the UN, civil society, business, academia etc. as well as assessment of our trajectory towards 2028, 2030 and beyond as a connected pathway to speed up progress.
2. **Challenges and opportunities are identified:** Actions are identified to accelerate achievement of the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, during the second half of the Decade, specifically what needs to change to achieve the water-related SDGs, how to reform the way of working together across sectors and stakeholders, and identification of key barriers that keep water off the political agenda and of opportunities for change.

3. **Actions and initiatives to accelerate progress are developed:** A roadmap to 2030 can be developed (based on the example from the [High-level Dialogue on Energy](#)), outlining actions during the next five years of the Water Action Decade, including for awareness raising, increasing resilience to shocks and crises, addressing inequalities, and ensuring a human rights-based approach in water-related sectors.
4. **Means of implementation and partnerships are enhanced:** Coordination is enhanced and collective political will for water supported, including through policy adjustments and new implementation modalities, increased financing and investment to ensure accelerated progress and enhanced partnerships/cooperation within the water sector and across other interlinked sectors.
5. **Best practices are shared:** Information is shared on concrete actions for new and existing initiatives, including what specific actions have been implemented and are needed to accelerate progress as part of the GAF.
6. **All stakeholders are involved:** All stakeholders are empowered and political will is built to achieve the water-related goals and targets, including through effective communication.
7. **Voluntary commitments are announced:** National governments and other stakeholders make commitments to scale up efforts to achieve the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including commitments from other (non-water) sectors like energy, agriculture, housing, trade, and ensure accountability for these commitments.
8. **Contribute to the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda:** Concrete recommendation/actions for negotiation of the ministerial declaration for HLPF 2023 are developed, as well as for Water Action Decade-related reports and the SDG 6 Synthesis Report.

IV. Designing the Dialogues

Regardless of the option finally selected, in designing the interactive Dialogues, the Secretariat of the Conference will be guided by A/RES/75/212. The duration of each Dialogue will be three hours. The Dialogues will be collaborative and multi-stakeholder in nature, with due regard for gender and geographical balance, and each one will be presided over by two co-chairs, one from a developing country and one from a developed country, to be appointed by the Presidents of the Conference. The Secretary-General of the Conference will select a moderator and up to four panelists for each Dialogue and will prepare concept papers on each of the Dialogue themes. The panel discussions, facilitated by the moderator, will be followed by an interactive debate among Member States and other relevant stakeholders. Summaries of the Dialogues will be submitted to the Conference at its closing meeting. In addition, it is envisioned that the Dialogues will be:

Inclusive:

- The Dialogues could build on all relevant preparatory documents, such as: the UN Secretary-General's report to assess progress in the implementation of the first half of the Water Action Decade implementation and the Outcome documents from the preparatory meetings.
- Create space for stakeholders to meaningfully engage in and contribute to the process and ensure that multi-stakeholder voices are heard, including women's participation, involvement of indigenous peoples etc. Identify those who do not have a voice and create a space of trust, including hearing from the various water users, e.g. industry, agriculture including fishers, environment etc.
- Keep in mind different levels of water management in different countries and invite the right people.

Action-oriented:

- Focus on the “do”, not the “talk”.
- Themes should be seen as "enablers", so the Dialogues could focus on why/how these enablers are critical to achieve the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- One-three key messages per Dialogue can be developed ahead of time, so that the main message can be adopted in the final plenary statement and linkages are ensured between the Dialogues and the plenary.

Cross-sectoral:

- Bring in actors from outside the water sector, beyond the SDG 6 target bubbles, to build understanding of how water can be a solution in their sectors.
- Not only focus on the SDG framework but be more cross-cutting in design.

In general, the identification of the moderators and participants will play a crucial role for successful Dialogues, as well as a rigorous stakeholder consultation process ahead of the Dialogues.