

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**United
Nations**

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.** The 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.

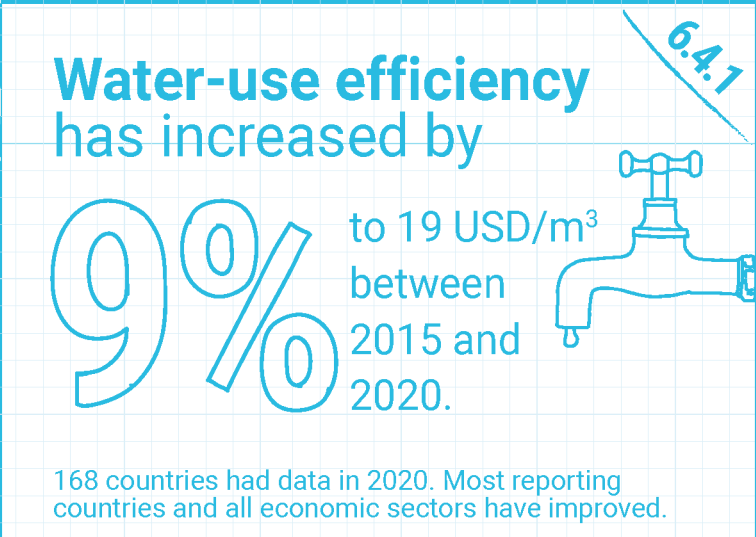
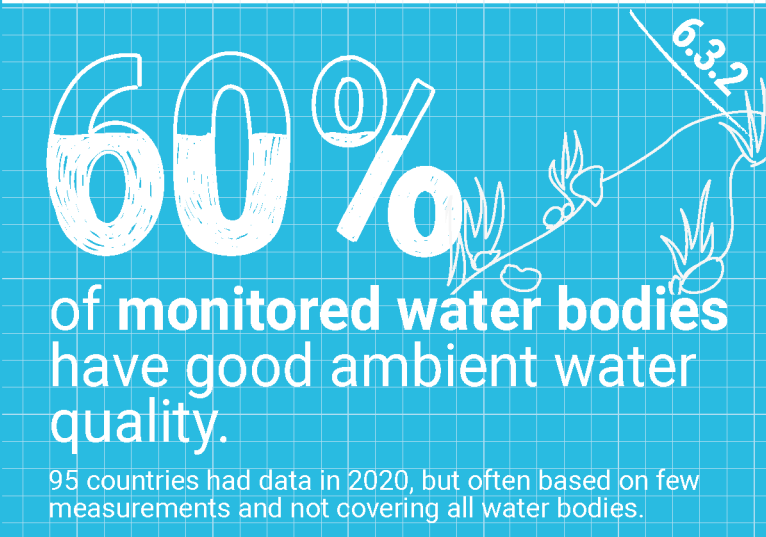
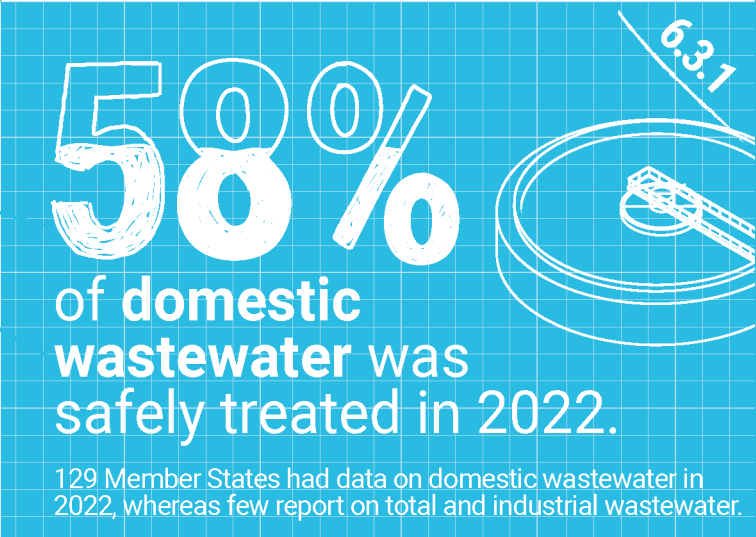
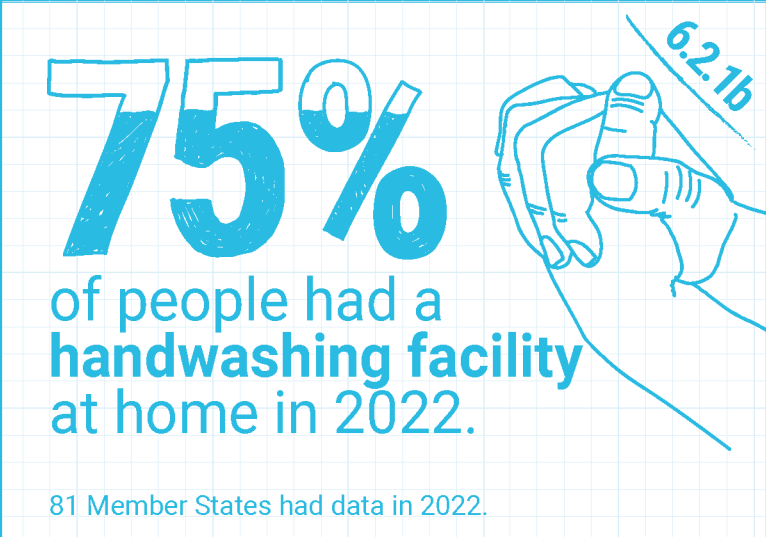
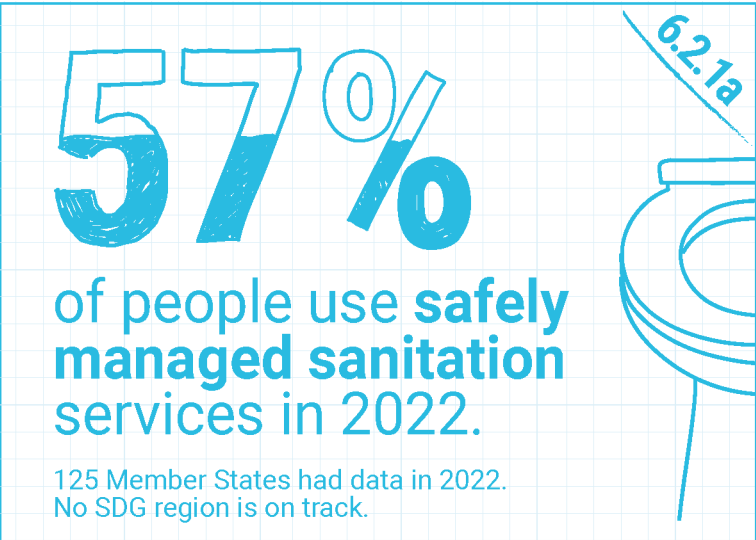
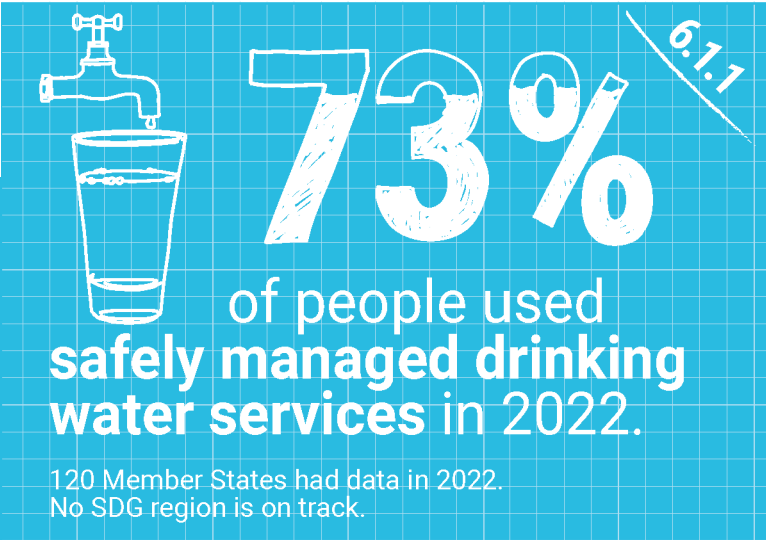
> Explore the full report:



www.unwater.org/publications/sdg-6-synthesis-report-2023



Progress against SDG 6 indicators



18%

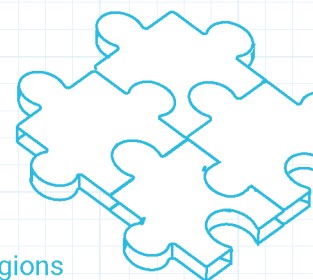
of available water resources are being withdrawn, with extreme disparities.

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

6.4.2

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

54%



186 countries have data. 5 SDG regions are off track.

6.5.1

24



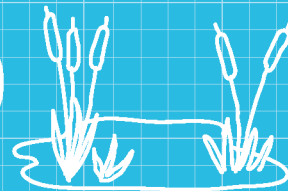
countries have all their **transboundary basin area** covered by operational arrangements.

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

6.5.2

There are high surface water extent changes in

21%



of water basins.

185 countries have data. All SDG regions are affected.

6.6.1

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

15%

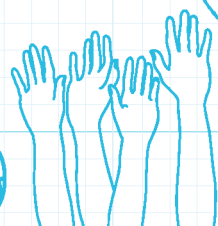
to US\$7.8 billion between 2015 and 2021.



6.a.1

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

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.

6.b.1