Draft UN System-wide Strategy on Water and Sanitation

Comments of the European Union and its Member States

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden

26 January 2024

The UN 2023 Water Conference was a landmark moment for water and built significant momentum for driving the global water and sanitation agenda forward.

The Conference also elevated water as a system-wide United Nations priority, however an improved institutional approach is required to support the transformation and higher level of ambition called by the Conference. This approach should incorporate solutions in water and sanitation management, including advancements in water purification, wastewater treatment, and efficient water (re)use.

Increasing water stress and water related disaster as a result of climate change is a key challenge. The EU and its Member States would like to stress the importance of upping efforts to increase climate adaptation in the water sector. This includes water security, which is a growing threat and needs to be addressed.

The EU and its Member States strongly support the establishment of a System-wide Strategy (SWS) for water and sanitation, to be endorsed at the highest level by the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, and which all entities should implement through their work plans and through their contributions to the envisaged Collaborative Implementation Action Plan. The SWS is also critical to highlight water as a key topic in the international agenda, stressing its relevance not only as part of climate and biodiversity agendas, but a standing-alone issue, that crosses many other fields.

We welcome in particular the action-oriented nature of the System Wide Strategy and its implementation through a Collaborative Implementation Action Plan. This plan will be the key tool to ensure delivery on SWS and helping to maximize coherence and minimise duplications.

The EU and its Member States welcome the draft strategy and its 14 outputs, which provide a strong basis to enhance cooperation and coherence of the UN System.

Strengthening the Joint Steering Group of UN Water by ensuring annual meetings of the executive heads of United Nations Entities, as proposed in the draft, will be essential in increasing coherence and ensuring real impact throughout the UN System. This would help strengthen water and sanitation-related programmes in strategic plans, results frameworks, resource allocations, staffing structures and partnerships.
The EU and its Member States encourage UN Water to establish information exchange with UN Member States and other stakeholders through periodic reviews (to be discussed with UN MSs) in the framework of the UN Water Conference in 2026 and further periodic Water Conferences in order to facilitate transparency, accountability, and monitoring of the SWS, and to provide policy guidance.

The EU and its Member States welcome in particular the outputs outlined under entry point C on mainstreaming water and sanitation in all relevant UN fora, intergovernmental environmental processes and other international processes related to development, health, peace and security and other themes, in order to ensure policy coherence on this cross-cutting issue that underpins the success of the entire 2030 Agenda.

The EU and its Member States highly welcome the goal of the SWS to enhance UN system-wide coordination and delivery of water-related priorities in support of countries to accelerate progress on national plans and priorities. Additionally, to the activities foreseen in the strategy to respond to this goal, the strategy should outline activities to ensure enhancing the alignment of water-related UN delivery at country-level with national development objectives, relevant regional, national and local strategies and plans and expressed needs of Member States. Likewise, the SWS should foresee activities to encourage interagency coordination and the establishment of partnerships to respond to yet unmet areas of need (particularly water related action beyond WASH) in support to countries’ efforts to achieve water- and sanitation-related objectives and priorities.

The EU and its Member States also welcome the development and operationalisation of multi-sectoral nexus approaches in Output 3.2 to support alignment and mainstreaming of water and sanitation across sectors.

The EU and its Member States will support UN Water in the establishment of proposals to ensure inclusiveness, effective participation of civil society, information, capacity development and knowledge sharing, provided they draw on existing structures and knowledge. We welcome the envisaged enhanced cooperation with stakeholders through a range of different inclusive partnerships.

The EU and its Member States welcome the three-tier approach to close the financing gap at country, regional and global level, welcome the UN system’ support for cooperation with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to enhance synergies and stimulate investments, and welcome the support for Member States in developing an enabling environment for investments and help them address workforce gaps through inter-disciplinary skills development.

The EU and its Member States welcome further coherence on data management and use as outlined in Output 4.2. Concurrently, The EU and its Member States will further promote effective, accessible, disaggregated and public data collection and sharing, access and monitoring systems (including civil society and citizen science) on water.

Any comprehensive strategy is only as effective as its monitoring and review mechanisms. The EU and its Member States welcome in that regard the plans for regular review of implementation, both at technical and leadership level.

The EU and its Member States would like to stress the importance of continued and strengthen focus on different aspects of gender equality in implementation of water programmes and projects.

The EU and its Member States welcome the proposals made on unifying UN system communication and messaging, to ensure that the UN speaks with one clear voice on global water and sanitation issues.

As the scope of system wide strategies is cross-cutting and holistic, The EU and its Member States would welcome the strategy to go beyond its fundamental building block, development, and to build up from there also into the realms/pillars of human rights and humanitarian issues, and peace and security.
Integrated Water Resources Management needs to continue to be a priority in water governance, as well as the strengthening of institutions to enable integrated approaches.

Promoting effective transboundary water cooperation through the work of the UN system is central to sustainable water management, to adequately respond to the diverse water-related development needs and the needs of the environment, and to promote peace, security, conflict prevention and stability in the context of global climate change, water scarcity and rising demands.

Finally, the EU and its Member States are among the 150 countries that endorse the appointment of an UN Special Envoy for Water, to be based in NY, with a well-defined mandate within the year 2024. The Special Envoy for Water should have a key role in supporting and facilitating the institutional changes brought by the system-wide strategy, by keeping water high on the global political agenda, asserting its crosscutting nature and promoting synergies and integration of water in relevant intergovernmental processes. We welcome the reference to the Special Envoy for Water in the draft strategy. Specifying its role and mandate into the SWS would clarify its support to UN-Water and other UN entities in mainstreaming and supporting policy coherence on water across the UN system (contribute to the expected outcome 3 of the strategy).

We also wish to recall that system-wide strategies are internal documents of the UN System. The Secretary General should retain his full prerogatives on the organisation of its internal work and coordination, based on the decisions of the CEB. System-wide strategies are not negotiated documents and should not become so.

We express our full trust in the Secretary General to deliver a final strategy that answers the call for better coherence and efficiency expressed at the UN 2023 Water Conference and fulfils the mandate of UNGA 77/334.