

High Level Panel on Water – Background Note

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will require governments, societies, and the private sector to change the way they use and manage water. To accelerate this transformation the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and World Bank Group President Jim Kim have convened a High Level Panel on Water (HLPW). The Panel, at the Heads of State and Government level, will provide the leadership required to champion a comprehensive, inclusive and collaborative way of developing and managing water resources, and improving water and sanitation related services.

Context and Purpose

Water connects public health, food security, livable cities, energy for all, environmental wellbeing, and climate action. Water and sanitation are necessary for human dignity and economic growth. Yet, as the SDGs make clear, the world needs to transform the way it manages its water resources, as well as improve water and sanitation related services for billions of people.

Pressure on water is rising, and action is urgent. Growing populations, more water-intensive patterns of growth, increasing rainfall variability, and pollution are combining in many places to make water one of the greatest risks to poverty eradication and sustainable development. Floods and droughts already impose huge social and economic costs around the world, and climate variability will make water extremes worse. If the world continues on its current path, projections suggest that the world may face a 40% shortfall in water availability by 2030. The consequences of such stress are local, transboundary and global in today's interconnected world.

The SDGs were agreed by all Member States of the United Nations in September 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The core focus of the Panel will be the commitment to **ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all** (SDG 6), as well as to contribute to the achievement of the other SDGs that rely on the development and management of water resources.

The HLPW will:

1. **Motivate Effective Action** – by changing the way that the world thinks about water, and by shining a light on examples of policies, institutions, and programs that could help the world onto a more sustainable pathway, the HLPW can help motivate effective action across governments, civil society, and the private sector.
2. **Advocate on Financing and Implementation** – by promoting efforts to mobilize and target financial resources, scale-up investment, and encourage innovation and partnerships, the HLPW can help the world improve water and sanitation related services, as well as build more sustainable and resilient societies and economies.

Success will require a focus on enabling effective actions that can have long-term systemic impacts and that fully leverage the HLPW's leadership to spark a movement of change and action towards implementation of the SDGs. Limiting the scope of activities to few high-impact actions will ensure focus and drive. To this end, the Panel will engage with an open and growing 'friends of the water panel' network that encourages a voice for all and seeks to learn from the knowledge that already exists.

Themes of the High Level Panel of Water

In line with its leadership role as Heads of State and Government, the Panel will focus on a number of cross-cutting themes that go well beyond the traditional scope of water and sanitation interventions. While these themes may evolve over the course of the Panel's deliberations, they are currently articulated as:

1. **Water is everyone's responsibility.** Water connects public health, food security, livable cities, energy for all, environmental wellbeing, and climate action. Water and sanitation are necessary for human dignity and economic growth. A "whole-of-government" approach is required to better manage water and deliver water and sanitation services. Similarly, households, farmers, and the private sector are the major users of water, and therefore have the responsibility of water

stewardship as well. Learning to better share and manage water lies at the core of a sustainable future, whether at the community, city, river-basin, or transboundary levels.

2. **Sustainable services for all.** Access to water and sanitation services is critical for poverty eradication, human dignity, livable cities, as well as economic growth and pollution prevention. At least 1.8 billion people use a source of drinking water that is fecally contaminated, while around 2.4 billion people still lack access to improved sanitation facilities, such as toilets or latrines. Even for those who have access to water and sanitation, services are often inadequate or unsustainable. The impact of poor water and sanitation falls disproportionately on women and girls and the poorest and more marginalized often lose out. As the UN General Assembly has agreed, access to water is everyone's right and therefore bridging access gaps is everyone's responsibility. It is a matter of city planning, education, and public health, as well the responsibility of the specific services providers.
3. **Valuing our water right.** Valuing the water we have becomes ever more important as its scarcity increases. Valuing our water right means reducing pollution and increasing the efficiency of water use. It means building resilience to climate change and water extremes. It means allocating it to areas of highest social, economic, and environmental value, whether through policy or pricing mechanisms. And it means valuing the human right to water so that the fundamental welfare of people, particularly the poor and women, is improved. Improving allocation for water and efficiency of use can go a long way towards decoupling water use from economic growth and managing the increasing problems of climate and socio-economic scarcity.
4. **Investing in water for the long run.** The water sectors have suffered from insufficient financing and inadequate infrastructure development for decades. At the same time, urbanization is occurring at unprecedented rates, food requirements are rapidly expanding, floods and droughts are growing in frequency, numerous deltas and aquifers are under threat, and climate change will only exacerbate these problems. Neglecting these issues may have important social consequences, particularly in fragile areas, where they may contribute large scale migration. To provide growing populations with sufficient access to quality water, sanitation, and irrigation services, flood protection, energy, and water storage, large investments in well designed multi-purpose and resilient infrastructure is critical – both within and across countries. Adequate means of implementation – financial resources, technology development and transfer, international cooperation and capacity-building – will therefore be critical. Given the large gap between the infrastructure needed and the amounts and type of finance currently available, innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships are essential.

Potential Activities and Outputs

The Panel will agree on the specific issues that it wishes to focus, the range of activities it will undertake, as well as its planned outputs. These are likely to include:

- Demonstrating and drawing attention to examples of effective water service delivery and management;
- Commissioning specific inputs for its consideration, including from the “friends of the water panel” network;
- Encouraging communication and a multi-stakeholder dialog around water and sanitation issues;
- Sponsoring some specific “lighthouse initiatives” that would demonstrate practical approaches to addressing some of the key bottlenecks to better service delivery or water resource management;
- Mobilizing networks, partnerships and initiatives to tackle key challenges over the longer-term;
- Mobilizing resources and financing mechanisms to improve long-term investment;
- Articulating a vision for how water resources and services can be better managed so that the SDGs, and in particular SDG6, can be achieved.

Timeframe

The Panel is a time-bound initiative to accelerate progress towards the SDGs and is being established for an initial period of two years.