



# HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## 2018 HLPF Review of SDG implementation: SDG 6 – Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

### Introduction

The 2030 Agenda is universal and transformative for all Member States. It aims to end poverty in all its forms and “shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015a). SDG 6 on water and sanitation provides a tremendous opportunity to accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda, given the water sector’s central role in human rights, poverty reduction, inequality elimination, peace and justice, and the environment. For example, achieving universal access to water is linked to SDG 6 to achieve gender equality. Women and girls are responsible for water collection in 8 out of 10 households where water is not accessible in the home across 61 countries. Bringing water sources closer to people reduces the time needed to collect water and makes more time available for educational activities, especially for females. SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. All these issues are intrinsically related to water. Water availability for agricultural activities is an essential, as approximately 70% of water withdrawals are for agriculture. Poor water, sanitation and hygiene contributes to undernutrition by causing frequent parasite infections and episodes of diarrhoea, which can result in intestinal dysfunction though chronic ingestion of pathogens. These are a few examples that illustrate the interlinked and symbiotic nature of water and sanitation to the entire 2030 Agenda.

### Status and Trends of Progress on SDG 6

The SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation<sup>1</sup> produced by UN-Water presents a review of the latest SDG 6 indicator data. This report has produced a baseline from which to measure future progress and has identified gaps in knowledge, capacity and resource

<sup>1</sup> More information about the report is available at: [http://www.unwater.org/publication\\_categories/sdg-6-synthesis-report-2018-on-water-and-sanitation/](http://www.unwater.org/publication_categories/sdg-6-synthesis-report-2018-on-water-and-sanitation/)





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availability. The baseline data illustrates that at current progress SDG 6 is not on track to be achieved by 2030.

- **Target 6.1 (Achieve access to safe and affordable drinking water):** Achieving universal access to safe and affordable drinking water means providing basic water services to 844 million people and improving service quality to 2.1 billion people who lack safely managed drinking water services (WHO and UNICEF, 2017). Universal access also implies providing access in services in schools, health-care facilities and other institutional settings. This will require substantial increases in investment from governments and other sources and strengthening institutional arrangements for managing and regulating drinking water services in many countries.
- **Target 6.2 (Achieve access to sanitation and hygiene and end open defecation):** Over 2.3 billion people lack basic sanitation services, 892 million still practice open defecation and 4.5 billion people lack safely managed sanitation services. These will not be eradicated by 2030 with current trends. Only 27 per cent of the population in LDCs has access to soap and water for handwashing on premises (WHO and UNICEF, 2017). Strengthening the capacity of local and national authorities is essential for managing and regulating sanitation systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Further work is required to harmonize the methods and standards used to monitor the treatment and disposal of excreta from on-site sanitation systems.
- **Target 6.3 (Improve water quality, wastewater treatment and safe reuse):** Pollution of water resources is a barrier to making progress towards the 2030 Agenda targets. Water pollution has worsened since the 1990s in almost all rivers in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Severe pathogen pollution already affects around one third of all river stretches in these regions (UNEP, 2016). Increasing political will to tackle pollution at its source and treat wastewater will protect public health and the environment, mitigate the costly effects of pollution and provide additional water resources. Wastewater is an undervalued source of water, energy, nutrients and other recoverable by-products. Recycling, reusing and recovering waste can alleviate water stress. A coordinated, coherent and pragmatic policy environment is therefore required for the multiple stakeholders involved in the





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monitoring, collection, treatment, recycling and reuse of wastewater to engage in safe and innovative practices.

- **Target 6.4 (Increase water-use efficiency and ensure freshwater supplies):** More than 2 billion people live in countries experiencing high water stress. The agriculture sector is by far the largest user of fresh water, accounting for nearly 70 per cent of global water withdrawals. Saving just a fraction of this would significantly alleviate water stress in other sectors and also strengthen economic development instead of constraining growth. Agricultural water savings can come in many forms, such as increasing productivity of food crops (more crop per drop), improving water management practices and technologies, implementing sustainable agricultural practices, growing fewer water-intensive crops in water-scarce regions, reducing food loss and waste, and importing food grown from water-rich countries. Savings can also come from municipalities, industry and energy production.
- **Target 6.5 (Implement integrated water resources management (IWRM) including transboundary cooperation):** The global average degree of implementation of IWRM is 48 per cent, corresponding to a medium-low level, but with great variation among countries. Achieving an advanced level of implementation requires increased financing for water resources development and management and devolving IWRM to the lowest appropriate level. Transboundary cooperation is essential to implement IWRM at all levels, with 153 countries sharing rivers, lakes and aquifers. The average national proportion of transboundary basins covered by an operational arrangement is 59 per cent, meaning that a significant effort is needed to ensure that operational arrangements are in place for all transboundary waters by 2030. Now is the time to take advantage of the global legal frameworks on shared surface water and groundwater to develop country capacities to negotiate and implement transboundary cooperative arrangements.
- **Target 6.6 (Protect and restore water-related ecosystems):** The world has lost 70 per cent of its natural wetland extent in the last century, including significant loss of freshwater species. The baseline data of the indicator do not allow for a proper





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picture of the general state or trends of freshwater ecosystems. Further detailed data (quantitative, geospatial and qualitative) and its compilation are required to demonstrate accurate, contextualized understanding of water-related ecosystems, in particular monitoring change over time.

- **Target 6.a (Expand international cooperation and capacity-building):** Over 80 per cent of participating countries reported insufficient finance to meet national WASH targets. Stronger domestic financial engagement and better use of existing resources will be required to achieve the goal of leaving no one behind, although ODA will continue to contribute to development needs for water and sanitation.

**Target 6.b (Support stakeholder participation):** Local community participation in water and sanitation management has the potential to yield benefits such as empowerment of marginalized groups and sustainable service delivery. However, the current indicator monitors the existence of policies and procedures for local community participation and not whether this participation is genuine and meaningful. Further research is required to understand the complexities of participation and its impact, to ensure that policies are effective and sustainable.

## Notable Challenges

The SDG 6 Synthesis Report 2018 on Water and Sanitation creates a baseline for the SDG 6 monitoring. Making progress on SDG 6 will enable and drive progress on all the other SDGs, from health to hunger and from gender equality to environmental protection and sustainable growth. All SDGs are mutually dependent on one another; action therefore needs to be of an integrated nature, ensuring that all SDGs advance together. However, many challenges were identified and need to be addressed for the successful implementation of SDG 6:

- **Political engagement:** SDG 6 targets present challenges for all countries but continuing with business as usual will not suffice. Achieving sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, tackling pollution at its source will require profound evolution of actions among policymakers and decision makers. Actions need to be taken now to move towards a more sustainable and resilient path, leaving no one behind, if the 2030 Agenda targets are to be achieved.





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- **Data gap:** More and better data are required for national, regional and global monitoring. Data sometimes exist but are often not accessible or shared. The extent of industrial pollution is not known, as discharges are poorly monitored and seldom aggregated at national level. Insufficient data are generated by countries to adequately measure progress on water-related ecosystems and the benefits they provide. Further work is required to standardize and harmonize indicators used in national and global monitoring. The financial, institutional/organizational and human resources to fully monitor SDG 6 are lacking. Increased uptake of data, including at the sub-national level, to inform decision-making and ensure accountability will be crucial for achieving SDG 6.
- **Climate change:** Climate change has a significant impact on freshwater systems and their management. Most effects due to climate change will be experienced through changes in the hydrological cycle, such as overall water availability, water quality and frequency of extreme weather events (e.g. floods and droughts). Water-related hazards account for a large part of disaster loss and impact. Between 1990 and 2015, more than 1.6 million people died, and 5.5 billion people affected in internationally reported natural hazards. Water-related hazards accounted for 62 per cent of the deaths and 96 per cent of the people affected and 75 per cent of total damage costs amounting to US\$2.5 trillion.
- **The financing gap:** Development partners in the WASH sector identified three financial challenges: (1) lack of finance for strengthening the enabling environment and service delivery, (2) untapped use of repayable finance, including microfinance and blended finance, and (3) resources inadequately targeted towards the poor and vulnerable who are unable to access services. Bridging the finance gap necessitates improving the efficiency of existing financial resources, while increasing innovative sources of financing, such as commercial and blended finance, including the private sector. An enabling environment is therefore needed that considers the specialities of water investments (e.g. large upfront capital needs, long terms or associated risk management). ODA is crucial, but it needs targeting where it can be most effective and used to catalyse other funding sources.





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## Recommendations for Action – Across Levels and Stakeholders

- **Good water governance is essential.** Good water governance provides the political, institutional and administrative rules, practices and processes for taking decisions and implementing them. It is key to implementing integrated water resources management, which aims to coordinate between sectors to overcome a siloed approach. An improved enabling environment for investment will create the necessary impetus for private sector investment that will boost progress on SDG 6. Implementing IWRM at the transboundary level is further evidence and recognition of the critical need to strengthen cooperation over shared water resources and the benefits they provide, which can prevent conflicts.
- **Inequalities must be eliminated.** Inequalities exist in every country where marginalized communities and disadvantaged groups such as women, children, poor, indigenous peoples, rural communities and those living in fragile States do not have equal access to water and sanitation and are more susceptible to the impacts of pollution and water-related disasters. Disaggregated data play a vital role in supporting these efforts, to enable policymakers to identify disadvantaged groups and to tailor support to their specific needs and priorities. Effective policies, strategies and subsidies must be developed to ensure that no one is left behind. The 2030 Agenda will not succeed if governments fail to support the most vulnerable people.
- **Water and sanitation require a new financing paradigm.** Increasing the efficiency of existing financial resources and mobilizing additional ones in the form of domestic public finance and domestic and international finance (ODA, loans, grants, etc.) are necessary. Domestic and public finance can be leveraged to increase the role of private financing, through promoting innovative financing streams such as blended finance and microfinance. Targeted public finance and reforms are necessary to improve the performance of existing services, increase cost recovery and financial security, and make the sector more attractive to private investment. This can lead to a virtuous circle of improved service levels, attracting further investment until services are financially sustainable.





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- **Capacity must be developed.** Capacity development is a cross-cutting issue that is essential for improving service levels, operating and maintaining technology, and monitoring performance. A serious lack of institutional and human capacity across the water sector is constraining progress, particularly in developing countries. Capacity development is required in engineering, scientific and technical disciplines, and also across all areas of the water sector, including in policy, law, governance, finance, information technology and management. Investing in capacity development requires a long-term view as well as short-term measures.
- **Smart technologies can improve management and service delivery.** Smart technologies supported by information technology can effectively improve all aspects of water resources and WASH management. The use of Earth observations, citizen science and private sector data is increasing, but these are not yet sufficiently incorporated into data-monitoring systems at all levels. Furthermore, local adaptation of technology and sharing of knowledge can be supported through collaborative partnerships for sustainable development.
- **Multi-stakeholder partnerships can unlock potential.** Sharing, accessing and adapting new solutions needs cooperation. SDG 6 provides the ideal platform for multi-stakeholder partnerships to ensure more effective and efficient progress on poverty reduction and sustainable development.

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